The mission of the International Food Information Council and Foundation (IFICF) is to communicate science-based information on food safety and nutrition issues to health professionals, media, educators, and government officials. The council and foundation are primarily supported by the broad-based food, beverage and agricultural industries. Since 1995 the Council has been cooperating with organizations such as the President's Council on Physical Fitness, The National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners, The American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Sports Medicine, American Dietetic Association, the FDA, the CDC, and others to address the increasing problem of childhood obesity and inactivity. As a group these organizations formed ACTIVATE and developed Kidnetic.com, a consumer communications outreach program designed to prevent childhood overweight by helping children aged 9–12 and their families achieve healthy life styles through regular physical activity and good nutrition.

Overview of the Obesity Epidemic — “The health problem of the century,” Director of the CDC

We are all aware of the publicity that the increasing obesity problem has received over the last several years; virtually every national magazine has devoted at least one cover story to this important health issue. However, it is startling to discover that there are 300,000 obesity-related deaths in this country per year; this is fast approaching the 400,000 tobacco-related deaths yearly that have always received so much attention. The cost of obesity and related diabetes is nearly $238 billion per year ($93 billion if the related diabetes costs are factored out). The number of overweight children is up 35% since 1991. The percentage of children at risk for obesity or overweight is 30%. We do not use the term obese with children; the correct jargon is “at risk for overweight” (over the 85th percentile) or “overweight” (at or over the 95th percentile). Sixty percent of those children already have at least one risk factor for cardiovascular disease. The cost of medical care for these children is also rising. CDC has released information stating that the chance of a child born in 2000 becoming a Type 2 diabetic is now 1 in 3; Hispanic and African-American children are most apt to become diabetic because the incidence of overweight in these populations is much greater than in the population as a whole.

Factors Contributing to the Obesity Epidemic

Obesity is a complex issue, but the root cause is simple: an imbalance between calories-in and calories-out. However, the social issues are complex:

- Changing food habits/eating styles
- Declining physical activity at home and in school
- Changes in the physical environment

The Research

IFICF's concept was to conduct research to:

- Communicate science-based information to the opinion leaders and, ultimately, consumers
- Provide consumers with practical, relevant tools to work with information

IFICF conducted exploratory research to discover what kids and their parents think and feel about food, physical activity, and health so a plan could be devised to help prevent childhood overweight. The targeted group was 9- to 12-year-olds, since this group is beginning to make some of their own choices but is still influenced by the adults in their lives. From discussions with focus groups, ethnographic studies, and individuals all over the country, it was ascertained that both kids and adults associate obesity more with food intake than with activity.

Kids relate overweight more to performance and appearance than to health; the long-term health effect of overweight is not a concern to children and preteens. Kids are not sure what being “fit” means, nor are they sure what it means to be “healthy” other than to have lots of rules and restrictions. In devising programs for overweight children, small victories are important to sustain interest and build confidence and self-esteem. Physical activity needs to be more than organized team sports. Parental encouragement, support and guidance are important to kids. Why be healthy? Kids said so that they would “have more friends,” “have more fun,” “make the team,” and also that they wouldn't wish to be someone else.

Parents don't see their child's overweight as a health issue. They think that their child will outgrow childhood overweight. Furthermore, parents are afraid to talk about overweight for fear that it will upset their
child’s self-esteem or precipitate an eating disorder. Parents are more concerned about, and focus on, sex, drugs and alcohol than on overweight or lack of physical activity. Another void parents felt was in information to address the problem adequately, even to be able to interpret food nutritional labels. The parents felt they were not good role models; they gave good advice, but didn’t follow through. Motivational skills were also absent, and the parent-child relationship was a problem.

Teachers felt that the major emphasis should come from the home. Teachers could see the impact of overweight on the child’s self-esteem and performance at school. The implementation of lifestyle changes at home must involve the entire family; children really want and need this.

The Results
The manner of presentation of the information about health, overweight, and activity to children and adults was influenced by the research: Parents want quick and easy-to-use materials; kids want “fun,” “cool” and not boring materials. So ACTIVATE was born. It is a strategic approach to:

- Target kids and their families (home, school, community)
- Be prevention oriented
- Balance physical activity and nutrition
- Be research driven
- Be a consensus science
- Be credible
- Be noncommercial

It was decided to reach kids in an interactive way through a web site. Currently, 67% of school-age children have computer/internet access, and by using technology materials that are “fun, cool and not boring,” information can be put into the hands of large numbers of them. Kidnetic.com is the site; it is interactive, customizable, quick acting, and fun. It is designed to increase family communication, and fill the 4 Fs — food, feeling, fun and fitness. It was designed by interactive specialists and is updated quarterly. It does not stop with kids, but also addresses concerns of parents and other adults.

Kidnetic.com is advertised on other kid-friendly sites and to health professionals and others at professional meetings and through publications. By the first-year anniversary of the site, there had been one million visitors. There are other sites linked when Kidnetic is entered. The project is made possible by unrestricted grants from the food and beverage industry. Furthermore, industry products are not mentioned and links to those industry sites are not given.

Guidelines for doing something about childhood overweight:
- Promote physical activity and healthful eating
- Involve kids and parents
- Find out what kids and parents want
- Harness the power of family dynamics
- Discover ways we can reach parents and kids together
- Work within the community
- Develop partnerships

Resources to use in these endeavors:
- Take ten minutes for physical activity in the classroom
- Action for Healthy Kids (National Dairy Council heads this activity)
- Healthy Kids Challenge — for teaching kids to cook
- American Cancer Society: Active for Life and Generation Fit

Since measures of physical activity and fitness correlate positively with test scores, any efforts that a nurse may employ to encourage school administrators to make physical fitness a priority are worthwhile.

So what is ACTIVATE? It is an effort by IFICF and others from the health field to address childhood overweight by using the Internet. The results of their research-based efforts were the development of Kidnetic.com.

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