

7 GUIDING PRINCIPLES

How to Prevent Eating Disorders & Inspire Well-Being in Kids



WHAT to SAY

WithAll 



Hello There!

For many adults, talking to kids about body image, food, and exercise is overwhelming, but WithAll's What to Say wants to help grown-ups like you raise kids with healthy bodies *and* healthy minds. Research has shown us that the words we use around kids can impact their relationships with body image, food, and exercise and that's why WithAll is committed to providing simple principles that you can use as a "home base" when deciding what to say to kids related to food, body, and exercise. To learn about these principles you can use to help your kids make healthy choices for the rest of their lives, keep reading!

What to Say's 7 Guiding Principles

- 03 AVOID SINGLING KIDS OUT BASED ON SHAPE OR SIZE
- 05 DON'T MAKE HEALTH A NUMBERS GAME
- 08 REMEMBER THAT SELF-WORTH ISN'T SKIN DEEP
- 10 LET KIDS BE KIDS BY LETTING FOOD BE FOOD
- 12 LET FOOD BE FUEL AND FUN
- 14 MAKE MOVEMENT JOYFUL
- 16 IT'S OKAY TO NOT ALWAYS GET IT RIGHT

AVOID SINGLING OUT KIDS BASED ON SHAPE OR SIZE

Singling out individual kids (or subgroups of kids) as needing special attention surrounding diet, appearance or exercise can make kids question if something is wrong with their body and needs to be fixed. This leaves kids feeling guilty or ashamed of their bodies and can lead to unhealthy behaviors to try to change their bodies. While you may have internal concerns over a child's weight or their eating and exercise habits, try not to create special rules for individual children based on their weight or shape.

PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

"I had an eating disorder for many years, and I still struggle with body image and my relationship with food. One thing that contributed to my ongoing struggles was being singled out as a child because adults who loved me were concerned that my metabolism was slower than my siblings, and that I would be 'heavier,' etc. So, the 'food rules' and hypervigilant weight focus in our house applied to me—not my siblings. That forever changed how I saw myself, my body, and my food. I'm 38 and still working to unravel the impact.

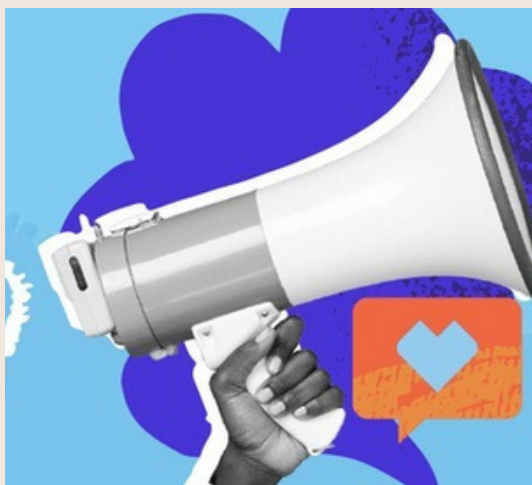
I only recently learned that all this concern about my weight and size also deeply impacted my cousin, who, as a child, had a naturally smaller body than mine. She heard comments about my body and felt the stress of needing to stay 'skinny' so adults would continue to admire her thinness. This, for her, also led to an eating disorder." – Maria, What to Say Pledge Signer

EXAMPLES:

Limiting entire categories of food (i.e. dessert) for one child

Making worried comments about one child's portion sizes, food preferences or body shape/size

Encouraging one child to exercise when others are present and available



WHAT TO SAY

Apply everything you say related to food, body, and exercise to all kids in your life equally. If the changes you are recommending are about health, everyone can do it together!



REFLECT

If you are concerned about the size or shape of specific kids in your life, ask yourself: *Is my concern about appearance bias, or is it truly about health?*

GO DEEPER



- **Take the Free Mini-Course:** [Easy Ways to Help Kids Feel Good in Their Bodies](#)



- **Watch the Video:** [What to do if a doctor tells my child to lose weight?](#)

DON'T MAKE HEALTH A NUMBERS GAME

Our culture has long taught us that health can be reduced to a numbers game based on weight, growth chart percentiles, and BMI. However, health and overall well-being are a result of many factors. Furthermore, research has shown us that focusing on these numbers in conversations about your child's health can negatively influence their beliefs about their body and their worth and does not lead to healthier outcomes. These negative beliefs have been associated with an increased risk for anxiety, depression, weight cycling and weight gain, fear of weight gain, and eating disorders.

PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

"Someone who had been one of our many awesome volunteer coaches for my high school team came over to wish me well after the season, and after talking for a few minutes they casually threw out "wow, you look a lot bigger than you did in high school! Have you gained weight?" The casual comment about my size and shape of my body was what I would call unintentional cruelty. In fact, when I look back on it, they may have even intended the remark as a compliment! But whatever the intention was, that evening, I slid back into my eating disordered habits for the first time in over a year." - Jessie Diggins, Olympic Athlete and What to Say Ambassador in her book Brave Enough

"Almost all clients I see have a vivid memory of someone in key moments of their lives saying something that negatively impacts how they feel about their body and how they eat." - Geri Scherer, MA, LP, Therapist/Licensed Psychologist for Eating Disorders



EXAMPLES:

01

02

03

swaps of “What to Say Instead” of weight or body shape and size.



WHAT TO SAY

Instead of commenting (negatively or positively) on your weight, your child’s weight, or anyone else’s weight, redirect conversations about body size and shape to discussions of health and well-being.

REFLECT

Do I worry often about my child’s weight? Is my concern for their health or is it something deeper?



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Scan the QR code or click the link to read each article.



[What is weight talk and why is it harmful for kids?](#)



[How reliance on BMI keeps us sick](#)



[How to support your child's health without focusing on weight](#)



[Why you should take weight and diet talk seriously](#)

REMEMBER THAT SELF-WORTH IS NOT SKIN DEEP

In our culture, many people derive their self-worth from their appearance or their size, but research has shown that this cultural obsession with the “ideal body size,” can leave many people feeling depressed and anxious. We want to protect our kids from these mental health challenges by teaching them that their value does not come from their size or shape, particularly when that size or shape is unrealistic or unhealthy. By modeling healthy self-talk to our children and others, we can begin to teach them how to derive self-worth, not from their size or shape, but from who they are.

PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

“I started to realize just how much of my worth, and others’, I put into appearance. I think we all have those judgy thoughts and these thoughts are what lead me to be self-conscious because I believe others are thinking the same things about me. But when I think about the people I love and why, it’s never because of their appearance. When I think about the people who care about me the most, it’s for reasons outside my appearance.”

“I want my kids to be free from the fears that live in my head and I want to make sure I’m not reinforcing them by the little comments that come out of my mouth when I’m feeling insecure. Things still slip out, but I know it’s happening less and that it matters.” – Aimee, What to Say Pledge Signer





WHAT TO SAY

Instead of commenting on someone's physical appearance or size, try complimenting their character. Don't judge people based on their appearance, here are some simple swaps of what to say instead.



REFLECT

Do worries about my weight or appearance keep me from being fully present in my life?

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Read the Article: [How we can stop diet culture \(one choice at a time\)](#)



Watch the Video: [How to teach kids to love their bodies \(even when you're struggling with your own\)](#)

LET KIDS BE KIDS BY LETTING FOOD BE FOOD

When we talk about food using phrases such as “clean eating,” “junk food,” or “bad foods,” we inadvertently assign those foods moral value and set our kids up for confusion and shame around eating. Foods with lower nutritional value are all around us, and many of these foods are very tasty! When we tell our kids that the foods they love are *junk food*, they may begin to fixate on limiting or eliminating entire categories of foods from their diets in ways that can be unhealthy or dangerous to their health. This fixation can contribute to behaviors such as hiding or sneaking food or overindulging in it. This fixation also means our kids are spending more time thinking about food and eating, and less time on being kids!

PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

“I grew up with my parents telling me candy was bad, that hamburgers are junk food, and more. I thought these were the right terms to use, and have been using these with my kids. On reflection, these terms made me sneak foods as a kid and feel guilty for eating too much at a party. I don’t want my kids to feel like this too.” - Sam, What to Say Pledge Signer



WHAT TO SAY

Instead of talking about foods using moral terms (such as “junk food”), just let food be food and let your kids be kids by helping them make decisions about foods that support their overall well-being. Here are some helpful swaps of “What to Say Instead” when talking about different types of foods.

REFLECT

What words do I use when I talk about certain food groups? What is influencing this perspective? Do I think about food's value based on how it will affect my or my child's appearance?

GO DEEPER



What is diet talk and why is it harmful?



