

Two small stars, one white and one yellow, positioned above the title.

A Guide for Health Professionals

Assisting Parents and Guardians in communicating
with their children about body weight





A Guide for Health Professionals

Increasing levels of childhood overweight are a cause of real concern, but if you decide to become involved, it is very likely that you will be able to meaningfully assist parents and children in a very important part of good childcare.

This guide has been design to assist health professionals seeking to help parents begin to address weight management in their family through healthy lifestyle changes. The guide will also assist health care professionals to implement the HSE-ICGP Weight Management Treatment Algorithm for children which is available to download from **www.hse.ie/weightmanagement**

There are many common worries about speaking to a parent about their child's weight but they shouldn't be a reason to stop you from talking to them.

The key is to build up a positive relationship with the parent. Granted, this is a sensitive topic, but with your professional experience you will have the skills that can be used to raise and discuss this issue. If however you feel that you may not have a good enough relationship with your patient you could perhaps refer them to a more appropriate health professional to discuss further.

Experts agree that if a child is five years or younger they are too young to explicitly talk about body weight. For this age group however, it's never too early and *really important* to introduce the behaviours that are part of a healthy lifestyle like 'eating breakfast, lunch and dinner' and 'how good it is to have active play'. If a child is older than five years and doesn't actually bring up the topic of body weight then it is not appropriate to sit them down for a 'big talk' about it.

The reality is children are exposed to a lot of messages. In fact, becoming aware of weight as a modern day issue is a normal part of growing up. Messages children hear about body weight are often mixed so it's normal and likely that they will talk about it.

Remember that when speaking to children and parents about weight issues you shouldn't actually be doing a lot of the talking. They should. It is their opportunity for someone to listen to their concerns.



Helpful tips and advice
to use when discussing
weight with parents
and children

Talk about weight as a health matter, use positive language

When talking about weight it's important to keep the focus on health. Some examples of phrases that you could use to do this are:

- *'We need to let your child's height catch up with his/her weight'*
- *'I think we could find a better weight for John?'*
- *'Weight is a measure of our health and carrying extra weight can hurt our health'*
- *'Having our weight measured is just like having our height or ears and eyes tested - it's a measure of our overall growth and development'*
- *'When your child carries extra weight then his/her body has to work harder than it ought to'*
- *'It's not healthy for his/her body to have to work harder than it should, it will get tired quicker...'*
- *'Many of your friends and people you know have other health issues like asthma or' use an example they are familiar with.*

Other helpful language to use includes language that connects weight status to health; e.g. Leaner, healthier, fitter, better weight.

Avoid negative language. There are a lot of negative stereotypes about people who are overweight and people are often wrongly labelled as 'fat', 'lazy', 'clumsy' or 'bad'. Don't use these to describe overweight.

Talk directly to the child where appropriate, involving them in the conversation if it feels comfortable.

Unhelpful language also includes:

- *Language that promotes the over-valuation of thinness; e.g. slim, thin, ideal weight, normal weight*
- *Blunt use of the words 'obese' or 'overweight'*
- *Euphemisms; e.g. plump, big-boned, chunky or cuddly*
- *Avoiding words that have strong negative connotations; e.g. heavier, larger, bigger.*
- *Using labels in an indirect manner; the medical word to describe your child's current weight for their height would be 'obese'.*

Advise parents to be aware of discussing weight in front of their children

Long gone are the days that you hear comments like 'you look great, you've put on a bit of weight!'. In today's world you're more likely to hear comments such as 'these trousers make me look fat' or 'look at the size of him'. These can send negative messages about weight to children. It puts the emphasis of weight on body image and self-esteem rather than health. Beware of using these comments in front of the children.

Focus on the habits that can be changed as a family. Some examples include:

- *Reducing consumption of foods high in fat, salt and sugar, and to promote a healthy lifestyle*
- *Reducing screen time to less than 2hrs a day and perhaps have one screen free night a week where instead you do something active as a family*
- *Promote 60 minutes moderate or vigorous physical activity per day, it doesn't have to be all at once and can be split into 4 x fifteen minutes bursts of activity*
- *Promote increased consumption of fruit and vegetables i.e. include at breakfast time in cereal, as snacks*
- *Have agreed meals times during the week, involving children in preparation and tidy up*
- *Eat only at table, not on the couch and not in front of a screen, fruit snacks excepted*

It's important to stress the whole family approach to parents

Some phrases you could encourage them to use when talking to their children include:

'We as a family'

'Your dad and I think we should focus on eating more healthy foods and doing more active things together as a family'

'We think it would be more fun if we all played around a bit more'

'There are small things we can do every day like eating ...' Get them to highlight the changes that they feel are realistic for their family e.g. less food treats and sugary drinks, eating one extra portion of fruit and veg etc

Encourage self-esteem

It's important that a parent and their child recognise that self-esteem comes from many other sources other than just appearance. Parents and guardians can promote healthy self-esteem by showing encouragement and enjoyment in many areas of day to day life.

