

Talking to Your Child About Weight



When, Why, & How
To Have This Important
Conversation



Introduction

As is also the case with adults, the topic of weight can be an extremely sensitive issue children, adolescents, and teenagers.

Many parents – who fear that their child will feel judged or labeled as “fat” if the parent brings up the topic – are often concerned that directly addressing their child’s weight issue will add to the child’s shame and emotional burden.

However, the truth is that it’s more likely that your child is likely already feeling embarrassed and burdened by weight, and may even be getting teased or bullied at school because of it. Your child may also be reluctant to try treatment (or even talk to a counselor or therapist about it) because he or she believes that weight loss is just not possible given failed past attempts.

The e-book is designed to help you overcome any hesitance you may be feeling about having this important conversation with your child. The information that follows is organized into the following sections:

Section I: The Impact of Childhood Overweight & Obesity

- The physical impact
- The emotional impact
- The academic impact
- The financial impact

Section II: Talking to Your Child About Weight

- How do I decide if I should discuss weight with my child?
- What should I say?
- When should I say it?
- How should I say it?
- Consider your motivation

Section III: Getting Help

- Making a few key changes
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The Impact of Childhood Overweight & Obesity

Over the past 20 years, clinical obesity among children and adolescents (defined as 95+ percentile body mass index on a growth chart) has skyrocketed from 6% to 15%. This makes overweight and obesity the most common chronic illness in pediatrics. To provide a sense of the magnitude of the opportunity, the prevalence of eating disorders is only 0.3%.

Although pediatric and adolescent obesity is most common in lower socio-economic groups, it is prevalent at all income levels, including in upper-income families. In 1995, 2.9% of households in the top 5% of income had obese children or adolescents. The number has certainly risen over the past 8 years.

The two primary causes of this epidemic are high-calorie diets and insufficient exercise.

As the following facts illustrate, the unfortunate truth is that young people who are struggling with their weight are at increased risk for a range of physical and mental health concerns.

The physical impact of childhood overweight & obesity:

- Type 2 diabetes mellitus (formerly adult onset diabetes)
- Hypertension and predisposition for cardiac disease
- Sleep apnea
- Asthma
- Gallbladder disease
- Kidney disease
- Pancreatitis
- Eye diseases
- Nerve damage
- Various gastrointestinal disorders
- Various skeletal and orthopedic problems
- 80% increase in incidence of obesity in adulthood
- Obesity in adulthood likely to be more severe with earlier onset of co-morbidities

The emotional impact of childhood overweight & obesity:

- Obese individuals are up to 44% more likely to suffer from depression than those of average weight. *Source: Archives of General Psychiatry, June 2006*

- Overweight girls and boys experience a substantially greater number of thoughts concerning suicide and self-harm. *Source: Psychological Bulletin 133: 557-580, Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at Yale*
- Excess weight in teenagers correlates directly with intensity and frequency of unhealthy anger expressions. *Source: Pediatric Exercise Science, November 2008, Medical College of Georgia*
- Overweight children display more signs of loneliness and social isolation, and are viewed less favorably by peers as early as kindergarten. *Source: Psychological Bulletin, Vol. 133, No. 4*
- Many overweight children rate their quality of life as low as that of terminal cancer patients. *Source: Journal of the American Medical Association, April 9, 2003*

Childhood obesity has also been associated with academic and financial struggles:

- Overweight children are absent from school 20% more days each year than normal-weight children, which is associated with poorer academic performance. *Source: Obesity, August 2007, Center for Obesity Research and Education at Temple University*
- Adolescent boys who are overweight are more likely to consider themselves poor students and more likely to drop out of school. *Source: Obesity Research (2001) 9, 32-42*
- Individuals who are obese in their teens are more likely to live in poverty and earn significantly less than those who are not overweight. *Source: New England Journal of Medicine, Volume 357:2325-2327*

The connection between excess weight and poor academic performance occurs because many overweight adolescents identify themselves as failures. Most overweight teens have experienced such a sense of rejection and isolation that they have given up on the possibility of success in endeavors, even those like academics that do not seem related to their weight.