How to help kids make healthy food choices without pressure



LET FOOD BE FUEL AND FUN

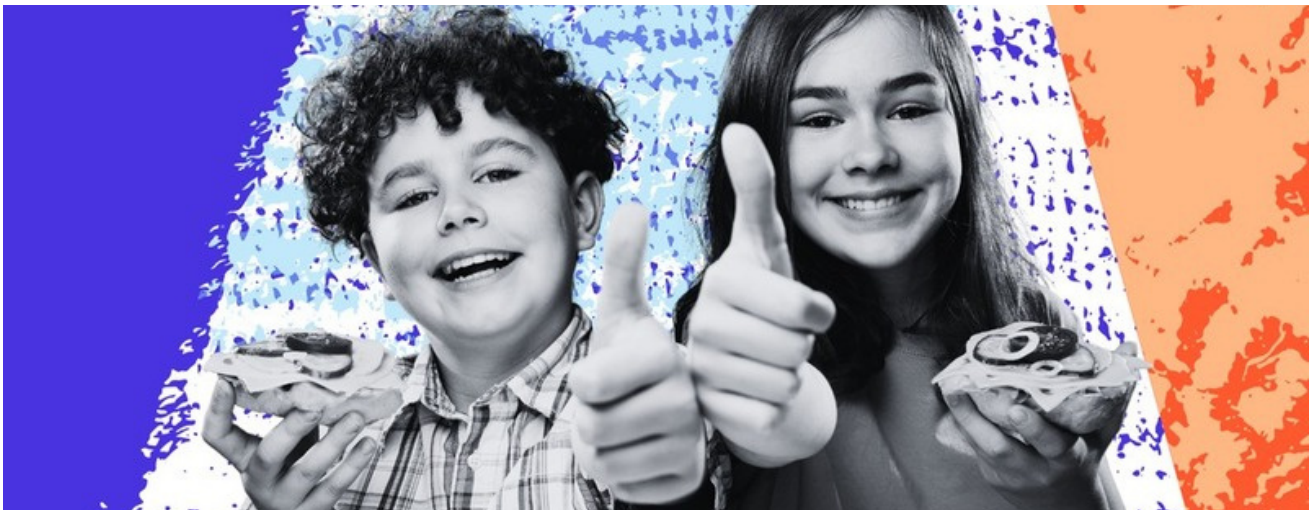
A healthy relationship with food is all about balance and variety and, while our bodies may work best when we fuel them with whole, fresh foods, other foods with lower nutritional values are often fundamental to community and family traditions and celebrations. Kids should feel comfortable and confident around all foods because this confidence is important to their social and emotional health. Many parents would prefer it if their kids ate strictly whole, unprocessed food, but by giving them access to both carrots and candy, we can empower them to make food choices that nourish their bodies and minds without guilt or shame.

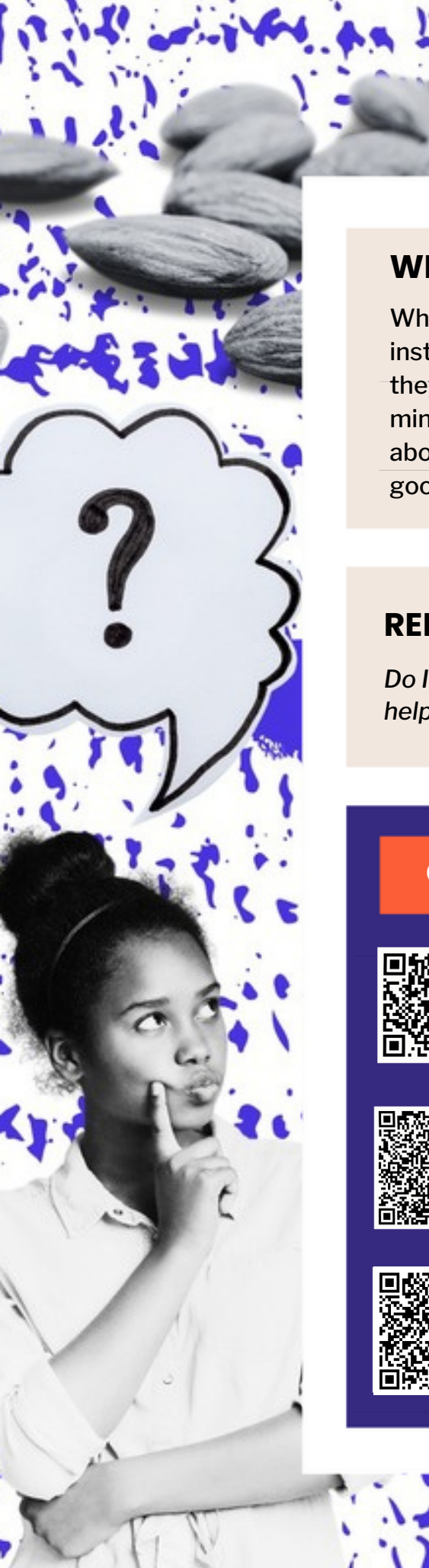
PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

