

Healthy Parents, Healthy Children:

Be Mindful of Your Body Talk

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In our society, we constantly are bombarded with messages telling us to try this diet, lose weight, don't eat that food, be skinnier, be healthier, etc. Our children are exposed to many of the same messages we are.

Thus, parents need to be aware of their own attitudes and behaviors, as well as how to talk healthfully about their bodies. As a parent, what you do can affect how your children think and feel about their bodies. Here are some helpful tips on how to communicate nonverbally and verbally with your children.

Approach and Moderate

Many diets encourage you to lose weight by limiting your intake of “bad” foods. This leads to a behavior called avoidance. Instead, think about eating food in a healthful way, or what is called “approach.” If you approach healthful foods, instead of avoiding unhealthy foods, you are more likely to develop healthful overall eating habits.

One example of an “approach” strategy is to try to incorporate more fruits and vegetables into your meals. But remember to listen to your body. Entirely avoiding certain foods, even those such as chocolate, is not a good idea.

Avoiding certain foods, especially ones that you are craving, actually leads to eating more of that food later than you would have originally. You can let yourself have the occasional treat; moderation is key to a well-balanced, healthful lifestyle.

The good news is, not only will this behavior make you healthier, but it will help your child have healthier behaviors toward food, too. Children tend to model the actions of their parents. When you focus on eating healthful foods, your child is more likely to do the same.

Be Kind to Yourself and Others

Never make comments about other people's weight, whether teasing or not. Any teasing about weight is bad because it gives unnecessary and often negative attention to an individual's body.

Similarly, do not engage in "fat talk" about your own body. Fat talk is when you make negative comments to others about your body, such as, "I look fat in these jeans" or "I am so fat." When you make comments such as these, whether directly to your children or not, children hear them, think about them and often later engage in similar commentary with their friends. Be careful what you say to your partner, friends or other family members – children hear everything!

Therefore, engaging in positive talk about yourself is essential. If you find that refraining from commenting about your body is hard to do, focus on what your body can do, not what it can't.

For example, you could be a very fast runner, which means your legs are very strong and help you run fast. Positive talk such as this will help you love your body and all of the wonderful things it allows you to do. If you love your body, you can help your child love his/her body, too.



Discuss, Discuss, Discuss!

As a parent, you can do only so much to prevent your child from being exposed to conversations about weight and dieting, and images of thinness and muscularity. So one way to take a hands-on approach is to use any of the experiences your child has as an opportunity for you to talk to him/her. The media, in particular, provide a great opportunity for discussion.

In the media, individuals often are presented in an unrealistic way. For example, girls and women are portrayed as extremely thin, and boys and men are shown as being extremely muscular. These portrayals are called the "thin ideal" and the "muscular ideal" because they serve as indicators of how we are "supposed" to look.

In reality, these images are completely unrealistic and unattainable. For example, in magazines, the photos of nearly all models are altered electronically, meaning that computers are being used to make certain body parts, such as the stomach, arms and legs, smaller or a different shape.

What is important is to realize that although the images presented in the media are unrealistic, children can and do make comparisons with models and movie stars. When children are unable to look like the images they see, their feelings about their own bodies and themselves in general can be affected negatively. Thus, talk to your child about what he/she sees and encourage him/her to understand that the images seen are not realistic and are not healthy.

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