

The Fat of the Land

by Rick Reilly



Is your Little Leaguer so fat his blood type is Chee-tos? Do the other kids wait for your Cub Scout to jump in the pool so they can ride the wave? Is it difficult for your six-year-old to play Hide and Seek anymore?

I see you, Amber! At both ends of the Buick!

You're not alone. Americans have the fattest kids on earth. Over the last 20 years the number of overweight children in this country has doubled. Soon, if that trend continues, one of every three kids will be obese. I live near an elementary school and see it every day. Chubby little girls are now singing this rope-skipping rhyme:

*Georgia, Texas
North Carolina!
I think I'm suff-ring
Acute angina!*

We used to play Kick the Can every summer night. Now kids play Sit on Your Can, or a game more like Mother May I Finish Off the Double-Stuff Oreos? "Generation Y," says U.S. surgeon general Richard H. Carmona, "is turning into Generation XL"

We only have each other to blame.

It's you, Mr. Dad, pumping your bike madly while you let your triple-chinned five-year-old lie in the back of his little vinyl bike caboose. He's back there on his cellphone, gorging on marshmallow bunnies. Let him pedal himself!

It's you, Mrs. Elementary School P.E. Instructor, letting policy wonks talk you into replacing sports that actually make a kid sweat – dodgeball, kickball, tag – with "activities" like competitive cup-stacking. Hey, nothing burns off fries like competitive cup-stacking. Can we let them do it in recliners?

It's you, Mr. School Board Member, cutting gym classes to supposedly focus on "literacy." Or reducing gym to one or two times a week. Do you realize about half the states require only a year of high school P.E. or less? Wonderful. Now we've got kids who not only can spell myocardial infarction but also will have one by their 30th birthday.

It's you, Mrs. U.S. Senator, spending hundreds of billions of dollars to check grandmothers for shoe bombs while letting funding for schools shrink to the size of Uday's heart. Meanwhile, our kids blow up like Macy's floats. It's all part of the No Child Left Behind Except the Ones We Couldn't Get with the Forklift Act.

You want a threat to America? According to the Centers for Disease Control, one in three kids born in 2000 will contract type 2 diabetes – and potentially the heart disease, blindness, asthma, sleep apnea, gall bladder disease and depression that may come with it – because they are obese. This could be the first generation in American history to live fewer years than the one that came before it.

At least there's one person who wants to do something about it, and you won't believe who it is – LeBron James. The Cleveland Cavaliers rookie is fast-breaking a campaign, sponsored by Nike, to get kids off the Play Station and back on the playground. He's visiting 47 schools in seven cities and donating sports equipment, getting courts and school yards resurfaced, and paying for instructors who think kids ought to play something other than Capture the Flab. It took a 19-year-old to say, “Uh, I don't mean to say anything, but your first-grader just got mistaken for a tollbooth.”

If a kid can do something about it, why can't we? Let's all of us – every parent – make a vow to....

- Stop jumping up and driving the kids three blocks to their friends' house. Let them take that cobweb-covered contraption in the garage. It's called a bike.
- Watch what your kids are jamming down their throats. When I was a kid, a fast-food soda was 12 ounces . Now it's 32. In the last 20 years hamburgers have grown by 23%. And so have our children. Thanks, McDonald's. You super sized *us*.
- Stop treating the kid like The Little Prince. "You wouldn't believe the signed excuses kids bring in to get out of gym," says Rich Wheeler, who teaches seventh-grade P.E. in La Canada, Calif. “ ‘My kid has a sore thumb.’... ‘She's got a bruise.’... ‘He was up late.’ Parents are escape artists for their kids!”
- Pull fast-food carts and candy machines and exclusive-deal soda contracts out of the schools. One third of all public high schools sell fast food. Meanwhile, fewer and fewer schools teach home ec anymore, so kids have no idea what a healthy meal is. We've raised an entire generation that thinks ketchup packets are a food group.
- Turn off the cathode-ray tubes once in a while. The average kid spends 5 1/2 hours per day in front of a TV, a video-game monitor or a computer. Our kids have the strongest thumbs in the world. It's the rest of their bodies that jiggle like a San Andreas Jell-O factory.

We've got to do something – and quick. Out my window the kids are starting another round of Hot Potato.

Only they've got forks.