“NUTRITION MATTERS TO ME. But, you know what else matters to me? Not giving my kids a weird complex about food.

I realize I have sort of done this by not letting them drink soda. My oldest is that kid at a party who drinks all of the Sprite as soon as his mom leaves. I gave him \$15 to take to a birthday party the other day in case he wanted to buy extra snacks at the venue, and he spent it all on Mountain Dew. Clearly, I have made some mistakes.

I want to teach my kids that moderation is key and that even junk food has a place in our lives. Also, I have a wicked sweet tooth and I want to have access to a million tiny Halloween Almond Joys.” -Madison Mom, Let your kids eat Halloween candy





WHAT TO SAY

When talking about food choices, emphasize balance instead of restriction. Focus on teaching your children how they can use food to support their growing bodies and minds. Here are some fun facts to help you talk to your kids about how vitamins in the foods they eat make them feel good and have the energy they need for the day.



REFLECT

Do I believe my kids can eat all foods and be ok? What is my role in helping them develop healthy eating habits?

GO DEEPER



Watch the Video: [Can I really trust kids to make their own food choices?](#)



Watch the Video: [How can I support my child who has special dietary restrictions?](#)



Read the Article: [3 tips for when your kid only wants sugary and salty snacks](#)

MAKE MOVEMENT JOYFUL

Our bodies were made to move, and movement is important to our physical and mental health. When we make physical activity about weight, shape, or size, we eliminate the experience of joy in movement. To ensure our kids love movement and exercise for the rest of their lives, we must teach them that physical activity is joyful, and not a means to a BMI or size-based end.

PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

“I grew up constantly hearing (and still hear all the time if I’m honest!), ‘I have to work out later because I ate so much at breakfast.’ or ‘Let’s go for a walk to work off our dessert.’ I realized that little comments like this have made me focus on movement that would result in the most calorie burn rather than what I would most enjoy. For a long while, I dreaded working out and felt guilty when I didn’t because I was seeking activities that were solely focused on weight loss. What to Say has helped me see that connection and seek to find ways to move that I enjoy. I know my kids are watching and will notice the shift.” –Ryan, What to Say Pledge Signer





WHAT TO SAY

When talking about movement in front of kids, avoid making a connection between exercise and weight. Help kids understand all the other amazing reasons we move our bodies, such as improving our focus, sleep, and energy levels, as well as reducing stress, risk of injuries, risk of infection, and so much more! Here are some helpful swaps of “What to Say Instead” when talking about exercise.



REFLECT

How do I talk with my kids about exercise? How do I personally feel about movement and exercise? Is it for the joy of it or to reach a certain outcome?

GO DEEPER



[How to encourage healthy routines without guilt](#)



[5 phrases to say to young athletes about bodies, food & exercise](#)