Praise should be given for things that children do that aren't related to appearance and parents should complement them on their personal qualities such as being kind, being a good friend, doing well at school, looking after a pet well.

Self-esteem is also related to how valued a child feels. Advise getting them involved in household tasks such as preparing food, which will help them feel valued and will promote a good relationship with food.

Parents should avoid focusing on one specific area; for example, success on a spelling test, which can lead to kids feeling that they're only as valuable as their test scores. Focus on the effort that your child has put into the task i.e. 'them doing their best' instead of the outcome.

Discourage parents from talking about losing weight or dieting in front of their children

For the majority of children who are carrying excess weight the aim will be to allow them to 'grow into their weight' as they grow taller. Dieting tends to be a negative term the way that many adults use it. If adults plan to go on a diet, it is usually for a short period and usually involves following a food plan that isn't nutritionally balanced. They may have lost weight on a 'diet' in the past but usually the weight is piled back on once they return to their old ways and habits.

We don't want children to end up following the same pattern of 'yo-yo dieting' so encourage the parent to talk about the specific things the family can do to eat healthier and be more physically active. It is the lifelong long-term approach that has been shown to work – and remember this is a marathon not a sprint.

Change is difficult

It is important that you acknowledge that change is difficult. Encourage parents to follow the following tips to make change easier

- *Choose the right time to start*
- *Things don't always go to plan, despite best intentions sometimes it is hard to achieve what we set out to do, parents shouldn't despair if they don't succeed straight away.*
- *Highlight what they have learnt from the experience and incorporate this into a revised plan.*

It's common for parents to feel like they are in battle with children to eat a healthy diet. It is important to stress that they and their family make the rules around healthy eating and occasional food treats. Being consistent is key and helps overcome the feeling that children are being nagged all the time. Parents also need to become the role models and set the example.





Other Advice

Encourage parents to seek more support

Advise parents to talk through their concerns with their partner or other adult(s). This will help everyone provide consistent messages to the child. Parents should also consider involving other family members, carers and close friends who spend a lot of time with the child.

If they don't wish to engage

If the parent and child choose not to acknowledge that there is a weight issue or don't want to discuss it you must:

- *Respect their wishes.*
- *Do not ask any more questions.*
- *Let them know you are there if they would like to speak to you at any point.*
- *Offer them the opportunity to speak to another Healthcare Professional e.g. practice nurse etc.*

What if a child wishes to talk about their weight with a health professional?

An opportunity may present where a child seeks some information about weight. In this case the key piece of advice is not to make a big issue about it. There is no need to have a "big talk" with them.

Instead:

- *Look out for a good opportunity to discuss e.g. if they are struggling in P.E. classes, are left out of a group activity, are out of breath easily, are teased because of their weight.*
- *Focus on the behaviours that have led to their weight gain. Highlight that these are behaviours, and behaviour can be changed.*
- *Be empathetic and try to understand how they are feeling. Highlight all the positive aspects of being a healthy weight.*
- *Be careful not to assume you know how the child is feeling – make sure that you ask them if they would like your support and how they would like you to help.*
- *Consider both of you checking your weight together, and calculate your BMI*

If after detailed consideration, there is still a desire to have a conversation with a health professional, options include the Public Health Nurse, the School Nurse, your GPs Practice Nurse, or your GP.

Be prepared and ready to quickly check height, weight, BMI and do z scores

Sometimes we communicate by saying and sometimes we communicate by doing!

All primary care professionals, particularly Medical and Nursing colleagues in any discipline should be able to easily and quickly check weight and height of children as part of their routine practice.

You need a reliable scales and measuring stick or stadiometer, a BMI calculator and a set of reference tables to enable you to quickly and easily calculate BMI centile for gender and age (BMIz Score), for example using the UK 2-18 year growth charts for boys and girls.

