

the

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CHILDREN'S A JOURNAL OF MEDIA COVERAGE BEAT



Danielle Rodriguez holds a picture from her childhood, when she was sexually abused by her father.

PHOTO: NOBUKO OYABU

Taboos IN THE Newsroom

Covering sexual assault

- THE CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND ■ THE 'NICE GUY' MOLESTER ■ COVERING OBESITY
- CONTAMINANTS, CHEMICALS AND CHILDREN'S HEALTH ■ LEAD BY THE NUMBERS



Severson and May's series featured Shirleisa Rogers, then 10, who was improving her eating and exercise habits after having been diagnosed with a type of diabetes normally found in adults.

KIM KOMENICH / THE CHRONICLE

WEIGHING Our Options

As children get heavier, reporters struggle with the 'fat kid story'

BY CARA NISSMAN

As high school journalism students shared diary entries chronicling a week of when, what and where they had eaten, Meredith May shuddered. They had gorged on soda and chips for breakfast. Lunch often came from the school's mall-style food court. And dinner, well, it's not what is used to be.

"When we asked how many had had dinner with their families at a table the night before, only three out of 25 raised their hands," says May, an education reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Fast food was the norm.

"Folks are working so hard, they don't have the luxury of time to plan, find recipes, shop and throw it all together like they did in the '50s and '60s," she says. "A lot of kids fend for themselves."

The students had this in common, too: Most were overweight. But as May and her collaborator, *Chronicle* food writer Kim Severson quickly learned, food is not the only reason why children's bodies are ballooning.

Super-sized portions, the proliferation of in-school vending machines, parents' long work hours and the elimination of physical education are among the factors that compromise teens' health, the reporters found. Their May 2002 story, which won a Casey Medal, illuminated a national trend before the heft epidemic had sparked much public concern. It also did something that health experts wish reporters would do more often: Examine the complex cluster of family and socio-economic pressures that contribute to childhood weight-gain without pathos or grotesquery.

The goal, says May, is avoiding the predictable "fat kid story."

The blame game

Late last year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that 15 percent of youths between the ages of 6 and 19 are overweight. That's nearly nine million children, and triple the proportion in 1980.

Dr. Diane Wilkins Mickley, co-president of the National Eating Disorders Association, lauds the media for heightened attention on childhood obesity, but says that too many stories chide children for piling on the pounds.

"I'd like to see more reporters promoting the understanding of overweight as a medical problem," says Wilkins Mickley, also director of a weight management center in Greenwich, Conn.

Beyond the numbers

Meredith May of the *San Francisco Chronicle* says the key to writing a well-balanced story about childhood obesity, aside from an extended deadline, is digging deeper than statistics and including children's and doctor's opinions. She shared the following tips:

- Call children's hospitals and pediatricians to find out what the trends are in examination rooms. Ask for introductions to appropriate patients.
- Ask school nutritionists and nurses what they see among students. You also can enlist the help of school journalism teachers, who understand deadlines.
- Watch what children do before and after school. Do some stop at the local fast food joint for breakfast? Are fewer participating in extra-curricular activities?

"If you're overweight, you're not ugly. You're not lazy. You're not just a health problem."

Other stories unfairly admonish parents, says Joanne Ikeda, co-director of the Center for Weight and Health at the University of California, Berkeley.

"It's like blaming parents for their child's being autistic or having Down syndrome," she says. "Parents are responsible for instilling and promoting healthy eating habits, but they're not responsible for how their child's body turns out."

Reporters would provide a better service if they scrutinized the lifestyles and diets of all kinds of families, says Ikeda, who has researched obesity for three decades.

"If you look at children, they're not all fat, but most of them are practicing unhealthy lifestyles," she adds. "They're spending too much time in front of the television, overeating junk food, and not eating enough fruits and vegetables."

By keeping the focus on fat instead of health, "we could actually do harm in this effort to prevent childhood obesity," she says. "Reporters should stop harping on what a horrible thing it is to be overweight. It reinforces children's fear of becoming fat and the stigma associated with it."

Information versus titillation

Even when tempted by sensational stories of youths – and celebrities, such as Carnie Wilson – who have had bariatric surgery and other invasive weight-loss procedures, reporters should resist writing articles that only go skin deep, say health experts.

"People are getting the wrong impression that [surgery's] a quick fix," says Dr. Ann Scheimann, director of the Pediatric Weight Management Clinic at Johns Hopkins Children's Center. "It's not a cure-all."

Ikeda is irate about an article she spied in the June/July *Teen Vogue* called "Extreme Measures," which discussed the benefits and drawbacks of getting cosmetic surgery while young. The article advised girls to avoid surgery not because of the health risks, she says in exasperation, but "because bodies go in and out of fashion."

