

Supporting a Child or Adolescent Through Food and Body Image Concerns

The eating disorder brain is something that can seem almost impossible to understand if you have never experienced the illness first hand. Even more so, not knowing how to support a child who is struggling with food and body image can feel distressing and overwhelming. It is really hard to know what to say when you really just want your child to know how much you love them and how much you don't want to see them in pain. The best kind of support you can give your child is to tell them that you believe in them and trust their body. In this resource, we've compiled some tips for parents who are looking to learn about supporting a child or adolescent with food and body image concerns. Please follow the links on the final page for further resources and more information.

Keeping language *neutral* is really important:

Use neutral language when communicating with your child, as well as with others in the presence of your child. Let them know you are proud of them every single day. Remind them of all the things that make them special to you. The use of neutral language is not only helpful for people recovering from an eating disorder, but a positive mental health move for anyone!

- **Weight Neutral**
 - It's better not to mention how much they weigh, BMI, how much you wish they weighed, what weights seem like too much, words like 'obese' or 'overweight.' The treatment team will monitor the child's weight if they deem it is necessary/appropriate. Even well intentioned comments around weight and size can be more harmful than helpful.
- **Body Neutral**
 - Comments should be centered around the *function* of our body or what it allows us to do vs. aesthetics or how we need to change an outward appearance (Ex: I'm so glad I can go on walks, play with my dog, cook myself breakfast, sing, etc)
- **Food Neutral**
 - The point of food neutrality is to remove the power we have given certain foods. No talk of 'good' or 'bad' foods, healthy or unhealthy foods, calories or specific amounts/portions.
 - Our body has the ability to process all foods, and this means that all foods can be utilized by our body. All foods are composed of carbohydrates, proteins and fats.
 - No single food can make you lose weight or make you healthier. It is the way we feed and treat our body over time that impacts our health. Just as eating one salad doesn't make you healthy, eating cookies for a snack doesn't suddenly make you unhealthy.
 - Overeating or binging on any particular food is a direct response of the body to deprivation. The more we try to micromanage a child's eating, the more they will consciously or subconsciously want to rebel with the food.
- Neutral language extends to comments about your *own* body or *other people's* body's in front of your child. Your child may hear these comments and internalize the messages that bodies are the most important thing about a person, further perpetuating ED behaviors and mindset. Keeping language around food and body neutral is a healthy skill everyone can benefit from.

Language that may be harmful:

- Even with the best intentions, sometimes comments around food and body can be harmful and cause your child distress. Here are some common things to be mindful of and avoid:
 - “You look healthy!” (This can be problematic because the eating disorder brain hears “You look like you’ve gained weight.”)
 - “That’s a lot of food on your plate.”
 - “Just eat something.”
 - “Do you really need that [third piece of pizza; dessert, etc.]?”
 - Comments related to celebration of weight loss or concern for weight gain
 - “Maybe we should work out since we ate a lot today.”

Language that may be helpful instead:

- If your child seems to be having a bad day and you notice that they seem to be **coping with food**, you could say: “[child’s name], is something wrong? Would you like to talk about it? I am always here just to listen.” It is important to leave the food your child is eating completely out of it. Shaming emotional eating will only perpetuate the behavior. Emotional eating is not always bad, it is a very normal, human response. It just can’t be the only coping mechanism in place.
- When your child seems to be having a **negative body image day**, continue to remind them how much they mean to you, that you trust their body and they should too, how you are so grateful for...(list something not size or shape related, ex: your beautiful voice, that we can go on walks together, your creativity, how you make me laugh, your hugs.)
- **What to say in front of your child about your own body:**
 - “I don’t want to miss out on memories just because I was feeling uncomfortable in my body that day.”
 - “I appreciate _____ that my body does for me.”
 - “My job is to be the best caretaker of my body that I can be.”
 - “I trust my body and all that it does to keep me safe.”
 - “I’m focused on health, not weight.”
 - “My weight has nothing to do with my attractiveness or worth.”
 - “My body is worthy at its natural size.”
 - “Even on the days that feel the most uncomfortable in my body, I still honor its needs.”
- **Language & messaging around food:**
 - We take the best care of ourselves when we eat 3 meals, 1-3 snacks per day, with all 3 food groups (carbohydrates, protein, and fats) present at each meal.
 - Our bodies function best when we don’t go longer than 3-4 hours between eating occasions.
 - Honor your hunger when your body needs food, eat mindfully and slowly so you can feel your fullness.
 - It’s not about what we should avoid or take away, but how we can include even more variety of food in our day.
 - Protein, carbohydrates and fats all have very important roles in our health and we need them all at every meal.

Recommended Resources That Might Help Support You

Podcast episodes:

- [Embracing the Gray with Intuitive Eating](#)
- [Exploring Normal Eating](#)
- [What Does a Healthy Relationship with Food Even Mean](#)
- [Flexible Eating, Satisfaction, Body Trust](#)
- [The Body Kindness Podcast: For Parents](#)

Books for Parents/family members/professionals:

[Health At Every Size](#), [Intuitive Eating](#) (both are also available in audio version), [Sick Enough](#)

Book for Adolescents:

[Beautiful You](#), [Body Kindness](#), [Eight Keys to Recovery From an Eating Disorder](#)

Books for children:

<https://www.threebirdscounseling.com/single-post/2018/01/27/Body-Affirming-Children-Books-That-Teach-Kids-to-Trust-Celebrate-Their-Bodies>

More Books:

<https://www.inspirdnutrition.com/resources>

Articles:

<https://www.edcatalogue.com/no-weigh-interview/>

https://slate.com/human-interest/2019/01/child-body-image-advice-weight-shaming.html?fbclid=IwAR3uQMFPHbA5JSetDbnGg_VkuP-9bJaW3NZSTUTThu4Q82hCBG2_Mzn-PRl

https://more-love.org/2018/05/17/how-to-stay-zen-when-your-child-has-an-eating-disorder/amp/?_twitter_impression=true&fbclid=IwAR1nd57B4tlGfY7pVGyKx5uGMsV3aCyP6g7hdfC_Mv0-XlfbPbA1M3i1lw4

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/toolkit/parent-toolkit/level-care-guidelines-patients>

<https://www.edcatalogue.com/wrote-parents-guide-anorexia/>

<https://www.theprojectheal.org/healblog/unmeasurables-eating-disorder?rq=Unmeasurables&fbclid=IwAR1-OdVNcBXqQ8wRNbo0u4-N9c5gZcl002egDmnengEoM4dmGo9e2-4ql50>

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/blog/nine-truths-about-eating-disorders>

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