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**OVERWEIGHT
AND OBESE
STUDENTS IN
POLISH SCHOOLS
- HAVE WE
FAILED THE TEST?**

Estimates suggest that by 2025, the number of overweight 5-17 year olds will reach **177 million**, whereas the number of obese 5-17 year olds will increase to **91 million** worldwide.

Currently, this issue affects as many as 10% of children and youth.

How are Polish schools handling it?

This article uses data from:

www.gov.pl · www.mazovia.pl · www.wkatowicach.eu · www.szkolazklasa.org.pl

At the beginning of 2024, the Medical University of Warsaw surveyed 1,642 primary (the last two grades) and secondary school students. As it turns out, one in five students in the Masovian Voivodeship is already overweight or obese. A similar study was carried out in the same year by the Katowice Municipal Sports and Recreation Centre (MOSiR) together with the city of Katowice. Thanks to FMS (Functional Movement Screen) tests involving 722 school students, we found out that as many as 30% of Katowice's schoolchildren are overweight. Only 204 boys and 250 girls were within the norm, 67 boys and 59 girls were overweight, and as many as 49 boys and 40 girls were significantly overweight. The culprits include poor diet and lack of exercise. Experts estimate that young people eat too few meals and the food that ends up on their plates is not varied or nutritious enough.

ON PAPER VS. IN REALITY

The statistics are alarming, and Polish schools are far from perfect when it comes to working with overweight and obese students. Natalia Ruman, PhD, from the Institute of Pedagogy of the University of Silesia, is researching the issue.

'It is true that there are school lesson plans on the subject, but they will not be of any use individually. The pro-

grammes themselves are not conducted in a reliable manner', says the pedagogist. 'The evaluation of prevention and education initiatives conducted using questionnaires also seems to be unreliable. On paper, the results are positive, but in practice they do not contribute much and are generally of little help.

So what measures can a school take to promote acceptance and body diversity among students? Natalia Ruman proposes solutions that might seem quite obvious and yet prove difficult to implement. Schools need more classes on topics that aim to improve students' self-esteem and help them discover their strengths, the introduction of diversity days, the publication of relevant texts in the school newspaper, and topic-related happenings. There is no doubt that this is an issue that must be included in the prevention and education programme.

'24 October, i.e. the Anti-Obesity Day, and 4 March, i.e. the World Obesity Day, should be included in every school calendar and celebrated accordingly. Schools could invite special guests who managed to achieve significant weight loss and who would be willing to answer questions asked by children', suggests Natalia Ruman. 'We could also organise challenges that are so popular around the world nowadays, such as "one day without sugary drinks". The point, however, is that these challenges should be realistic and not rivaling the 12 Labours of Heracles. A week without sweets is

too much, it would just discourage children from working on themselves', she adds.

The important thing is rules. One basic rule should be to exclude sweets and fast food from such class events as birthdays and school dance parties. Instead, the teacher could encourage students to bring fruit and healthy snacks. Similarly, during trips – instead of storming McDonald's, why not go out for a nutritious and healthy lunch? School trips should involve physical activity and walking, during which there should be no shortage of reminders to drink water regularly.

I SEE MYSELF THE WAY YOU SEE ME

There are many stereotypes, negative opinions, and prejudices about people who are obese or struggling with their weight. They are often perceived as unattractive not only in terms of physical characteristics but also in terms of their personality. The perception of what's on the outside influences the evaluation of that what is inside. This leads to discrimination and even psychological and physical abuse (bullying) not only on school premises but also beyond them. Name-calling, hurtful jokes, and teasing are the grim reality for many students affected by weight-related issues. To make matters worse, they tend to see themselves through the

lens of others' opinions and judgements. When the lack of acceptance and dislike expressed by peers is combined with a lack of self-acceptance, the young person withdraws and often begins to react with aggression towards those around them and towards themselves. Those individuals tend to exhibit their emotional problems as well as social difficulties also further in their adulthood.

Therefore, the teacher's role is, first and foremost, to limit the negative attitudes of classmates and to effectively combat discrimination against those who do not conform to the generally accepted standards of appearance.

TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Teachers must help overweight students feel more comfortable not only in P.E. classes but in all school activities – involve them in various activities, praise them publicly for the mini-successes of everyday life. Most of all, inappropriate behaviour towards such kids should not be downplayed in the first place – every sign of bullying (which might even lead to a suicide attempt) must be addressed. In doing so, the teacher should avoid empty platitudes such as 'just don't pay it any mind', 'if you try hard, you'll look the way you want', etc. Overweight students must be treated normally, like an-

one else, without exclusion, labelling, or comparison to others. It is essential to conduct awareness-raising conversations with the class, during which young people will gain knowledge about weight-related issues and their causes, which can change their attitudes towards their peers. In P.E. classes, an informed teacher should always choose exercises that will not put the student at risk of being mocked by their classmates. A meeting with the student's parents may be helpful as well, as it could result in the family deciding to take up physical activity and review their eating habits. It is important to ensure that the young person does not feel alone in dealing with their problem.

Natalia Ruman also draws attention to the competencies teachers need to develop in order to be able to effectively support students with those particular needs.

