

Eating Disorder Prevention

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Among the many tragic and devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health crisis among adolescents and young adults has been one of the most concerning. Visits to emergency rooms for suicide attempts have skyrocketed, and psychologists and psychiatrists simply can't keep up with the volume of patients with anxiety and depression requesting appointments. Eating disorders have likewise spiked, leading many patients who are in dire need of help to be unable to access resources for months. As a pediatrician, I have witnessed this distressing phenomenon firsthand, and have found myself wishing I could prevent even one of my patients from developing an eating disorder.

Social isolation, the sudden disappearance of normal milestones of adolescence, and loss of control over their lives led many teens to try to find control over the things they could control - eating and exercise. What might have started as an effort to eat a little healthier and stay physically active, in some cases led to exercising many hours a day and extreme weight loss.

The factors that contributed to eating disorders before the pandemic will exist after the pandemic ends, and are often hard or impossible to prevent or treat - pre-existing anxiety and depression, a family history of eating disorders or other mental health disorders, cultural bias for thinness and unattainable body expectations in social media.

But I have realized that there is one factor that parents can change: how they talk about food, weight, and body health with their very young children. Even when they have the best intentions, parents can unintentionally send messages to their kids that can later contribute to the development of eating disorders. I have put together six steps parents can take to hopefully immunize their children against developing eating disorders when they get older.

1. There are no “Good Foods” or “Bad Foods”. From an early age, children internalize the behaviors that are modeled by their parents. When you talk about food and eating with your family, avoid attaching value judgments to food. Children should learn that all food is ok, in moderation. If you talk about a food as if it is inherently bad and should never be eaten, like sugary cereals, then the child will learn that they are not trusted to regulate what and how much they eat (not to mention that forbidden food is often the most tempting). If children see their parents and siblings eating a wide range of foods, and being able to regulate what and how much they eat, they will learn to trust their own instincts about food. Involve your children in making meals, growing vegetables and herbs in a garden if possible, and choosing family meals. Children should be excited to eat foods because they taste good and make them feel good, not because they have “good fats” in them or are “low carb”.

2. Get rid of your scale, or at the very least put it somewhere your children can't find. As kids get older, they will hear other kids and adults talking about how much they weigh, and can end up becoming overly focused on the number, leading to dieting and restricting that is

dangerous for children and young teens. Children should not be dieting or limiting what they eat based on what they weigh - they are supposed to be gaining weight as they grow, and how much they weigh is only relevant in relation to how tall they are, what their body type is, and where they are in the course of puberty. If your children see you frequently weighing yourself, or complaining about how much you weigh, they will learn to think that there is a "good weight" and a "bad weight". I am often asked at check ups whether a child's weight is ok, and most parents equate a good weight with average, or less than average weight. But by definition, half of kids' weights will be above average, and it's much more important that each kid grows according to their own usual trend than that they are some idealized weight that wouldn't be healthy for them.

3. Expect major amounts of weight gain during puberty, and help your children know this is normal and a sign of healthy, normal development. Many girls will gain 40 pounds during the course of puberty. The dramatic transformations that happen during puberty can be upsetting to kids, and sometimes to their parents. Suddenly seeing your child looking like a grown up man or woman can be disconcerting, but it is not a sign that your child is eating too much. In addition, during puberty, many children will gain weight first, and then have a growth spurt. So it is best to let the process play out over time without overreacting.

4. Avoid modeling restrictive or fad diets. There are currently many popular diets that are geared toward helping people lose weight, lower their cholesterol, improve mood and energy or just be "healthier" in some vague sense. These include the paleo diet, gluten free, intermittent fasting, and veganism. The underlying premise of these diets is eliminating some type of food completely. While some adults might have a true medical need for one of these diets, they are not appropriate for growing children, and can lead to nutritional deficiencies and slowed growth. In addition, kids who observe their parents eliminating whole food groups from their diet will absorb the message that some foods are inherently bad and can't be healthy for them even in reasonable quantities. I have several patients who have struggled with eating disorders who started first by deciding to become vegetarian, then vegan, then as their restricted eating choices evolved into an eating disorder, there were very few foods left that they felt were "healthy enough" for them to eat.

5. Show your kids that exercise is fun, and makes you feel good. If children see their parents participating in fun exercise that leaves them feeling happy and healthy, they will be more likely to seek that out. If instead, parents gripe about needing to exercise in front of their children, and say they are only doing it to lose weight, or fit into a new dress, then their kids will associate exercise with an unpleasant task that they should avoid if possible.

6. Stop commenting on your children's or other people's body shape or size, even if you think you are saying something positive. If your children hear you telling a friend, "Wow! You look great! Did you lose weight?", they will interpret that to mean losing weight is the key to looking better and getting noticed. Likewise, if you make a negative comment about how large someone is, or how they gained weight, and your child overhears it, they may internalize that and think that if they gain weight it will be something to be ashamed of.

Sadly, I know I will continue to diagnose more patients with eating disorders. But I do believe that we are not powerless to prevent some eating disorders. How parents talk about food and weight can have a huge impact on their children; changing the conversation to focus on positive attitudes toward eating healthy foods and staying active in fun ways can steer children away from some of the destructive habits that lead to eating disorders.