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Search

- [About](#) |
- [Subscribe](#)

[baktalk](#)

- [Page One](#)
 - [Sports](#)
 - [Arts](#)
 - [Opinion](#)
 - [Comics](#)
 - [World](#)
 - [The Remixed Plate](#)
 - [Life & Style](#)
- [Hawaii Loa](#)
- Koolaupoko
 - [Kaneohe](#)
 - [Kailua](#)
 - [Waimanalo](#)
- West Oahu
 - [Aiea](#)
 - [Ewa](#)
 - [Kapolei](#)
 - [Waianae](#)
- Honolulu
 - [Downtown](#)
 - [Kaimuki](#)
 - [Moiliili](#)
 - [Kalihi](#)
- North Shore & Central
 - [North Shore](#)
 - [Mililani](#)
 - [Wahiawa](#)
- [Kauai](#)
- [Hawaii Island](#)

[Kohala Center joins a national race to help our keiki stay healthy](#)

May 28, 2010 - 12:59 PM | by [Beth-Ann Kozlovich](#) | [Main baktalk Page](#)



HONOLULU—The Kohala Center on Hawaii Island will partner with The Center for Ecoliteracy in California and Kaiser Permanente on a July conference to help teachers help kids grow gardens and healthier bodies—and maybe teach their parents a thing or two.

Thirty-four percent of boys and girls in Hawaii ages 2 to 19 are overweight or obese according to the most recent Kaiser Permanente data from 2008, which has remained fairly consistent with past years. Clearly Hawaii still has a problem, but so does the rest of the country. The national childhood obesity rate is 31.7 percent and boys ages 6 to 19 are especially at risk; they are now at their heaviest weight levels according to a CDC study published last January.

Childhood obesity is now officially an American issue. Earlier this spring, First Lady Michelle Obama made it her mission by launching the “Let’s Move!” initiative. While Hawaii schools have already been trying to cultivate better eating and fitness habits under the Department of Education’s Wellness Guidelines for K-12—and some schools have added school gardens and healthier cafeteria choices—most kids still face the usual school lunch fare and the compelling barrage of media touting less healthy choices.

Nancy Redfeather is the Kohala Center’s Program Director of the Hawaii Island School Garden Network. A teacher and organic gardener for 40 years, she was the coordinator of the 2007 Hawaii Island Food Summit and one of the conference organizers. Despite the DOE’s 2008 Wellness Guidelines, Redfeather says “a lot of schools haven’t implemented their wellness policies at all because they are so overwhelmed by the work they need to do for No Child Left Behind. That program has taken precedence over physical education time outside and all kinds of curricular time have been cut to put more time into academics.”

In the most recent “Shape of the Nation Report: Status of Physical Education in the USA,” Hawaii is ranked one of the 11 worst states for meeting PE requirements. The National Association of Sport and Physical Education releases a new report every five years. The next is due in 2011.

Part of the issue is that kids also need to better understand how they can measure their wellness. Dr. Cristeta Ancog, a general pediatrician with a 20-year practice at the Kaiser Permanente Nanaikeola Clinic and the physician champion for Pediatric Obesity for the Kaiser Hawaii Region, says there are statewide efforts to train kids to focus on their physical health as well as their academic achievement.

“There is a DOE rep on the Hawaii Initiative for Childhood Obesity Research and Education (HICORE) group and we’re working with them to measure Body Mass Index in children and have children be aware of what their BMI is, and maybe even put that on their report card. That would be a really interesting thing, wouldn’t it?”

The BMI formula uses height and weight to calculate the amount of body fat. An online version from the National Institute of Health is at www.nhibisupport.com. While there are some kids who truly are just

big—tall structured and muscular—they are few and far between. “Big” is usually just a euphemism for kids who are overweight and obese and Ancog says a BMI over the 85th percentile is considered at risk for diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and endocrine diseases.

Hawaii already struggles with its high incidence of diabetes but “Type 2 diabetes is worse now,” says Ancog. “When I was in residency a mere 20 years ago, we were never taught about Type 2 diabetes because that was considered an adult disease. Now about half the children I’m seeing who are new onset diabetes is Type 2.”