Feeling the physical burden of weight, struggling with intense emotions, and living with increased social pressure add up to an overall sense of failure that is difficult to overcome, reinforcing a belief that there is no reason to even set goals, let alone try to achieve them. Understandably, the result is often a lack of motivation to achieve and an overall sedentary life.

Although it's difficult as a parent to accept that your child is suffering in these ways, it is vital that you consider the role that weight plays in your child's mood and behavior so that you can seek the most beneficial treatment.

Talking to Your Child About Weight

One key to a successful outcome is for you to become your child's ally in this discussion, rather than increasing tension about the topic or becoming an adversary. If you are concerned about your child's weight, take time to carefully consider the best way to approach the topic with them. Here are some suggestions.

How do I decide if I should discuss weight with my child?

First, consider your child's age. Children in elementary school are likely too young for such a conversation. At this age, their parents are making all of the decisions surrounding food and exercise.

If you have a young child who is overweight or obese, simply begin making the changes necessary to bring their weight under control while teaching them healthy lifestyle choices at the same time. Emphasizing weight with your child when they are too young may set them up for a lifelong struggle with body image or eating disorders.

If your children are older and struggling with their weight, talk to them about what foods they are eating, what exercise they are getting and any problems they may be having without stressing the fact that they are overweight. Be supportive of your children and help them do what is necessary to become healthier.

What should I say?

The best way to talk to a child about weight is to talk not about weight, but about health. Instead of telling your child they are too heavy or that you think they need to lose some weight, talk about the importance of eating healthy and getting enough physical activity.

Point out the benefits of physical health, such as having more energy, increased self-confidence and less illness.

Your child will be more willing to listen if you make healthier living a family project. Focusing all the attention on your child could negatively affect their self-esteem and interest in losing weight. Instead, tell them that the entire family is going to eat better and get involved with physical activity.

Teach your child healthy eating habits by including them in grocery shopping and meal planning.

When should I say it?

Timing is important. Sitting your child down for a formal "we need to talk" conversation could unnecessarily cause your child to feel stressed, and make their weight into a bigger issue than it needs to be. Instead, look for more natural opportunities to discuss weight and health, such as when you're grocery shopping, walking to school, playing in the yard or making dinner.

How should I say it?

Delivery is everything, no matter the topic. You can have the best ideas and intentions, but if you present them the wrong way, your child won't listen. Avoid anger, frustration and sarcasm. These attitudes are hurtful, especially coming from a parent. Be encouraging and supportive, and above all else, make sure your child knows you love them.

While you want to reinforce the conversation you and your child have about health and weight, you don't want to nag. There's a fine line between supporting your child and pestering them, and you'll need to find it.

Consider your motivation

Though this may seem like a lot to keep in mind, don't feel overwhelmed. Take time to carefully think through what you want to say, and consider practicing a few times.

You may also want to consider your own motivations for wanting to help your child lose weight.

- Are you truly concerned with your child's health?
- Are you embarrassed at having an overweight child?
- Do you want your child to be athletically competitive?

Any selfish or unkind motivations you have need to be dealt with before you talk to your child, or you risk the possibility of having them come out during your conversation. Make sure your primary concern is the health and well-being of your child.

Getting Help

The weight loss industry is full of quick weight loss schemes and diets designed to keep people losing and regaining weight, often causing more health issues than they resolve.

To ensure that your child loses weight in a safe and healthy manner, you should select a weight loss plan for your child that meets the following criteria:

- Has proven long-term success
- Includes behavioral therapy so that your child changes the way he or she thinks about diet and activity, in order to change behavior for good
- Your child understands and can follow independently (with varying amounts of support from you depending on the child's age).

Ask your child's doctor what he or she recommends for a long-term eating and activity plan for your child, and what role behavioral therapy plays in your child's weight loss success. And make sure that the plan you choose is backed by medical research.

Treatments for childhood obesity generally fall into three categories

- Improved diet
- Increased activity
- Medical procedures (including medication and/or weight-loss surgery).

