

I'm a general pediatrician down here in Middlebury, and as a general pediatrician, I spend every day trying to combat the childhood obesity epidemic. Yet despite my and my colleagues' best efforts, we are seeing more and more kids become overweight or obese, and at younger and younger ages. Once that happens, we face an increasingly steep uphill battle to remedy that situation; it's a battle which statistically we are very likely to lose, with the results of that loss being a child tied to a lifetime of chronic medical problems and increased medical costs.

And while the causes of childhood obesity are many, from genetics to sedentary lifestyles to poor dietary choices, one thing is abundantly clear, and that is that what kids are drinking has a major effect on the rate at which they gain weight. The clear and consistent link between obesity and the consumption of soda and other sugar-sweetened beverages is so strong that from the time kids are babies, we are trying to instill in families that all they need to drink are breast milk or formula to start, and then milk and water when they're older. Not only are soda and juice not necessary, but they can actually be harmful for their children. And while we will gladly convey that message in every pediatrician's office in the state, clearly we need help getting through to people. What better place for that to occur than in the setting in which families are spending more and more of their time and consuming more and more of their calories?

Why not take this opportunity to send the message that we as a state care enough about the health and well-being of our children to make this one small change to the way we offer them beverages? If a parent wants to buy their kid a soda or sugar sweetened drink, fine, let 'em do it. But studies have shown over and over that the vast majority of the time, people will stick with the default option offered to them. So why not make that default option the healthy one, and make the choice that is potentially harmful to the child the one that requires a little bit of extra effort? Failure to do so would not just be a missed opportunity. Failure to do so would be an inaction that would result in tangible, sustained adverse health outcomes for the children and families that you are elected to serve. So please, let's start taking some baby steps towards addressing this ever-growing problem. Thank you.

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