IT'S OKAY TO NOT ALWAYS GET IT RIGHT

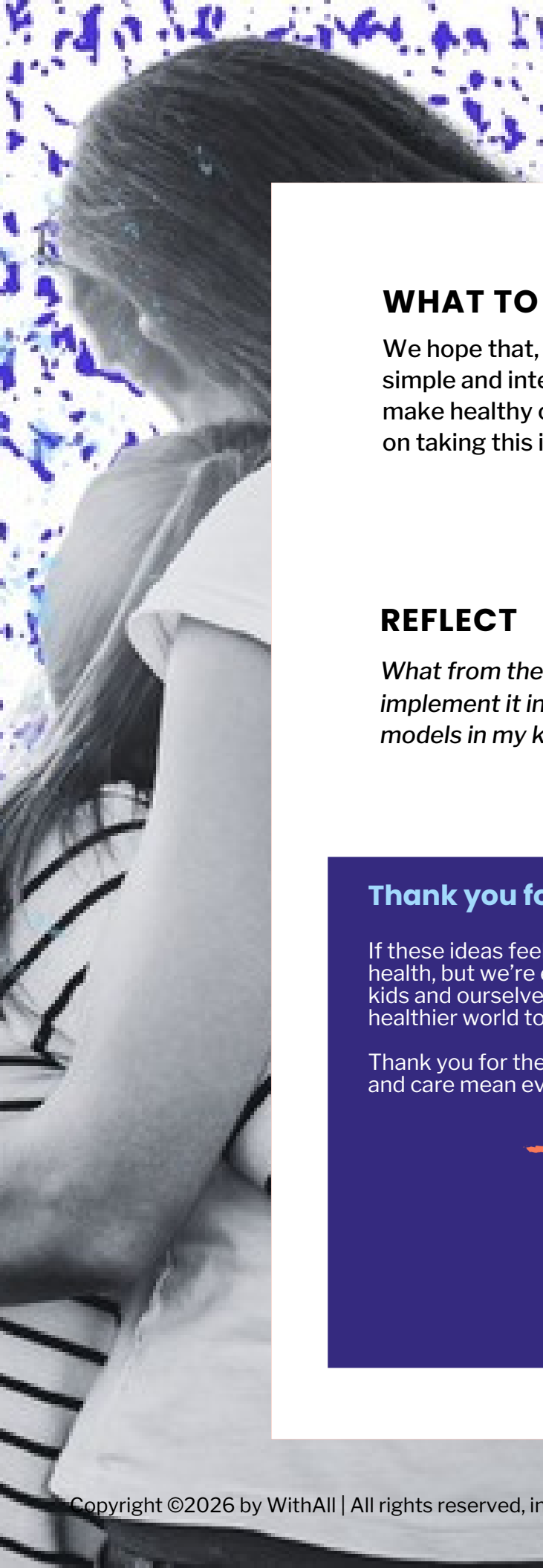
The goal of What to Say is to give you the tools you need to nurture your child's self-concept in ways that will increase their likelihood of positive physical and mental health outcomes. We're not always going to get it right and it's important that we have compassion for ourselves when we feel that we haven't responded to our kids' needs in ways that are helpful.

In these moments, it is important to remember that no one has the power to cause the kids in their life to develop eating disorders or other physical and mental health problems. What to Say is here to help you use your words and voice to build up healthy and happy kids, and, by learning these principles, you're taking a big step in the right direction.

PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

"I thought I was saying the right things to my kids about the food they are eating, but I've said harmful things without even realizing it. I talked with another parent about feeling discouraged about this, and she reminded me that that's true of so much of parenting! I'm also surrounded by people who say harmful things without knowing it and I don't judge them. It's just the way our culture has taught us to think about food and body. Instead, I try to model and share what I've learned. None of us are perfect and taking the step to educate myself and apply what I've learned is the best I can do and it makes a huge difference." –Adrian, What to Say Pledge Signer





WHAT TO SAY

We hope that, by reading these principles, you feel confident to make simple and intentional changes that empower the kids in your life to make healthy choices around diet and exercise. Congratulate yourself on taking this important step to protect the kids in your life!

REFLECT

What from these principles resonated the most? How can I implement it into my life or share what I learned with other role models in my kids' lives?

Thank you for reading A Simple Guide for What to Say!

If these ideas feel new, you're not alone. Society often equates appearance with health, but we're embracing a better path—one that fosters true well-being for kids and ourselves. Challenging norms isn't easy, but it's how we create a healthier world together.

Thank you for the love and support you give to the kids in your life. Your words and care mean everything to them—and to us.

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GO DEEPER IN YOUR ROLE

- **Parents and families:** Learn the 3 Simple Shifts at withall.org/shifts
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- **Teachers:** Build a body-healthy school culture at withall.org/schools
- **Healthcare providers:** Earn CME credit at withall.org/healthcare

Support This Work

This guide is one piece of WithAll's work to help kids feel good in their bodies and with food. That work only happens because individuals and businesses fund it directly. If it helped you, consider making a gift at withall.org/donate.

Get Financial Help

If you or someone you love is facing an eating disorder, you are not alone. Our Recovery Support Program provides grants for groceries and housing during intensive treatment. Apply at withall.org/apply.