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# A Guide for parents

Communicating with your  
child about a healthy weight



Healthy habits for life



Tips and advice

# Talking to your child about weight

Body weight is a topic you as a parent may prefer not to talk about with your children. *Sometimes this may be the right course of action and focusing on good diet and exercise are good ways to keeping your child healthy.* But if your child brings the topic of weight up, it is important to deal with it sensibly. This guide provides you with some ideas and language to address weight issues in positive and caring ways.

## If your child is under 5

At five or less, children are too young to talk about body weight. But for this age group, it's never too young to introduce healthy lifestyle habits like active play and eating a good breakfast, lunch and dinner.

## If your child is over 5

If your child is older than five and doesn't actually bring up the topic of body weight, you should not sit them down for a 'big talk' about it. But if they do bring it up, you should welcome the conversation. Some of the tips below might help.

# Tips on what to say



## 1. Talk about weight positively as a health matter

When talking about weight, it's important to keep the focus on health. There are a lot of negative stereotypes about people who are overweight. People are often wrongly labelled as 'fat', 'lazy' or 'bad.' Don't use these words to describe being overweight.

If a child uses these terms, say to them that some people have the wrong idea about weight. If you get a chance, maybe reinforce the fact that 'Weight is not who we are – it is a measure of our health.' Better terms are 'healthy weight' and 'unhealthy weight.'

Here are examples of some phrases that you could use:

*'Weight is a measure of your health and carrying extra weight can hurt your health.'*

*'Having your weight measured is just like having your height measured – it's a measure of your overall growth and development.'*

*'When you carry extra weight, your body has to work harder than it needs to.'*

*'It's not healthy for our body to have to work harder than it has to work. It will get tired more easily.'*

*'Many of your friends and the people you know have other health issues, like asthma or ...' Use an example they are familiar with.*

## 2. Don't talk about losing weight or dieting

For the majority of children who are carrying excess weight, the aim should be to allow them to 'grow into their weight' – so that they remain the same weight as they grow taller.

Many adults use the word 'dieting' in a negative way. If we plan to go on a diet, it is usually for a short period and involves following a food plan that may not be nutritionally balanced. We may have lost weight on a 'diet' in the past but usually the weight returns once we stop dieting. We don't want our children to end up following the same pattern of 'yo-yo dieting', so 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. Remember, this is a marathon not a sprint.

## 3. Focus on the habits that can be changed

Highlight the changes that you feel are realistic for your family. For example, less treats and sugary drinks, and eating one extra portion of fruit and vegetables a day.

Some examples are:

**Treats:** *'We all love our biscuits and chocolate bars in this house and we always have some in the cupboard. But we eat far too many of them and they're not good for our bodies. From now on, we're all going to plan to enjoy one biscuit or fun-size chocolate bar a day. Let me know what daily treat you'd like and I'll put it on the shopping list. We won't be buying any extra during the week.'*

**Screentime:** *'I know you love your video games after school and at weekends but it's not good for you to be sitting down for so long. We're not saying that you cannot play your games but we'll agree an hour each evening that we're all happy with.'*

*'There are lots of TV programmes we like to watch in this house but the TV is on too many hours every day. We're going to cut down on TV by 30 minutes every day and do something more active as a family together. And all of us have to try, including me.'*



## 4. Encourage self-esteem in your child

It's important that you and your child recognise that self-esteem comes from many other sources 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 them for things that they do that aren't related to appearance, and compliment them on their qualities, such as being kind, being a good friend, doing well at school, looking after a pet well etc. Focus on a number of things and praise them for the effort they put into something rather than the outcome e.g. test result.

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

## 5. Be aware of discussing your or somebody else's weight in front of 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 kids.

## 6. Make changes together as a family

Children are more successful at making changes when the whole family do it together. It's important that parents and other adults involved in their care are all on board with making these changes.

Some phrases to use when talking to children

*'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.'*

*'There are small things we can do every day like eating less or choosing healthier snacks'*



## 7. Be strong and be the parent

Remember that you're the parent or guardian of your child. You are the one who sets the routine and house rules. You are the role model and it's really important that you be seen to make the same changes too.

Children are most likely going to resist any changes at the start and often behaviours may get worse before they get better. It is at this initial stage that you will find it difficult, and you may be tempted to give up. However, if you are consistent in your approach, children soon stop resisting any change and adopt to new ways very quickly. Remember to tell your partner or other adults who spend a lot of time with our children so they get a consistent message.

When choosing to start new routines, you need to pick a good time and be up for the challenge. School holidays may not be the best time to start as many family routines stop for example. If you follow through on changes, it will be easier to introduce new ones in the future. You don't want to fall into the habit of not following through on changes and the children resisting more.

