Find out how to help families overcome culture of obesity
by Carla Kemp, Senior Editor


A short-distance triathlete, Suanne Kowal-Connelly, M.D., FAAP, is dedicated to being healthy and fit. Yet, she admits she can't resist macaroni and cheese.

"I don't buy it. It's not in my house. I don't make it. But stick it on a buffet and I'm in the room, and I don't know that I could ever just say no," she said.

Dr. Kowal-Connelly has spent a lot of time reflecting on her own struggles to maintain healthy habits as well as the challenges her patients face.

"I assume that if it is so hard for me when I'm totally dedicated to this lifestyle, it's got to be 100 times harder for people who don't have the luxury of being athletic or being devoted to some kind of athletic thing like I am," she said.

She's come to the conclusion that it's not personal weakness that drives people to make unhealthy choices. It's the culture of obesity.
Dr. Kowal-Connelly defines the concept and what pediatricians can do to help families during a session titled “Addressing a Culture of Obesity,” which can be accessed via the virtual platform through Jan. 31, 2021.

The culture of obesity refers to the systemic forces that stand in the way of people making healthy choices. Those systems include the family, schools, communities and the nation as a whole. During the session, she focuses on how the marketing of unhealthy food to children and the development of unhealthy food preferences early in life can lead to obesity.

When talking to her own patients, she tells them that industry spends nearly $2 billion a year to market sugar-, fat- and salt-laden products to children.

"I've had many people say to me, 'Oh gosh, I never thought about it that way,'” said Dr. Kowal-Connelly, director of pediatric clinical quality for the Federally Qualified Health Centers in Long Island, N.Y.

She hopes that looking at the obesity crisis through the lens of cultural forces resonates with people.

"It's a huge responsibility that we have as pediatricians to help to raise healthy children, and obesity stands to be one of, if not the greatest threat, to this generation from a health perspective,” said Dr. Kowal-Connelly, a member of the AAP Section on Obesity and Councils on Sports Medicine and Fitness, and School Health. "...We need to find ways that motivate families to invest in their health and wellness. And so far, I think we're losing the battle.”

She also talks about how pediatricians can get involved on a larger scale by advocating for policies to improve health.

"... We really need to go beyond family shaming and focus more on the forces of the culture of obesity that are there,” she said. “They are looming. They are across all systems. They make it difficult to impossible for families to make the healthy choice, the easy choice. We really need to try to do something about that.”