It is crucial to be able to recognise emotional states, also related to hunger and fullness levels, or more specialised ones, such as those relating to eating habits. The teacher should know how to talk to a student in crisis and how to help a child who has withdrawn', explains the pedagogist.

The teacher could try to explain to their students that in today's world we often perceive our own appearance through

the standards of human body image promoted by media (especially social media) that are extremely difficult, and often impossible to achieve,. It would also be useful to explain the tricks that influencers use to ensure that the camera does not show the imperfections of their bodies (there are tons of articles and videos online exposing such practices).

It is also important to be mindful of the words we use. Strong, often radical terms, such as *obesity*, *overweight*, *fattening*, *calorie-dense*, *low-calorie products*, *bad habits*, etc., can be replaced at school with softer-sounding words, e.g. *higher-than-average body weight*, *unhealthy food*, *healthy products*, *unhealthy habits*. This may not seem important, but it produces completely different images in young people's minds.

Of course, the parents' support is essential. The family must take care of the young person, encourage them, and be there for them, even if they fail in their efforts to lose weight. Sometimes silence is more important than words. It is better to simply be there for them than to repeat the platitudes about how the next time will be different. But most of all, they should not be allowed exceptions like 'OK, you got an A in maths today, so we'll order a pizza or go to the shop for crisps'.

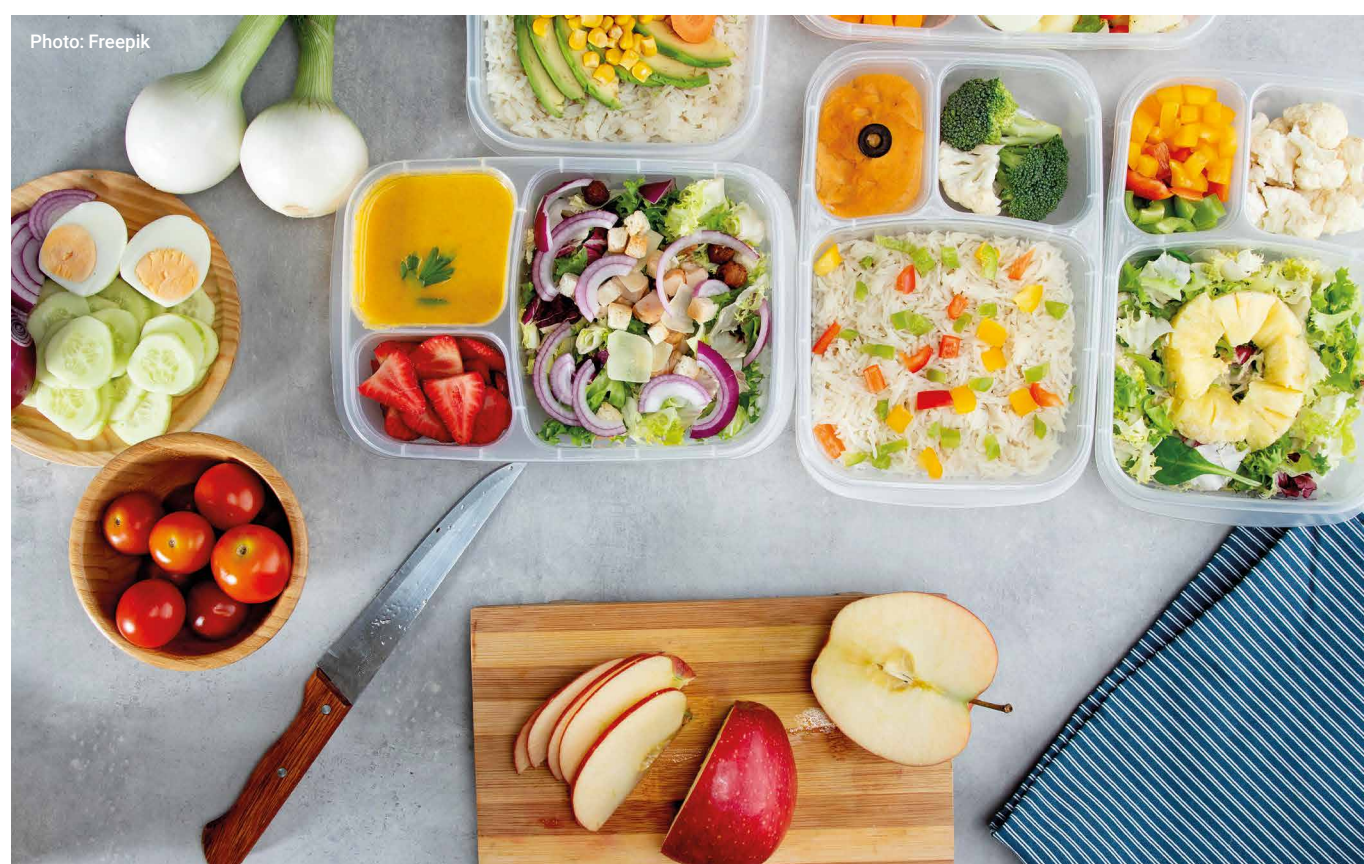


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