

Children Are Actually Getting Fatter on Summer Break

As a child, some of my favorite books were the [Betsy-Tacy series](#) by Maud Hart Lovelace. Although fiction, the stories were largely taken from real life examples of the author's childhood in a turn of the 20th century town.

One of the recurring themes in the books is the nightly games which were played outside the author's house. Children from all over the neighborhood would congregate in the nice weather and play their hardest until the sun set.

I was reminded of this happy scenario when I read a [New York Times article](#) reporting on a new study on childhood weight gain. Contrary to what conventional wisdom might think, the study found that children's weight actually increases in the summer months instead of the months they are in school:

A nationally representative sample of 18,170 kindergartners were weighed in the early fall and again in the late spring from 2010 through 2013, when they were finishing second grade. The prevalence of children who were overweight increased to 28.7 percent from 23.3 percent. ... Most strikingly, according to the study published Wednesday in the journal Obesity, all of the increases were during the summer breaks. No increase in body mass index was noted during the school year.

"It's dispiriting how little progress we can see as a result of all these school-based fitness and nutrition programs," said [Paul von Hippel](#), the lead author and an associate professor of public affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. He was referring to initiatives such as soda bans,

recalibrated school cafeteria food, and more attention to physical education and nutrition curriculums.

***“But it makes sense if you believe that schools were never the problem to begin with. Nor can they be much of the solution,”** added Mr. von Hippel, who said that family education and access to summer fitness programs needed to be bolstered.*

Mr. von Hippel is completely right when he suggests that families, not schools, can most effectively remedy excessive weight gain in children.

But I tend to disagree with his idea that families need to get their kids into summer fitness programs in order to control weight. Children do not require structured programs to make sure their lives are on track and that they are receiving appropriate exercise. What they need are opportunities like Betsy, Tacy, and all of their little friends had. Opportunities to simply be kids and wear off their excess weight by playing their hearts out.

Adults these days often are so concerned about making sure little Johnny is entertained and that he isn't playing with or on anything that might hurt him, that they train him to be an immobile, unimaginative creature. Is it time we recognized that children would likely be happier, more physically fit, and ready to grow into responsible adults if parents simply backed off and allowed them to rediscover the freedom which children once knew?