If you do this several times, you will become quick, confident and accurate. It is increasingly likely that parents and children will be asking you to check weight. When you do so, in most instances it is likely that you can reassure them.

Alternatively, if overweight is an issue, the earlier this is reliably detected and competently taken up, the better it is likely to be for the family. The HSE ICGP Weight Management Treatment Algorithm for Children is particularly relevant to Irish Primary Care and will provide guidance for you and families who are attending you for their care.

The HSE ICGP Weight Management Treatment Algorithm and BMI chart are also available for adults and should be used when assisting parents who may wish to address their own weight at the same time as encouraging weight maintenance in their growing child.

Available to download - www.hse.ie/weightmanagement

Given the epidemiology of overweight in Ireland, it is not really satisfactory to be anything less than skilled and competent at this useful, simple but important task.

Your main consulting space should be equipped with a reliable scales and either a measuring stick or wall mounted stadiometer. If you run child screening or immunisation clinics, you might consider a Leicester Measuring stick, which is easily assembled, and readily transportable.

Additional kit to carry will include your own inventory of information on healthy eating, physical activity and healthy lifestyle information for families. An essential resource, which you should have to hand to give parents is the “Your Child’s Weight ... A Guide to Preventing Childhood Obesity” available via **www.healthpromotion.ie order code: HPM00851**

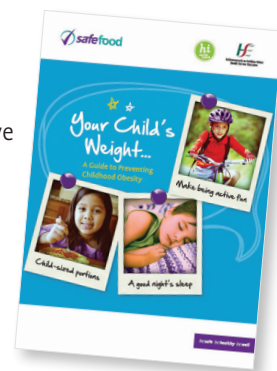
If you are consulting in primary care with Irish children, one in four of whom are overweight, you are not properly equipped unless you have such information to hand, wither in written format, or on web based reference, or both.

Good web based information will be found on the:

- www.hse.ie/weightmanagement
- www.safefood.eu
- www.getirelandactive.ie

or indeed on many other sites and sources.

Ensure if you are consulting with children that you are well equipped to communicate and assist families and children reduce their future risk of obesity and tendency towards weight gain.





What are parents' concerns?

Parents want to know that you are on their side

They may be sensitive about any perceived criticism of their parenting skills, and they may be anxious or worried about their own weight, or that of their children, but if you can forge a practical, cheerful therapeutic alliance with them, which is mindful of the particular challenges they face in their parenting, you will be most effective in your communications with them.

Parents want to do the best for their children. If a child raises the topic of 'body weight' with them, they may feel like playing it safe and end up dismissing or 'making light' of the issue. They may come to you for help or guidance. You need to acknowledge these concerns and address them. Common parental concerns and how you can advise them include:

Scenario 1

Parents own experience with weight

A parent is struggling with their weight and doesn't feel they can discuss body weight with their child.

Body weight is an issue that we all think about and potentially struggle with, in different ways. Many of us are carrying excess weight while a small number of us may be underweight. However, knowing that we have our own struggles with body weight is not a reason to ignore a child's questions.

Parents can help their children by explaining that the majority of adults are carrying too much weight, in fact two thirds of us are. That means that they are not alone in fearing what their children think about their weight. In fact, hopefully, this will motivate parents to tackle the issue as a family.

If the parent's own weight comes up in conversation don't ignore it, but instead acknowledge it. The children need to understand that it's not easy to lose weight once you have gained it so the best plan is to avoid putting it on in the first place.

Here are some phrases that may help:

'Yes I do find it's a bit tricky watching my weight and eating a healthy diet/being active'

'Parents aren't always perfect but we do our best'

'Maybe we might do better if we both try to tackle it together?'

Scenario 2

A fear that they'll upset their child

Their child heard friends talk about body weight and they had heard about the childhood obesity campaign

Reassure them that children have more sense than we give them credit for. However, weight is a sensitive issue and parents want to deal with it in the right way. Parents know their child best. However if their child is 5 years or younger then they are generally too young to talk about weight as such, instead focus on healthy behaviours for families.

You can advise that the important thing here is to acknowledge it- 'I'm glad you brought that up as there is a lot about it in the papers and on TV'. Allow the child to lead the conversation by letting them talk about their feelings. Encourage them by using open ended questions like 'what do you think?' or 'how does that make you feel?'

Advise them that they only need to answer the questions that their children ask.

