Childhood obesity is a problem

There is a health problem facing the children in Northern Michigan schools that too often gets ignored. But it is a problem that impacts about one in five school-aged children between the ages of 6-19 — childhood obesity.

The number has tripled since the 1970s. Obesity is defined as having excess body fat, whereas overweight is defined as having excess body weight for a particular height from fat, muscle, bone, water or a combination of those factors.

Many different factors contribute to childhood obesity, including genetics, metabolism, eating habits, physical activity behaviors, environmental factors and social and individual psychology.

In Michigan, 32.6 percent of children ages 0-17 are overweight or obese, compared to a national average of 31.3 percent, a National Institute for Health Care Management Foundation study discovered.

This creates problems for the children beyond just health issues.

As noted in a recent Petoskey News-Review, “In addition, to the short and long term health consequences, overweight or obese children are also more likely to have lower academic achievements and score poorly in math than their non-overweight peers, the National Institute for Health Care Management said.”

According to that same story, a Michigan State University Extension report indicated that, weight bias is another problem associated with obesity in children. Weight bias refers to negative attitude, beliefs and discrimination directed toward overweight or obese children and adolescents. Those attitudes and beliefs play out in forms of teasing, bullying and exclusion from activities.

Weight bias negatively impacts physical health and could actually reinforce behaviors that contribute to obesity, such as binge-eating and avoidance of physical activity.

But there is help in combating this issue in the community and one of the organizations working to combat this health problem is the Health Department of Northwest Michigan, according to Erica Van Dam, family and community health supervisor at the health department.

One such way is through the Safe Routes to School program, which is a national program that believes in the importance and joy of safe walking and biking to school. The program provides ways for communities to get started on safe ways of transportation to schools and highlight how creating walkable and bike-able places “enhance an entire community’s quality of life.”

Another program is the Smarter Lunchroom Movement, dedicated to providing schools with the knowledge, motivation and resources needed “to build a lunchroom environment that makes healthy food choices the easy choice.”

Van Dam also said a number of area school districts have also shown interest in farm-to-school initiatives, while the health department also offers various nutritional education opportunities within the classroom setting.

“It’s not just conducting lessons on what’s healthy and what’s not,” Van Dam said in a recent Petoskey News-Review story. “We’re doing cooking demonstrations and teaching different skills so when they (children) get home from school they can make their own snack in a healthier way.”

She added, “Public transportation ends up playing an important role in obesity. Having access to healthy foods, having more farmers markets and how do we make it more available. Having SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) available at the market, there’s a lot of things we can do.”

We encourage the community to take part in these health department programs and take steps to help our children and our future become healthier both physically and mentally.