



War on child flab

Traditional remedies
for coping with
overweight children
may not be working,
reports BRIGID
O'CONNELL

IT IS a commonsense and benevolent approach — banning junk from the lunch box and bumping up the exercise to shrink the expanding waistlines of our children.

But a new book has revealed that for obese and clinically overweight children these best intentions are not working. And this simplistic approach may even reinforce hopelessness and the blame sharing.

Dr Matt Sabin, a researcher at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, has penned a question-and-answer guide for parents concerned about their child's weight.

Is your child overweight? What you need to know and what you can do about it, released during the week, collates material he has gathered from a decade working with obese and clinically overweight children, where he has seen community senses of what is "normal" weight become warped.

"Ten years ago we thought that if children were overweight it was because they were eating the wrong foods and weren't running around enough; it was almost this pejorative view towards parents," Dr Sabin said.

"What we've learnt since is that there are a lot of factors that influence a child's weight. About 50 to 60 per cent of a child's weight is actually determined by genetics, by the parent's shape and size.

"There are lots of other things that impact upon obesity in children — ranging from maternal health in pregnancy, birth weight, through to early infant feeding, the way children sleep and missing breakfast."

The paediatrician arrived in Australia four years ago to set up the country's largest hospital-based weight management service at the Royal Children's Hospital.

It sees 200 new children a year and,

with about 1000 patients on the book, the waiting list is substantial.

"One family brought their children in to see me, concerned that one child was not putting on enough weight," he said.

"But in fact that child was normal weight and the other child was overweight.

"In the majority of cases we've discovered parents just need education and practical tips of how to identify if their child is putting on too much weight at a young age, and from there, what to do about it."

This is the first year the Royal Children's Hospital has considered lap band surgery for teenagers — one of the final options after long-term lifestyle changes and fat blocking drugs have been tried — and has so far selected four patients as possible candidates.

But Dr Sabin said with childhood obesity becoming a "generational effect", each cohort programming the next generation to gain more weight, much more research was needed into the causes.

"In all westernised countries we're seeing massive rates of it, but we don't really understand why that is," he said.

"We know that society is important; it's too easy to get energy dense foods, take part in activities where you don't spend much energy, but it seems to be more complicated than that.

"What we are beginning to understand is a whole new field of science called epigenetics, where we're learning that the environment models the way your genes are expressed."

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