Their child has heard name calling at school that upset them

Advise parents to ask open ended questions such as 'tell me what happened and what was said?' and 'how did it make you feel'. - 'I'm glad you told me'. Then allow them to lead the conversation so that they can express their feelings.

Scenario 3

Coming to terms with the fact that their child is probably or most definitely overweight

Their child is an overweight child but hasn't talked about body weight

Acknowledge that it's hard to deal with an issue that they may have been worried about but haven't yet addressed. If a child is overweight or at risk of being overweight because of family habits, parents tend to hope 'it will go away'.

Unfortunately children don't grow out of it and extra weight seen as 'puppy fat' or 'extra padding for the Winter' are not healthy and lead in most cases to weight and health problems in adulthood.

Experts recommend that parents don't bring up the issue of body weight with their children unless the child raises it themselves. Parents don't need to use the term 'weight'. Instead encourage them to focus on a 'healthy lifestyle' and 'healthy habits'. Focus on what changes they can make as a family, discuss them together and make the change

Step 1

Identify one or 2 changes that the family can make

Step 2

Discuss it with the family

Get other adults in the family on board

When discussing it with children use phrases like:

'There are things that we can do to make this family healthier'

'Let's have some fun together while we're making changes'

Step 3

Make the changes – it will only work if parents/guardians lead by example and they do it together as a family

Scenario 4

Their child is being bullied in school about their weight

Acknowledge that this can be a very anxious conversation for a parent. If it emerges in consultation, welcome and congratulate them on bringing up the issue (I'm really glad you told me about this, and well done for doing so!). Their first instinct as a parent is to console their child with a hug, tell them all will be okay. However, it is a very confusing time for a child and it's important to talk it through and allow them to express their feelings. Allow them to lead the conversation.

It is important that the child feels they are supported and that something will be done, both in terms of the bullying and about addressing their weight.

The bullying should be dealt with separately with school staff with the permission of the child. It is very important that it is addressed, monitored, and not allowed to continue. There are new guidelines in place (see below) and support is available.

Here are tips for things that you can advise a parent to say when faced with this scenario:

'I'm sorry that is happening and I'm really glad you told me'

'Teasing is not nice behaviour and is not your fault'

'Weight is not about you as a person'/ 'weight is about health'/ 'how do you feel about your weight?'

'We'll make some changes together as a family and it will improve our health'

'I love you and don't have a problem with how you look, but as your parent, I'm concerned that you are carrying some extra weight which may hurt your health'

There are the guidelines for addressing bullying in schools in NI and ROI.

For other information on dealing with bullying these sites are useful:

http://www.letsomeoneknow.ie/common_problems/bullying/ and

<http://spunout.ie/action/article/bullying-campaigns> (both endorsed by the HSE)

Scenario 5

Parents don't discuss weight for fear of an eating disorder

Eating disorders are serious and complex conditions, characterised by severe disturbances in eating behaviours. They are not primarily about food. They are an unhealthy way of coping with emotional distress, or as a symptom of underlying issues. A person with anorexia, one type of eating disorder, often equates him/her self-worth with how thin he/she is. There is no evidence that discussing weight as a matter for health in a positive and caring way promotes eating disorders. This guide will provide you with the language to address the issue in positive and caring way.

Scenario 6

The parent is concerned their child may have an eating disorder

Consult and refer parents to their GP, and to the following web sites:-

ROI

Bodywhys

<http://www.bodywhys.ie/m/uploads/resources/BWResourceForParents.pdf>

NI

<http://www.eatingdisordersni.co.uk/image.html>

Other helpful information

Royal College of Psychiatrists (UK)

Leaflet for parents and carers -

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/expertadvice/parentsandyounginfo/parentscarers/eatingdisorders.aspx>

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/expertadvice/problemsdisorders/eatingdisorderskeyfacts.aspx>

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/expertadvice/problemsdisorders/eatingwellandmentalhealth.aspx>

Young Minds - provides information and advice on child mental health issues

http://www.youngminds.org.uk/for_children_young_people/whats_worrying_you/anorexia

http://www.youngminds.org.uk/for_children_young_people/whats_worrying_you/bulimia



For more handy tips and
great ideas for parents
and guardians, visit
www.safefood.eu

About this guide	The guide was developed in consultation with health professionals.
Published by	safefood in partnership with Health Promotion HSE and Healthy Ireland.
Publication date	November 2013
To order more copies	visit www.healthpromotion.ie
Order code	HPM00860