**The following phrases may be helpful:**

*'We're all going to do this together.'*

*'We're all on the same team.'*

*'We're the parents and it's our responsibility.'*



Some of  
your questions



### I struggle with my own weight and I don't feel I can discuss bodyweight with my child

Two-thirds of adults are carrying too much weight. That means that you're not alone in being worried what your children think about your weight. If your own weight comes up in conversation with your child, don't ignore it. Instead, acknowledge it. *'Yes I do struggle with my weight and eating a healthy diet and being active.'* *'Parents aren't perfect but we do our best.'* Your child needs to understand that it's not easy to lose weight once it is gained.

### My child heard friends talk about body weight. I'm worried that I'll upset her if I talk about it.

The important thing is to acknowledge it: *'I'm glad you mentioned that to me as there is a lot about it in the papers and on TV.'* Then allow the child to lead the conversation by letting them talk about their feelings. Encourage them by using questions like *'What do you think?'* or *'How does that make you feel?'*

Remember, you know your child best. You only need to answer the questions that they ask.

### My child has been upset by name calling of others at school

Ask questions such as *'Tell me what happened and what was said?'* and *'How did it make you feel?'* After they tell you, say something like *'I'm glad you told me.'* Then allow them to lead the conversation so that they can express their feelings. Other phrases that may be useful: *'Many children and most adults have this health issue so it's very common.'* *'Weight does not show who a person really is.'* *'Weight is a measure of health.'*

*'Just because somebody has too much weight doesn't mean that it is right for someone to make a comment about how they look.'* *'Words like (use term that child said the person was called) aren't very nice.'*



## My child is overweight but hasn't talked about body weight

If a child is overweight or is at risk of becoming overweight because of family habits, you might be hoping the problem 'will go away.' Unfortunately, children often don't grow out of it. Extra weight, seen as 'puppy fat', is not healthy and leads in most cases to weight and health problems in adulthood. So now is the time to tackle it.

Experts recommend that we should not bring up the issue of body weight with our children unless they raise it themselves. You don't need to use the phrase 'weight.' Instead, talk about 'healthy lifestyle' or 'healthy habits.' Focus on what changes you can make as a family, discuss them together and make the changes. Remember, it's never too early to introduce the idea of a healthy lifestyle.

## My child is being bullied in school about their weight

This can be a very anxious conversation for you as a parent. You need to comfort your child in whatever way works for them, maybe a hug, or tell them all will be okay and then try to deal with the bullying separately with school staff. 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 about the bullying. Making changes to your child's lifestyle directly as a result of the bully's words is not a good idea. Discuss making changes separately from the bullying with your child.

### Some tips for things you might say:

*'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.'*

### THERE ARE GUIDELINES FOR ADDRESSING BULLYING IN SCHOOLS:

**Republic of Ireland** [www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Anti-Bullying-Procedures-for-Primary-and-Post-Primary-Schools.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Anti-Bullying-Procedures-for-Primary-and-Post-Primary-Schools.pdf)  
**Northern Ireland** [www.deni.gov.uk/index/support-and-development-2/child-protection-safeguarding/21-pupils-parents-bullying-pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/support-and-development-2/child-protection-safeguarding/21-pupils-parents-bullying-pg.htm)

### FOR INFORMATION ON DEALING WITH BULLYING, GO TO:

**Republic of Ireland** [www.letsomeoneknow.ie/common\\_problems/bullying/](http://www.letsomeoneknow.ie/common_problems/bullying/) or [spunout.ie/action/article/bullying-campaigns](http://spunout.ie/action/article/bullying-campaigns) (both endorsed by the HSE)  
**Northern Ireland** [www.bullying.co.uk](http://www.bullying.co.uk) or [www.deni.gov.uk/index/support-and-development-2/child-protection-safeguarding/21-pupils-parents-bullying-pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/support-and-development-2/child-protection-safeguarding/21-pupils-parents-bullying-pg.htm)

## I'm worried about giving my child an eating disorder

Eating disorders are serious and complex conditions, involving severe disturbances in eating behaviours. They are not mainly about food. They are an unhealthy way of coping with emotional distress or a symptom of other issues. Discussing weight as a health issue in a positive and caring way does not promote eating disorders.

### FOR INFORMATION ON EATING DISORDERS, SUCH AS ANOREXIA, PLEASE CLICK ON ONE OF THE FOLLOWING WEBSITE LINKS:

#### Republic of Ireland

[www.bodywhys.ie/m/uploads/resources/BWResourceForParents.pdf](http://www.bodywhys.ie/m/uploads/resources/BWResourceForParents.pdf) or [www.spunout.ie](http://www.spunout.ie)

#### Northern Ireland

[www.eatingdisordersni.co.uk/image.html](http://www.eatingdisordersni.co.uk/image.html)  
[www.rcpsych.ac.uk/expertadvice](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/expertadvice) or [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)



For more handy tips and great ideas for you and your family, visit **[www.safefood.eu](http://www.safefood.eu)**

