

## Speaking with your child about health when they have extra weight



How do you talk with your child to encourage a healthy relationship with food and a positive self-image? The first thing is to leave out any focus on their weight. Here are some tips for having a helpful conversation.

**Talk about how making a healthy choice may prevent disease and keep them healthy.** Give your child an idea of a healthy choice like drinking less soda. Don't talk about how it could end up in weight loss. Discuss how things like soda can be bad for your health by zapping your energy, giving you a stomach ache, or stopping you from keeping up with friends on a hike. This way of talking with your child works better than saying how drinking soda can make you gain weight.

**Work as a team!** Children are more likely to make changes if the whole family is working together to get healthier. Include all family members regardless of their weight. Singling out a child to move more or eat differently because they carry more weight than other family members can lead to poor self-image. Many people learn by example. So, join together for the benefit of the whole family.

**Avoid fad diets.** Some people may lose weight for a short period of time on these types of diets, but the changes in eating patterns will not result in weight loss that sticks or better health. These diet patterns also set your child up for a less healthy relationship with food in the future. It is much better to shift to healthier, balanced meals as a long term way to achieve weight loss goals.

**Try not to use words that sound hurtful when talking about yourself, your child or anyone else's body.**

The words we use to describe our own body, our child's body or another person's body can have a lasting impact. If our children hear us calling ourselves fat, they are more likely to call themselves fat. Words like "overweight" or "carrying extra weight" are better choices than fat, chubby, and obese.

If you catch yourself saying something negative about your own body, correct yourself out loud. Tell your child that you are working on being kinder to yourself and on noticing when you say something hurtful. Work together to think about something you could say instead.

**Build your child's self-esteem!** When a child carries extra weight, they are at higher risk for having low self-esteem. Self-esteem can be built up in many ways. In your home, talk about the strengths of your child's personality, character, artistic, academic, athletic, or musical talents. Sometimes when we carry extra weight, we judge ourselves. Not only can this put us in a bad mood, but can also make it harder to make healthier choices and reach health goals.



### Questions to ask to talk about self-esteem

- What do you like about your body?
- What is something great that your body can do?
- What's something you might like to do with your body but don't do now?

**Stay curious.** Sometimes when we make choices that are less healthy, it comes from a negative feeling or something happening around us. When your child does not want to make a healthy choice or is eating more than is healthy, think about why that may be happening. Ask them why they think it's happening, if they are willing to talk about it.

### Questions to ask your child

- What thought was going through your mind before you made that choice?
- What kind of feeling did you have?
- Using the hunger and fullness scale, ask your child what their body might be telling them.
- If they are aware that they are eating past the point of fullness, ask them what they would like to do instead or to say to themselves in the future.

**Be supportive of your child.** Listen during times of frustration. Help your child stay on track in making healthy changes. And, celebrate your child's successes, no matter how small they may seem to you.

### How to respond if your child uses negative language about their body like "I am fat."

This can lead to negative self-esteem and poor health outcomes. If bullying or teasing is happening, your child may need you to address this. It is the job of the school system to make sure that this behavior is not allowed. Bullying and teasing can also happen at home with family members. It is important to make sure that words that shame, bully or tease are not allowed in your home. Be aware if negative language is coming from media/social media. Help your child understand that some things that they watch may be hurtful to them. Counseling may be needed to support your child's positive self-image and body language. Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it!

### Questions to ask about language that is used about your child

- Have you heard someone say something about your weight or body?
- How do you feel when you hear it? Remind your child that it is never okay for someone to say those things to them.
- What would you like to do if it happens again? Talk with your child about which adults they can go to if someone is using unkind words. If your child is old enough, make a spoken or written action plan and talk with the adults that are included in the plan.