



## How to Talk to Kids About Weight



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In today's culture, weight can be a sensitive subject, especially for children and teens. The desire to be thin is reaching school-aged children, as girls as young as 6 years old express concerns about their body image and gaining weight.

Deciding how to approach weight issues with young people deserves careful attention; how you handle the topic can have serious and lifelong implications. Here are some tips for discussing weight with kids, and what to do if a child brings up the topic.

**Encourage open dialogue.** Go ahead and talk with your children about weight and encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings about body image whenever they arise. When children discuss feelings about weight with you, be sure to listen and acknowledge that the feelings are real. If you have had similar experiences, it may help to share them. Explain that people come in all different shapes and sizes and you love your child no matter what.

**Don't make negative comments.** Judging your own body or your child's can result in lasting detrimental effects to your child's body image and relationship with food. Set a good example for children in the way you talk about your own body as well as others'. Skip the lure of fad dieting yourself.

**Take action.** Children learn fast, and they learn best by example. Teach children habits that will help keep them healthy for life. In general, if your child is elementary age or younger and you have some weight concerns, don't talk about it; just start making lifestyle changes as a family. The best thing you

can do is make it easy for kids to eat smart and move often. Serve regular, balanced family meals and snacks. Limit the time your child spends watching television or playing video games. Look for ways to spend fun, active time together.

**Avoid the blame game.** Never yell, scream, bribe, threaten or punish children about weight, food or physical activity. If you turn these issues into parent-child battlegrounds, the results can be harmful. Shame, blame and anger are setups for failure. The worse children feel about their weight, the more likely they are to overeat or develop an eating disorder.

**A united front.** As with any other important issue, make sure both parents and other important relatives are on the same page. Mixed messages about weight can have unhealthy consequences.

**Talk with your healthcare provider.** If a health professional mentions a concern about your child's weight, speak with the professional privately. Discuss specific concerns about your child's growth pattern and ask for suggestions on making positive changes in your family's eating habits and activity levels.

**Seek advice.** For kids and teens, check out local programs and professionals who specialize in youth. Look for a registered dietitian nutritionist with a specialty in pediatric weight management. Many hospitals and clinics have comprehensive programs with education and activities for both kids and adult family members. Some of these options may be covered by your health insurance plan.

**Focus on health over weight.** The key is to consider your child's overall picture of health, not weight. If your family starts eating better and moving more, your children may "grow into" their weight as their height increases. Compliment your children on lifestyle behaviors, such as choosing to play outside over playing video games inside, rather than on the loss of a few pounds.

### **What to Do if Your Child Says, "I'm So Fat."**

Learn where the thoughts about feeling fat came from. Did a friend or classmate tease your child about weight? Did another relative mention the size of your child's belly or thighs? Is your child feeling embarrassed from having snug-fitting clothes? Was there something on television or online about overweight kids? Maybe some sports are difficult for your child, or perhaps they are chosen last for teams. These frustrating and painful issues are common among children of all sizes.

If another child or an adult is bullying your child, confront the situation directly and as soon as possible. If your child's weight, eating and activity are normal and age-appropriate, reassure your child and don't focus on weight.

### **If Your Child is Overweight**

Weight loss among children can interfere with their growth and negatively impact their body image and relationship with food, so it's important to work with your pediatrician and a registered dietitian nutritionist. Choose a few specific changes that you can make in your family's eating and activity habits, then set realistic goals.

Be mindful that every family is different and change occurs slowly, so be patient and remember there is much more to health than weight.

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