So is it nature or nurture that is responsible for the increased girth of our kids and other associated health problems? Since 2003 scientists, have poked at the “fat gene” that causes some people to absorb fat, but Ancog doesn’t believe DNA alone is to blame for rising rates of pediatric obesity. “It can’t be all genetic because they had the same genes back in 1970 and we know the rate of obesity has skyrocketed since then. We might have the first generation who won’t outlive their parents.”

Zenobia Barlow agrees: “The CDC is predicting that two out of three young people who are ethnic minorities are predisposed to suffering from diabetes as adults and I think those stats are really going to affect Hawaii.”

Barlow is the executive director and co-founder of the Bay area-based Center for Ecoliteracy. She’s helped create teaching strategies for K-12 education, including the Food Systems Project, Rethinking School Lunch, and Smart by Nature. In 1995, her center was the first to fund the Edible Schoolyard project of chef, author, Chez Panisse owner and farm-to-table advocate Alice Waters. Barlow was also asked to help create the teaching guide for the film, *Food, Inc.* The guide is available for download at the [center’s website](#).

Nancy Redfeather is working closely with Barlow and says schools have even more responsibility to offer healthy meals, low in fat, sugar, and salt. “Most of our public schools in Hawaii are 50 percent free or reduced lunch—so this means an incredible amount of children eat both breakfast and lunch at school,” Redfeather explains. “I think we serve 100,000 breakfasts and 100,000 lunches a day statewide For a lot of kids, this is the primary food they will get during the day.”

Redfeather is also a proponent for reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act currently under scrutiny in Congress, which she says could add up to \$1 per meal and set up guidelines for a farm-to-school program so schools could set up geographical preferences for where they buy their food. She concedes that kind of choice is a long way off and is trying to push parents and schools to take some additional action now.

Ancog tells her young patients to pick one thing—just one—they can change to be more healthy and to do it for three weeks. Then add in another change. It can be as simple as eating one more piece of fruit or having one more serving of veggies per day. It’s all about small changes becoming substantial and lasting ones.

Still, many parents are working one or more jobs to make ends meet and aren’t necessarily home to help make those changes when children finish school. Most want to know their kids are inside and safe. While this may give the parent some peace of mind, it also gives plenty of time for a kid to plop down and not move for several hours: the allure of computers, interactive video games, three digit TV channels, and other incentives to stay glued to a chair make screentime playtime. Add to that the TV and online marketing of processed and fast food, many with toys featuring well-known animated characters, and it’s no wonder legions of kids and time-pressed parents default to what’s easy and not necessarily best.

So what’s a parent to do? Like it or not, parents have to model the changes and there are no easy shortcuts. It’s a matter of loving our kids enough to rearrange how we do what we do, including preparing meals and spending time in our own or community gardens. Beans, grains, fruits, and vegetables are among the least expensive foods, but they need time and vigilance to prepare without overwhelming them with fats, sugar, and salt.

Redfeather, Barlow, and Ancog suggest starting with something simple: Cook one or more plant and grain-based meals during the weekend that can be rewarmed throughout the week and bring kids into the kitchen to help with the preparation. Sit down with your children as many nights as possible and eat together as a family with the TV and any other electronic devices off. Go for a 15 minute walk after dinner instead of turning the TV back on. Remember food is not love. It's just food.

Is any of this new information? Of course not. But as with many of the things we know are good for us, there is just the choice to do them or not. And the underlying question that has to be asked, even when we're fatigued and tired: Isn't my kid's health worth it? In Hawaii with our 34 percent childhood obesity rate, there are thousands of reasons to answer yes.

The entire interview with Cris Ancog, Zenobia Barlow, and Nancy Redfeather is on the [Town Square archive at www.hawaiipublicradio.org](http://www.hawaiipublicradio.org).



[Kaiser day at Kahakai Elementary School](#) from [The Kohala Center](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Beth-Ann Kozlovich is the host of Hawaii Public Radio's Town Square. For several years, she was the Hawaii anchor of NPR's award-winning "Morning Edition," and has an extensive background in radio news and public affairs. She is the mother of three teen-aged sons.

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