

## Should a parent lose custody of an obese child?

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By Lyanne Melendez

OAKLAND, Calif., Dec. 5, 2007 (KGO) -- In this country, parents who allow a child to become morbidly obese face the possibility of losing custody and in some cases, being charged with child abuse.

In the next few minutes, Aisha Malone will hand her son over to child and family services of Contra Costa County.

"CPS is taking my son because he is obese and I have to relinquish my son today at 12:30 or else arrest warrants will be issued for me and my family members," said mother Aisha Malone.

Malone's son is six-years-old and weighs 140 pounds, that's about three times the size of a kid his age. He has other medical issues such as asthma. His sleep apnea is linked to his weight.

This case is very similar to Connor McCreddie's ordeal. He's the eight-year-old English boy who weighed 218 pounds.

A year ago, he was nearly put into protective custody because according to his doctors, his mother was slowly killing him by overfeeding him.

Mom kept custody of Connor, after promising to improve his diet.

"Half of society is overweight so are you going to take away every child because they are overweight give a parent a chance to help their child," said Malone.

But according to one physician we talked to, Malone missed a few appointments with nurses and nutritionists to help her come up with a diet plan for her son.

Legal experts say child abuse is not just about hitting a child or sexually abusing them, it's also about neglect.

"If she is raising a child and through his nutrition has become so endangered to his body and to his health, that's something else than just raising a fat kid, then you are harming a child and the judge would have the obligation to transfer custody," said Peter Keane from Golden Gate University Law School.

The National Institutes of Health define morbid obesity as being 100 pounds or more over the ideal body weight.

Childhood obesity is of particular concern because it is hard to overcome.

As a result some children are suffering conditions like type-two diabetes and liver disease. Things that basically were unheard of in the past.

Skeletal disorders are also linked to childhood obesity.

"The more obese you become, the more pressure you are putting on knee and ankle joints therefore you will be getting osteoarthritis. We are seeing this in kids, low back pain it's actually preventing kids from exercising," said pediatric endocrinologist Dr. Robert Lustig.

Jesse Manek was only 13 when he tipped the scales at 284 pounds. At the time his doctor delivered a grim outlook.

"You are going to have a heart attack, by the time you are 20 you are going to be a diabetic, you are going die young, you are not going to live a full life," said Manek.

That's when he came to see Dr. Robert Lustig, the director of the weight assessment for teen and child health clinic at UCSF.

With a proper diet and exercise, in two years he has lost 66 pounds.

Dr. Lustig blames the food companies for much of the weight gain in today's children because they add fructose to many of their foods. Too much fructose produces a chemical reaction that makes your brain believe you're starving.

"It makes you want more, it makes you eat more and therefore the food companies are delighted to put it in because it costs them nothing to put it in, because it is so cheap yet it increases their food sales," said Dr. Lustig.

"And this will be the first generation expected to live fewer years than their parents," said Pat Crawford from the UC Berkeley School of Public Health.

Pat Crawford is with UC Berkeley's School of Public Health. She says taking children away from their mothers is not the solution.

"That child will be better served to be with his mother. The mother has to be in a supportive environment where she can learn ways to interact with that child around food that will be healthier for her and her family and her child," said Crawford.

Malone asked that our camera be present when her son was taken by the social worker. But Child and Family services refused to do so while we were there.

Her response was: "Not at liberty to discuss that."

The six-year-old was eventually put into Foster Care. He has since been transferred to his grandmother's house.

He hasn't gained any weight but losing it remains a challenge.

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