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Over 15% of Connecticut's low income two- to five-year old children are obese, ranking us 5th in the nation in early childhood obesity.

While it is tempting to think that chubby toddlers will grow out of their baby fat, this is all too often not the case. An overweight child aged three to five is 3x more likely to become an obese adult. And overweight children that become overweight adults have more severe adult weight problems and higher morbidity and mortality than people that first become overweight as adults.

The Committee on Children has proposed legislation (H.B. 5303, An Act Concerning Childhood Obesity) to limit juice in child care settings.

Although combatting childhood obesity is more complex than targeting sugar sweetened drinks, they are a good place to start. Added sugars have calories but no nutritional value, and liquid sugar in juice and soda is the largest source of sugar in the American diet. 100% juice lacks the fiber found in whole fruit; fiber slows the release of sugar into our blood streams and avoids overloading vital organs like the liver and pancreas. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recognizes that fruit juice offers no nutritional benefits over whole fruit, and encourages children to eat whole fruits to meet their recommended daily fruit intake.

The combination of children's innate preference for sweetness and our bodies' tendency to underestimate how many calories are in drinks makes it is easy for children to drink too much juice. Research supports this. While the general population consumes only 1/3 of their fruit in the form of juice, children two to five years of age drink much more of their fruit (42% fruit juice and 58% whole fruit).

Early childhood is a crucial time in the battle against obesity. Children learn more about food and eating during their first five years than during any other developmental period; these are the years during which food preferences and eating habits are established. Since nearly 75% of children under the age of five spend at least part of their day in child care, it is an important setting to promote behaviors that will help prevent obesity.

The Joint Committee on Children should revise the bill to align it with the AAP's juice recommendations. For children one to six years old, the AAP recommends no more than 4 to 6 ounces of fruit juice per day, while the proposed legislation would allow up to 8 ounces.

The bill should also require the Connecticut Department of Public Health to provide parent education materials to child care centers. If parents provide the juice, the bill's restrictions do not apply. Parents should be informed about the benefits of eating rather than drinking fruit, the difference between 100% fruit juice and fruit drinks, and the AAP's recommendations regarding sugar sweetened beverages. Parents want to do the right thing for their children, but not all parents are armed with the knowledge to navigate the "more is more" food environment advertised by large food companies. Let's give it to them.