

Address by Mrs Andra Levite, First Lady of Latvia, at the European Leaders' Spouses Summit in Zagreb on the Prevention of Childhood Obesity

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Dear Prof. Sanja Musić Milanović, First Lady of Croatia,

Your Majesty, Excellencies,

Dear participants,

Dear colleagues,

I

It is a true honour for me to represent Latvia at this important conference.

Today we are discussing the results of the most recent study about overweight and obese children in Europe; therefore, we are discussing Europe's future.

The result for Latvian children in this study was rather satisfactory, but the actual tendencies are alarming.

The measures taken by the Latvian government are right and effective, but it is no reason to be content.

Still, 25 % of Latvian children need to be noticed more and offered support.

II

Not very long ago, we were discussing children's malnutrition even in Europe. These were the first decades after WWII.

Nowadays, the situation has completely changed. Again, we deal with children's malnutrition the other way around.

Children's overweight and obesity have become a major challenge for Europe's future health and health system.

We know the reasons for overweight and obesity.

In very rare cases they are inherited or due to hormonal malfunctions; in most cases, the reasons are excessive intake of calories and lack of physical exercise.

We also know the most likely consequences of overweight and obesity in childhood; these are type II diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, orthopaedic problems, different forms of cancer, mental health issues and more.

III

The solutions should be as diverse as the consequences of overweight and obesity.

It is common knowledge that it takes a village to raise a child. Normally this village is inhabited by parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, schoolteachers, coaches for sports, and music teachers.

In the case of children with overweight and obesity, the village should also include medical doctors, especially paediatricians, endocrinologists, dietologists, physiotherapists and psychologists.

We all know that therapy and healing may be a long process, often filled with tears, a sense of frustration and failure.

Therefore, our focus should be preventing overweight and obesity, reintroducing the pure taste of natural food and strengthening children's innate joy of movement.

IV

To prevent children's overweight and obesity, we should start at the very beginning of life. Pregnant women should be informed about healthy nutrition, avoiding harmful behaviours and following the doctors' instructions, especially concerning gestational diabetes and hypertension. Everything should be done to avoid premature birth.

After giving birth, the importance of breastfeeding ought to be strengthened.

Young mothers should receive help from professional lactation nurses, especially at the beginning of the sometimes painful lactation period, if required.

Breastfed children benefit not only immunologically but also develop less overweight and obesity in childhood.

Our Maternity hospital in Riga, where 1/3 of all Latvia's children are born, offers practical help from professional lactation nurses even when the mothers have left the hospital.

V

Parents should know about the importance of healthy food, regular physical exercise, regular sleep management, and growing up in a caring and supportive environment for their children.

In most cases, mothers are the first to notice and worry about the child's weight. They seek medical advice, and they are willing to change comfortable but wrong habits. But on their way to normalising their children's weight, they need cooperation of their partner and the children's father.

VI

Digitalization with all its possibilities has overwhelmed our children, the limitation of time for using digital tools is each parent's duty, as difficult and stressful for the parent it might be.

The mentioned options are in our hands. Sadly, the Covid pandemic during the last two years was beyond our influence, but with all the necessary restrictions the pandemic aggravated the tendency towards obesity in Europe and worldwide.

VII

Before I finish, let me mention recent achievements in the field of nutrition and physical activity by the Latvian government on our way to eradicating children's overweight and obesity.

In 2016 the Law on the handling of energy drinks was approved. It prohibits the sale of energy drinks to people under the age of 18.

Since 2016 there have been regulations on the maximum permissible content of trans fatty acids in foodstuffs.

Since 2015 amendments have been approved to nutritional norms in order to improve the quality of meals in schools, medical institutions, social care and social rehabilitation institutions.

In 2017 recommendations were revised on energy and nutrient intakes for the population of Latvia.

In 2017 recommendations were revised for procurement organizations on food service and food supply.

In 2017 recommendations were developed on healthy nutrition for pregnant women and vegetarians.

In 2017 EU school milk, fruit and vegetable schemes were introduced in primary schools.

We have established cooperation in health promotion in municipalities, healthy school networks and the Riga Children's Hospital homepage "veselapasaule.lv."

Latvia is awaiting and actively supporting an EU law concerning unhealthy food and beverage advertising on TV and radio, especially during children's programmes.

Let us be creative in finding the best solutions for our children, and the common future of all our nations.

Thank you!

<https://www.president.lv/en/article/address-mrs-andra-levite-first-lady-latvia-european-leaders-spouses-summit-zagreb-prevention-childhood-obesity>