

Executive Summary

Parents in Ontario want their children to grow up healthy, happy and ready to succeed in life. But, childhood overweight and obesity are undermining children's health. Almost one in every three children in Ontario is now an unhealthy weight. The problem is more severe in boys than girls, and in Aboriginal children.

Overweight and obesity are threatening our children's future and the future of our province, which looks to its children for the next generation of citizens and leaders. If our children are not healthy, then our society will not flourish. Overweight and obesity also threaten the sustainability of our health care system. In 2009, obesity cost Ontario \$4.5 billion.¹ To create a different future, we must act now!

In January 2012, the Ontario Government set a bold, aspirational target: reduce childhood obesity by 20 per cent in five years.

The multisectoral Healthy Kids Panel was asked for advice on the best way to meet that target. The panel listened to parents and other caregivers, youth and experts in the field and reviewed the literature and strategies in Ontario and other jurisdictions.

The panel strongly recommends a bold, yet feasible and achievable, three-part strategy – one that will have the greatest positive impact on child health as well as a substantial return on investment for Ontario:

- 1. Start all kids on the path to health.**
Laying the foundation for a lifetime of good health begins even before babies are conceived, and continues through the first months of life. We must provide the support young women need to maintain their own health and start their babies on the path to health.
- 2. Change the food environment.**
Parents know about the importance of good nutrition. They told us they try to provide healthy food at home, but often

If nothing is done:

- the current generation of children will develop chronic illnesses much younger and be more affected as they age
- the cost of obesity will grow, impacting our ability to fund other programs and services.

feel undermined by the food environment around them. They want changes that will make healthy choices easier.

- 3. Create healthy communities.**
Kids live, play and learn in their communities. Ontario needs a co-ordinated all-of-society approach to create healthy communities and reduce or eliminate the broader social and health disparities that affect children's health and weight.

No one policy, program or strategy will solve the problem of childhood overweight and obesity.

We heard loud and clear from parents that their children's health is their top priority, but they need some support to help their children become and stay at a healthy weight. Everyone has a role to play in supporting parents' efforts to ensure their children grow and thrive. We need action everywhere – from parents, caregivers and kids themselves, child care settings and schools, health care providers, non-governmental organizations, researchers, the food industry, the media, and municipal and provincial governments – and a willingness to take risks.

Ontario is at a tipping point. Parents, youth and everyone we spoke to are ready to be part of the solution. If Ontario acts quickly and implements all the recommendations in this report, it is possible to change the trajectory and bring kids' weight back into balance. But we must start now and sign on for the long term – at least 10 years. If we delay, we run the risk of more aggressive measures in the future.

¹ Katzmarzyk PT. (2011). The economic costs associated with physical inactivity and obesity in Ontario, *The Health and Fitness Journal of Canada*, Vol. 4, No. 4.