Because children are highly adaptable and usually very capable of making dietary changes and increasing physical activity levels without health hindrances, medical actions are usually reserved for extraordinary situations.

Making a few key changes

The majority of children can achieve healthy, long-term weight loss by simply changing a few daily habits and getting involved in more physical activities.

Because children are still growing and naturally put on weight to correspond to their growth, many young children (under the age of 7) who have no other pressing health concerns are advised to try and maintain their weight, instead of losing any weight. The idea is that as their bodies grow, their weight will return to a healthy proportion of their body size.

Dietary changes that will help address child and teen obesity are simple, but they must be facilitated by parents. Because parents are the ones who purchase food at the supermarket and prepare or purchase meals, they are the ones making the important dietary choices. Some simple changes that improve a child's chances of maintaining a healthy weight include:

- Choosing snack foods that are fresh and unprocessed, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
- Encouraging children to drink more water, and limiting the consumption of sweetened beverages of any kind including fruit juice. Although fruit juices have more nutritional value than soda, they are still high in sugar. Drinking water can have an energizing effect on the body, and kids can get more nutrition and less sugar from eating whole fruit.
- Discouraging eating while distracted and/or "on the go" including while watching television, in the car, or playing video games. Studies show that children and adults who sit down to eat as a family, without distractions like television, get more satisfaction from the food they eat and are less likely to overeat.
- Limiting how often the family eats fast food - even "healthy" options on fast food menus are often high in fat, sugar, sodium, and calories.

Getting active & staying active

Physical activities are a critical component of healthy weight maintenance or weight loss for children and teens. Parents should emphasize activity rather than exercise for young people. Most children and teens don't need to practice adult habits like going to a gym to achieve healthy levels of activity. Outside play time and sports are usually enough to burn the necessary calories and provide health benefits.

To encourage children to spend time being physically active, parents should limit the amount of time the kids are allowed to spend in front of the television and computer. Another great way to keep kids active is for parents to be active themselves. To keep kids interested, find activities that children like, and vary them.

Weight loss camps for kids

In many cases, one of the best ways to learn and set into motion healthy eating and exercise habits is through weight loss camp, where young people enjoy being kids while learning new coping skills and dietary information.

At locations throughout the United States and abroad, the Wellspring network of weight loss camps has produced superior results while promoting safety, health, and fun.

Wellspring campers consistently demonstrate average weight loss of 4 lbs. per week, and over 30 lbs. in 8 weeks. Wellspring Camps also have proven results in the time period that matters most—the months following camp.

In 6-12 month follow-up studies, the average camper goes on to lose even more weight – an additional 5 to 8 lbs., on average. Moreover, over 70% of campers maintain weight loss from camp, or continue losing more weight.

About Us

The information in this e-book was adapted from multiple articles produced by CRC Health Group and Wellspring Camps & Academies.

Wellspring is the leading organization of weight loss camps and residential treatment programs for overweight children, adolescents, families, young adults and women. Wellspring programs allow young people who are struggling with their weight to lose weight and change their lives for the better.

Wellspring operates two types of programs for children, adolescents and young adults:

Wellspring Academies – Formerly known as Academy of the Sierras, Wellspring Academies are revolutionary year-round boarding schools for maximum weight loss and behavioral change, with campuses in California and North Carolina. www.wellspringacademies.com

Wellspring Camps – 1-week to 12-week summer camps located throughout the U.S. and U.K. We also offer the unique Wellspring Family Camp at La Jolla – a weight loss vacation and transformation for the entire family. www.wellspringcamps.com

For more about Wellspring visit www.wellspringcamps.com or www.wellspringacademies.com, or call (866) 277-0221

Wellspring is a proud member of CRC Health Group, which offers the most comprehensive network of specialized behavioral healthcare services in the nation.

With the largest array of personalized treatment options, individuals, families, and professionals can choose the most appropriate setting for their behavioral, addiction, weight management, and therapeutic education needs.

CRC Health Group is deeply committed to making its services widely and easily available to those in need, while maintaining a passion for delivering the most advanced treatment available.

For more about CRC Health Group visit www.crchealth.com or call (877) 637-6237.

