



OPINION

Opinion: The Health of Our Children Is in Your Hands

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Alexis Glick

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In July, a close friend asked me to join him at a meeting for a new foundation with the mission to combat childhood obesity. As the mother of three young boys, I was acutely aware of the exponential growth in obesity-related illnesses among America's children and had been closely watching the first lady's initiative, Let's Move, which aims to end childhood obesity within a generation. The more I learned about this epidemic the more determined I became to get involved.

Since that introductory meeting, I have immersed myself in learning more about childhood obesity -- having extensive conversations and meetings with nutritionists, government agencies, schools, pediatricians and the dynamic professionals behind [Fuel Up to Play 60](#). This in-school program launched in 2007 by the National Football League and the National Dairy Council empowers youth in more than 70,000 schools across the country to consume nutrient-rich foods and achieve at least 60 minutes of physical activity daily.

Now, seven months later, I'm writing as CEO of the [Gen YOUth Foundation](#), a newly formed nonprofit with the goal of harnessing the power of education to create a movement that inspires our children to make positive changes in their lifestyle choices. We will work with schools, communities and business partners to develop and support programs that create lasting changes to child health and wellness.

Today, a [historic agreement](#) united the NFL, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the National Dairy Council and Gen YOUth Foundation in a public-private commitment to this issue.

As a journalist and businesswoman, I have spent the majority of my career interpreting economic data and political change, and I can attest that there is no greater threat to America's socioeconomic vitality and the future of our society than childhood obesity. Today, obesity-related medical expenses cost us more than [\\$147 billion annually](#), and this number is only projected to increase.

More importantly, the future of our children is on the line. If we do not inspire our children to nourish their minds and bodies and encourage them to play, jump, run or throw a ball more, we inhibit their ability to learn and excel.

In 2005, the 16th U.S. surgeon general, Dr. David Satcher, my colleague and a Gen YOUth Foundation board member, authored a report called "[The Learning Connection](#)," which

highlighted a direct link between nutritional intake and physical activity and academic performance. It also noted that there may be an association between weight problems and lower academic achievement.

This report really struck me -- parents need to understand that eating healthy and being physically active have a direct impact on academic performance. I, a mother myself, didn't even understand how much healthy eating and physical activity affected academics until I read this report.

At our first board meeting in November, I had the opportunity to meet a woman who changed my life forever. Her name is Lisa Riley, a teacher at Enslow Middle School in Huntington, W.Va., once labeled the unhealthiest city in the nation by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Lisa signed up for Fuel Up to Play 60 after attacks in the media lowered school morale. She shared personal stories about malnourished students who were able to gain 27 pounds and overweight students who were able to lose a collective 50 pounds after they were provided with pedometers to track their activities and funds to revamp their 95-year-old cafeteria and gymnasium.

At the end of the year, Enslow students became Fuel Up to Play 60 National Champions and were awarded a Blue Apple Award for Health Education, an honor given to only 12 schools each year. With pride, Lisa said, "Our new school motto is 'Believing is the first step to achieving.' " The board gave her a standing ovation.

Several weeks after the board meeting, I received a personal note from Lisa -- I now carry it with me every day. The note reads, "Thank you for being the bridge that connects our dreams to our realities."

We have a responsibility to this generation, and to the many generations to come, to build that bridge, and to inspire change -- change that is neither drastic nor extreme but achieved through small behavior choices each day

As this generation of children faces the real risk of becoming the first to experience shorter life expectancies than its parents, businesses, schools, government and influencers now have more responsibility than ever.

No single program or initiative will solve this problem alone, but if we work together to combine our efforts and resources -- helping students and parents make informed and sustainable choices and providing opportunities for children to get out and have fun in the gym, after school and throughout the community -- we will ensure that today's generation of children enjoy long and productive lives.

It starts with *you*.

Alexis Glick is the CEO of the [Gen YOUth Foundation](#).