

Parents' Patterns Prevail When it Comes to Kids' Weight

Do you, your child, or both of you struggle with your weight?

Does it sometimes seem like just too much effort to deal with it? Do you figure it might just be a cosmetic issue anyway?

One in five children in the United States qualifies as obese. As a parent, understand that the most vital determinant of whether or not your child will be at a healthy weight or will grow too heavy is you. Research has repeatedly confirmed this.

"Parents need to lead by example and make being healthy a way of life in their homes," says Amanda Fifi, M.D., a pediatric gastroenterologist and the director of pediatric nutrition at the University of Miami Health System. "Parents can't maintain a different lifestyle and habits from their kids," she says. "It would be unfair for parents to drink soda and expect their child to stick with water."

"Making good choices about food and physical activity aren't just things for the children to learn to do," she says. "Every member of the family should be eating in the same sensible way, and everybody should be moving and active for some part of every day."

Once children are old enough to help, they ought to become involved in buying and preparing food, she advises.

Focus on feeling good, not appearance or weight

As you introduce better new ways of eating and being active in your family's life, be careful of how you discuss the reasons for the changes. Talk about the gains to be had in everyone feeling healthier and more energetic.



“When I talk to overweight or obese patients about new routines, I stress that the main goal is for them to feel good, to have a great life, and to live to 99,” says Dr. Fifi. “I may add, ‘By the way, you may lose weight,’ but that’s not the main focus.”

Taking this approach is also wise because it can help prevent children from becoming concerned to an unhealthy degree with their weight and their shape. Such excessive concerns can lead to eating disorders. “We try to keep mental health in the foreground,” says Dr. Fifi. “Mental health is an influence on physical health and vice versa.”

Make healthy choices easy

Follow these tips from Dr. Fifi to make the establishment of healthy habits more natural, and less of a struggle, for your family:

Start in infancy to establish healthy eating patterns: “People find chubby babies cute,” she says, “No one worries at that stage. But if you wait until a child is 11 or 12 to establish good habits, it’s going to become an argument,” says Dr. Fifi.

You may want to introduce vegetables before you introduce fruits to your baby, to

avoid them developing an early, strong preference for sweets,

Feed your family lots of fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains (such as oatmeal and whole-wheat bread). Mostly choose lean sources of protein, such as chicken or fish. Include plenty of plant-based proteins, too, such as beans. Limit red meat and especially avoid processed meats (such as bologna, salami, and bacon).

Don't give babies or children juice

"It takes a lot of fruit to make juice. Juice delivers way too many calories too quickly," she says. Instead, give your child some berries or apple slices and water to drink.

"We don't drink juice in our house," says Dr. Fifi, who has three young sons. At the same time, she recognizes that her children may be given juice at their friends' houses. That kind of occasional consumption, of juice or other rather unhealthy foods, doesn't matter if the eating routines at home are sound.

Recognize your obligation to act: If your child is already way past the baby or toddler years and has a weight problem, be prepared to be firm about making healthy changes in your family's routines.

"Parents will tell me that their child doesn't want to give up certain foods that the kids are used to eating," says Dr. Fifi. "I say to them, 'If your child had cancer, you'd insist that they go for chemo. Well, obesity kills more people than cancer does.'"

Leave junk food at the store: Parents will tell Dr. Fifi that their child will sit down and plow through a whole box of cookies or a whole bag of Cheese Doodles. Her advice: "Don't buy those foods in the first place." Cross chips, candy, fruit rollups, and other highly processed sugary foods off your shopping list, and you won't have to reign in your child's desire for them.

Keep your family moving

Find ways to build physical activity into your day, and your children's day without framing it as "exercise," advises Dr. Fifi.

"Have the kids do useful things that get them moving," she says. They can walk the dog, dust, sweep, vacuum the floor, and do other chores around the house. Dance together.

Think twice before grabbing the car keys to chauffeur your children somewhere. "Can they safely walk there or ride their bikes?" she asks. If they can, send them on their way. If they're too young or you're uncomfortable sending them out alone, and time permits, walk or bike with them.

Encourage your child to join a school or community sports team.

Work for a healthier community

Many kids live in areas that lack safe places to play outside, walk, and bike. If you can, find ways to get involved to improve your community.

"Local policies and school policies matter a lot in these kinds of issues," says Dr. Fifi. "Maybe there's a basketball hoop at the school, but it's locked after hours. Maybe more sidewalks and green spaces are needed."

Be an involved citizen. Join the Parent-Teacher Association, and promote activities and sports. Vote for school board, local, state, and national leaders who prioritize the needs of children.

Further guidance

Read more about healthy habits for children and families at the Center for Disease

Control and Prevention.

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In June 2020, however, a study of 317 children and their mothers shed some new light on the topic and may change your approach in dealing with your angst-ridden mealtime. [Read more.](#)