Critical Writing Exercise

Part B: 'Childhood obesity – it's causes, treatment and prevention': Critically analyse recent literature, policy and research on this topic

According to the British Medical Association (2005), there were approximately 1 million obese individuals under the age of 16 in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2005. However, estimates of the incidence of childhood obesity within the UK vary for a variety of reasons. Crowther et al (2007) note that it may be underestimated and under-reported due to the unwillingness of children, and possibly their parents, to participate in measuring their weight. As well as this, there are different ways of defining childhood obesity: Obesity is not easy to define in children due to variations in the ratio between weight gain and height gain during normal childhood growth. But despite these factors there appears to be no doubt that the incidence of children being overweight or obese has been steadily rising in the UK since the mid-1990s (Chinn & Rona 2001; Reilly & Dorosty 1999). The National Audit Office et al (2006) suggest that obesity costs the NHS around £1 billion per year, and possibly much more in indirect costs.

Much attention has been focussed on how to halt this rise in childhood obesity, both through prevention and treatment of the condition. As a result, interest has been focussed on what the underlying causes of childhood obesity might be. There appear to be a range of views on this, and therefore on how the condition can best be treated and prevented.

In the popular media both in the UK and worldwide, a variety of claims about the causes of childhood obesity can be found, for example blaming childhood obesity on parents' neglect (Martin, 2007), lack of children's exercise (Hawkes 2007), and ineffective Government intervention (Rodgers 2007). Many of these claims appear to be emotive and simplistic, however, and careful scrutiny is required to assess the validity of these. A broader search is therefore required in order to gain a more balanced and evidence-based perspective on the causes of childhood obesity. Whiting (2008) provides a useful summary of the causes of childhood obesity, suggesting that the majority of children who become obese do so as a result of an 'inappropriate' diet and a lack of physical exercise. Interestingly, Lempert (2005) suggests that marketing by food companies may be a factor in causing the rise of childhood obesity. It should be noted that although he is writing from a US perspective, his comments may nevertheless be relevant in the UK.

Whiting (2008) questions whose responsibility it should be to tackle childhood obesity, noting the complexity of the underlying issues. Fox (2003) suggests that a multi-agency solution is needed to treat and prevent childhood obesity involving schools, the home, the neighbourhood as well as local planning in terms of provision of services and amenities.

Whiting (2008) outlines some of the initiatives have been set up by the UK government at primary school level to try to tackle these problems (Department for Education & Skills & Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2002; Department of Health and Department for Education and Skills 2005; National Audit Office et al 2006), through which it is hoped that young people will be supported in developing more healthy behaviours at all levels of society. She notes that a community approach underlies the above government initiatives, aiming to tackle childhood obesity through involvement of the local community, thereby transferring some responsibility from Government and healthcare professionals to groups and individuals.