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Family Focus Helping Your Overweight Child

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The Wisconsin anchorwoman in the news who was accused by a viewer of being overweight and a bad role model for children is a poignant reminder that weight continues to be a controversial issue in our society. In health-conscious, high-achieving communities like ours, parents of a child with a weight problem have special concerns. It's natural to want our children to blend in easily - socially, athletically, scholastically, and physically. And we want them to have healthy levels of self-esteem and self-confidence, in addition to all our other aspirations for them.

Weight is one of many issues that can set our child apart from others, cause a drop in self-confidence, and contribute to family tension. Most overweight children experience hurt feelings not only from comments and behaviors from their peers and community, but more cuttingly from well-intentioned remarks from their own family members.

Helping children under the age of seven who are overweight

At this age parents have more influence and control. Without saying a word about your child's weight, you can structure her environment to include more exercise, fewer unhealthy snacks, and less sedentary activity. You can eliminate tempting foods from the pantry and not emphasize food in the household. But you can also provide small amounts of sugary or fatty foods so that your approach doesn't become extreme, and you can help your child learn to make choices and find balance. You can be a good role model for her, and use positive reinforcement to encourage her to develop and maintain healthy habits.

Helping older children, teens, and young adults

I advise parents to suggest early on in your child's life that treats be limited to one or two small ones per day. Since you can't always monitor food consumption as they get older - and you don't want to put yourself in this

position anyway - you can at least recommend a balanced plan to your children.

It will be obvious to your older child if you eliminate all tempting foods, but you can reduce the amount you keep on hand. Large family-size packs of chips or cookies or ice-cream are ill-advised. Instead, you may need to shop more often and pay more for smaller quantities, but limiting the quantities of junk food on hand is essential.

It is important that everyone in the family get some sort of exercise. This can be a forced choice where you have each child pick at least one sport or activity. You can limit the amount of time spent with TV and other electronic devices in the home to encourage a healthy lifestyle. You can try to promote active family outings when you have time together.

When I work with overweight children, teens, and young adults, they invariably say that they want to be treated like everyone else at home. In other words, at times they want to spontaneously go for ice-cream with the family or order pizza, and be able to relax with food and their families. They have enough of a burden at times because of their weight, so it is liberating to have occasions where they can forget and enjoy.

Parents of older children and young adults sometimes ask me if it is okay to bring up the subject of weight with their child. They think they can help motivate their child to lose weight if they bring up the topic under the guise of health or exercise concerns. Unfortunately, their underlying intent is usually highly transparent.

Addressing weight with an overweight child is almost always a disastrous mistake. Almost every child over the age of six or seven (and even younger) is very aware if she is overweight. We're all bombarded with images of thin models and celebrities, and with television shows and commercials and magazine ads and stories featuring weight loss remedies and strategies.

Overweight children or young adults are already highly sensitive about their appearance. They feel their own constant pressure to lose weight, so any external pressure just adds to their unhappiness. What a child needs most from family members is unconditional acceptance. She is typically hurt and angered by judgments, criticism, pressure, unsolicited advice, and attempts to control her weight. And as we know, negative feelings can easily sabotage any hope for self-improvement.

Unless she is in medical jeopardy and under a doctor's care, an overweight child needs to be the one to decide on her own that she wants to lose weight. If she feels positive about herself in other ways and in enough control of her own life and body, she will be in a good place to begin. When that time comes, you want to have the kind of relationship where she can come to you for help and moral support.

Fortunately, the Wisconsin anchorwoman and many supporters fought back against the mean, bullying tactics of her accuser. At some point, your child may need to count on you to be her most ardent supporter. This can only happen if you provide her with unconditional acceptance of who she is and how she looks.

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