Although some teens might respond better to that approach than serious reports on medical complications (which Scheimann says "might go in one ear and out the other"), the best articles inspire healthy living. Pieces suggesting how families can stay fit together, including the benefits of pedometers (devices that monitor how many steps one takes) and ideas for easy, low-fat recipes, she says, would eliminate the fad factor and offer families concrete solutions.

If parents tune out warnings, showing them how portion sizes have expanded would elicit positive changes, she adds. Comparing the size of a cereal bowl from the 1930s with the size of a bowl families use today graphically demonstrates how much more people are eating.

Yet reporters also should warn parents against depriving their children of food, Ikeda says. Restricting meals is likely to backfire, spurring many a child to sneak treats.

"I've surveyed women who weigh from 250 to 700 pounds on their dieting experiences," she says. "The largest women had been put on diets before they were 14 years old."

Some journalists struggle with ways to inform families without embarrassing them. Carol Lee Espy, producer of WQED Pittsburgh's "OnQ," decided not to show overweight children in a recent story on the steep rise of Type 2 diabetes. Instead, "we got a doctor who spoke the plain truth. We didn't want the kids to be teased by other children." The doctor talked about young patients whose stomachs were so big they couldn't touch their toes, says Espy, who was inspired to do the piece after a Pittsburgh school sent parents letters saying that their children were overweight. She hopes the piece was a wake-up call.

"We wanted to educate parents now. Otherwise, in the next 15 years, droves of adults will be taking insulin."

Big costs

Scheimann says the media should not neglect other consequences of obesity, including sleep apnea, depression and poor academic performance.

Licensed nutritionist Maria Bettencourt says that journalists also should elucidate the inevitable long-term impact of youth obesity on society.

"This is not a problem that ends with childhood," explains Bettencourt, director of the Nutrition and Physical Activity Unit of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Bureau of Family and Community Health. "If not abated, it will continue into adulthood ... and potentially place a huge financial burden at the community, state and federal level."

Indeed, the estimated annual cost of obesity in the United States is about \$117 billion, according to the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. By comparison, Congress appropriated \$27.5 million in 2002 for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to develop programs to address physical inactivity, poor nutrition and obesity.

Johns Hopkins' Scheimann says reporters should delve into the financial strain obesity puts on families. In fact, a study that ran in the May issue of *Health Affairs* magazine found that overweight and obese people paid an extra 11 percent and 26 percent respectively in out-of-pocket medical costs.

"I haven't seen [reporting] on the lack of funding from insurance companies and the social implications," she adds.

Spotlighting successes

Some groups aim to inspire families to improve their lifestyles, Scheimann says, and the media should inform the public about successful school and community programs.

As part of a four-part series on obesity in July, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* writers John Fauber and Mark Johnson highlighted dramatic changes in student demeanor after an alternative high school replaced sodas and candy bars with fruit juices, a salad bar and ground turkey tacos.

"They had almost instant changes in their personalities and attention spans," says Fauber, the paper's medical reporter. "It

was a good story. It shows how nutrition can make a big difference. These were kids who had behavioral problems, trouble with the law and psychological problems.... The full-time cop went from interceding in various problems a day to never having to do anything."

The team also tried to give readers a sense of hope through a profile of a teenage boy who took healthy steps to lose weight after falling victim to greasy cafeteria meals, including cheese fries and soda. "We didn't want to hammer people with nothing but bad news," Fauber says.

He believes the project was stronger because he and Johnson, a GA reporter, come from different beats. "I think anybody covering this topic should be aware of more than just the medical studies out there," Fauber adds.

Indeed, the *Chronicle's* Severson says fusing her food beat with May's education focus elevated the depth and reach of their story, which they reported over two months. Each received more than 100 e-mails from readers.

"Unorthodox pairings of beats is a really good idea," Severson says. "All reporters have interesting facts floating on their desks, and working with other people in the newsroom can help you think differently."

Cara Nissman is the teen reporter at the *Boston Herald* and a recipient of a 2003 Journalism Fellowship in Child and Family Policy through the University of Maryland.
cnissman@bostonherald.com



Looking for answers

Sources include:

- Maria Bettencourt, director of the Nutrition and Physical Activity Unit of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Bureau of Family and Community Health, 617-624-5440 or Maria.Bettencourt@state.ma.us.
- Joanne Ikeda, co-director of the Center for Weight and Health at the University of California, Berkeley. Contact: Pam Kan-Rice, 510-987-0043 or pamela.kan-ric@ucop.edu.
- Dr. Diane Wilkins Mickley, co-president of the National Eating Disorders Association and director of the Wilkins Center in Greenwich, Conn. Contact: Natalie Mancini, 213-996-8565 or natalie@highwater-group.com.
- Dr. Ann Scheimann, director of the Pediatric Weight Management Clinic at Johns Hopkins Children's Center. Contact: Jessica Collins, 410-516-4570 or jcolli31@jhmi.edu.