



WHEN KIDS TALK ABOUT BODIES

What to Say (and Why It Matters)

A practical guide to navigating “fat talk.”

Kids notice everything—including how we talk about bodies. Whether it's something they overheard, something a peer said, or something they said themselves, these moments matter. Comments about bodies—especially words like “fat”—can shape how kids feel about themselves and others for years to come.

This guide is here to help. Inside, you'll find:

- ♥ Whether fat is even a bad word (and how to talk about it) - page 4
- ♥ What to say when your child is called fat - page 6
- ♥ How to respond if your child calls someone else fat - page 9
- ♥ When your child says they're fat - page 10

Plus:

- ♥ Simple, practical phrases to use in real moments
- ♥ Gentle ways to reframe comments—without shame or shutdowns
- ♥ Tools to build trust, body confidence, and compassion

You don't need the perfect words—just a few tools and a willingness to show up. Every conversation is a chance to model respect for all bodies, including your own.





Kids remember what we say—and what we don't. Even comments meant as compliments ("You're so skinny!") can send the message that appearance matters most.

Over time, this can affect how kids eat, move, and feel about their bodies.



Almost all clients I see have a vivid memory of someone saying something that negatively impacted how they feel about their body and how they eat.

— Geri Scherer, MA, LP, therapist and eating disorder specialist

But you can make a lasting impact in the other direction, too. It starts with how you respond in every day moments.



IS “FAT” A NEGATIVE WORD? HERE’S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

When kids or adults ask, “Is being fat a bad thing?” they’re not just asking about a word—they’re asking about identity, respect, and how we talk about bodies. In a world full of confusing messages about appearance and health, it’s important to unpack this question with care and clarity.

What Does “Fat” Really Mean?

At its core, the word fat is a physical descriptor—just like “tall” or “short.” It describes body size, not personality, health, or worth. The problem is society has layered that word with judgment.

Fat as a Neutral Descriptor

In some communities, especially in the fat liberation and fat acceptance movements, “fat” is being reclaimed as a neutral or even empowering term. People are challenging the idea that fat is something shameful or wrong.

But outside those spaces, fat is often still used as an insult or shorthand for being unhealthy or lazy. That’s why, for many people, it feels hurtful—even if it wasn’t meant that way.

Why “Fat” Feels Negative

Our culture has long associated thinness with value: beauty, health, success. And on the flip side, being fat has often been tied to negative assumptions like laziness, lack of willpower, or poor health. These stereotypes aren’t just false—they’re harmful.

This is called weight stigma or anti-fat bias, and it’s everywhere—from jokes on TV to biased treatment in healthcare and schools. Weight stigma doesn’t motivate people to be healthier; it actually contributes to higher stress, disordered eating, and avoidance of medical care.



Is It Okay to Use the Word “Fat”?

It depends on how it's used and how the person hearing it feels.

- ♥ If someone describes themselves as fat in a confident, matter-of-fact way, that's their choice—and it might be empowering. It is never our job to label others, but instead, to use reflective language to mirror the terms with which people use to identify.
- ♥ But if the word is used as a weapon to criticize, shame, and harm others it becomes a slur.

Tone, context, and respect matter. That is why at WithAll we often recommend refraining from body comments (especially judgments – whether positive or negative) in most cases. If you're unsure, ask: “How would you like me to refer to your body?” That might feel awkward at first, but it's a powerful way to honor someone's identity and boundaries.

Talking to Kids About Body Size

Kids pick up on body language—literally and figuratively. If they hear adults using “fat” as a bad word, they'll quickly learn to fear or judge that label. It is important that the word fat is regularly used in a respectful manner to ensure that we are fully seeing, respecting, and valuing fat people and to help children stop equating “fat” with all its negative connotations (i.e., it becomes a neutral descriptor).

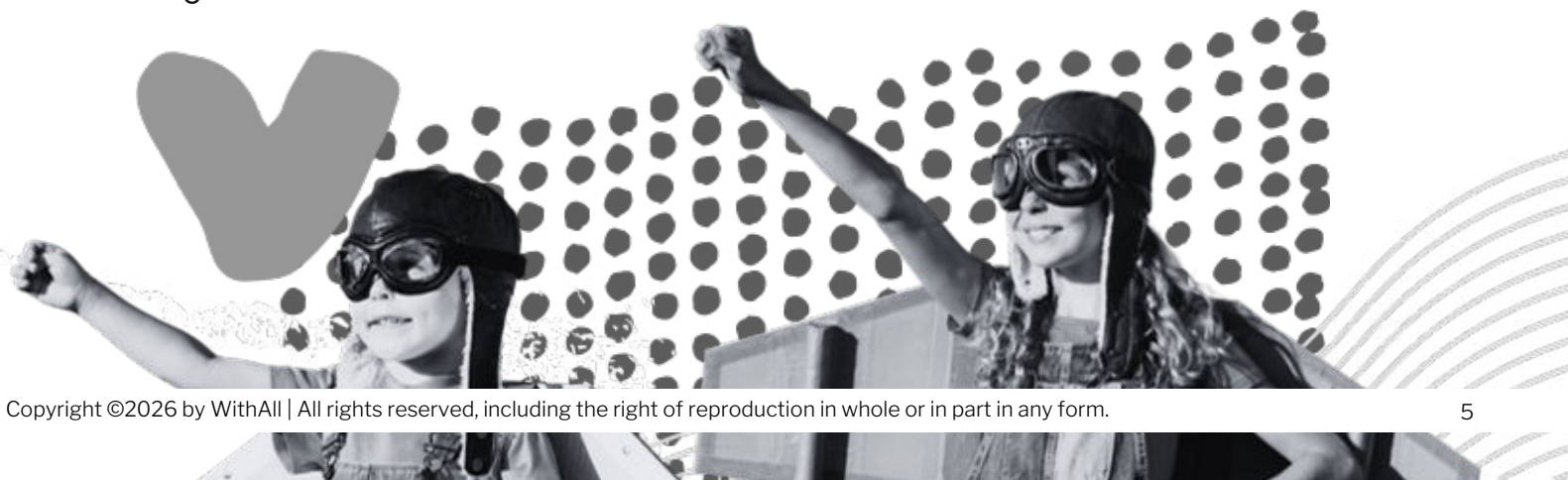
Here are some helpful ways to communicate this:

- ♥ Talk about what bodies can do, not just how they look.
- ♥ Use neutral, descriptive language around weight.
- ♥ Emphasize respect for all bodies, regardless of size. Do not make comments on your body or the bodies of others.

If your child makes a harmful fat comment on their body or the body of others, get curious:

- ♥ Instead of – “You're not fat!” say “Is fat something that is concerning to you?”
- ♥ Instead of reprimanding a child for calling someone fat (e.g., “That's not nice!”), say “Isn't it neat that bodies come in all different shapes and sizes?”

Remember, children aren't born with body shame. It's something they learn. We can help change that.



Final Thoughts: Let's Change the Conversation

So, is "fat" a negative word? It doesn't have to be. The word itself isn't bad—but the way it's used and the weight it carries in our culture can make it feel that way. By being mindful about how we talk about bodies, we can start to untangle shame from size—and help ourselves and our kids build healthier, more respectful relationships with our bodies.

WHAT TO SAY... WHEN SOMEONE CALLS YOUR CHILD FAT

It can feel uncertain when your child tells you someone called them "fat." Before rushing in to fix it, take a breath. This is your chance to help your child build confidence, resilience, and a healthy relationship with their body.

Here's expert advice from former WithAll Executive Director Lisa Radzak and Dr. Kelsey Varzeas, PhD, on how to meet the moment with clarity and care—including questions and sample responses to help you navigate the conversation with confidence.

Do not rush to tell them that they are not fat: When we tell a child in a larger body that they are “not fat,” we are telling them that we don’t see them exactly as they are. Children in larger bodies need to know that they are loved, respected, and safe in their body.

Start with curiosity:

“What did you think or feel when they said that?”

Let your child talk about how they felt and what the comment meant to them. Children, especially those in larger bodies, need to have their experiences listened to and validated. If we rush to tell kids how much they matter or try to correct their experiences, we disregard their experiences of anti-fat bias*.

***What is anti-fat bias?**

Anti-fat bias involves both implicit and explicit biases that associate fatness with negative traits such as laziness, lack of self-discipline, or poor health.

Affirm their body:

“Your body is exactly right**. Every body is different and no body is better than any other body. Bodies come in all shapes and sizes—and they’re all good. Your body is never the problem.”

**This phrase might feel wrong or uncomfortable to some of us because of the messages we grew up with about bodies, health and weight. Diet culture and anti-fat bias has taught us to tie our worth to how we look. But we know better now: weight or body size isn’t a useful (and is too often a harmful) measure of health—and it certainly isn’t a measure of value!



It's important for kids to value and trust their bodies, because when they do, they're more likely to take care of them and have better health outcomes and quality of life, regardless of their size. This is the one body they will have for the rest of their lives. Let's help them appreciate and care for it well.

Name what's happening:

"It sounds like they were trying to give you a label...like name-calling. It sounds like they were trying to make it seem like something about your appearance is a bad thing.

I've learned labeling others is how some people deal with feeling not secure or ok about themselves. Sometimes they do it to get the focus off of them onto someone else, even if what they say isn't true. It gives a sense of feeling "in control" even if it's fake.

This is all THEIR issue, and not yours to solve. It's not about you—it's about them."

Offer support and validate their experiences:

"You don't have to believe what they said. And you don't have to deal with it alone."

"It doesn't feel good to be called out with what feels like someone trying to be mean. No one wants everyone looking at them with a mean idea floating their way."



WHEN YOUR CHILD CALLS SOMEONE ELSE FAT

Even when kids are just curious or repeating something they've heard, it's a chance to teach respect, kindness and prioritize what really matters.

For young kids (ages 2–4):

"All bodies are different—and all bodies are good. Talking about someone else's body can make them feel uncomfortable. Let's talk about it later, just you and me."

For older kids (5+):

"Commenting on someone's body is like stepping into their personal space. Imagine if someone said something about your legs or your hair in front of everyone. How would that feel?"

"If you have questions, I'm always here to talk about bodies with you—just not in a way that could make someone else feel uncomfortable."



WHEN YOUR CHILD SAYS THEY ARE FAT

Kids often say “I’m fat” when they’re feeling uncomfortable, comparing themselves to others, or repeating something they’ve heard.

Try this:

Be curious, not corrective. Ask questions, and let them talk without judgment or concern.

“What made you say that?”

“How are you feeling about your body today?”

Affirm their worth and body:

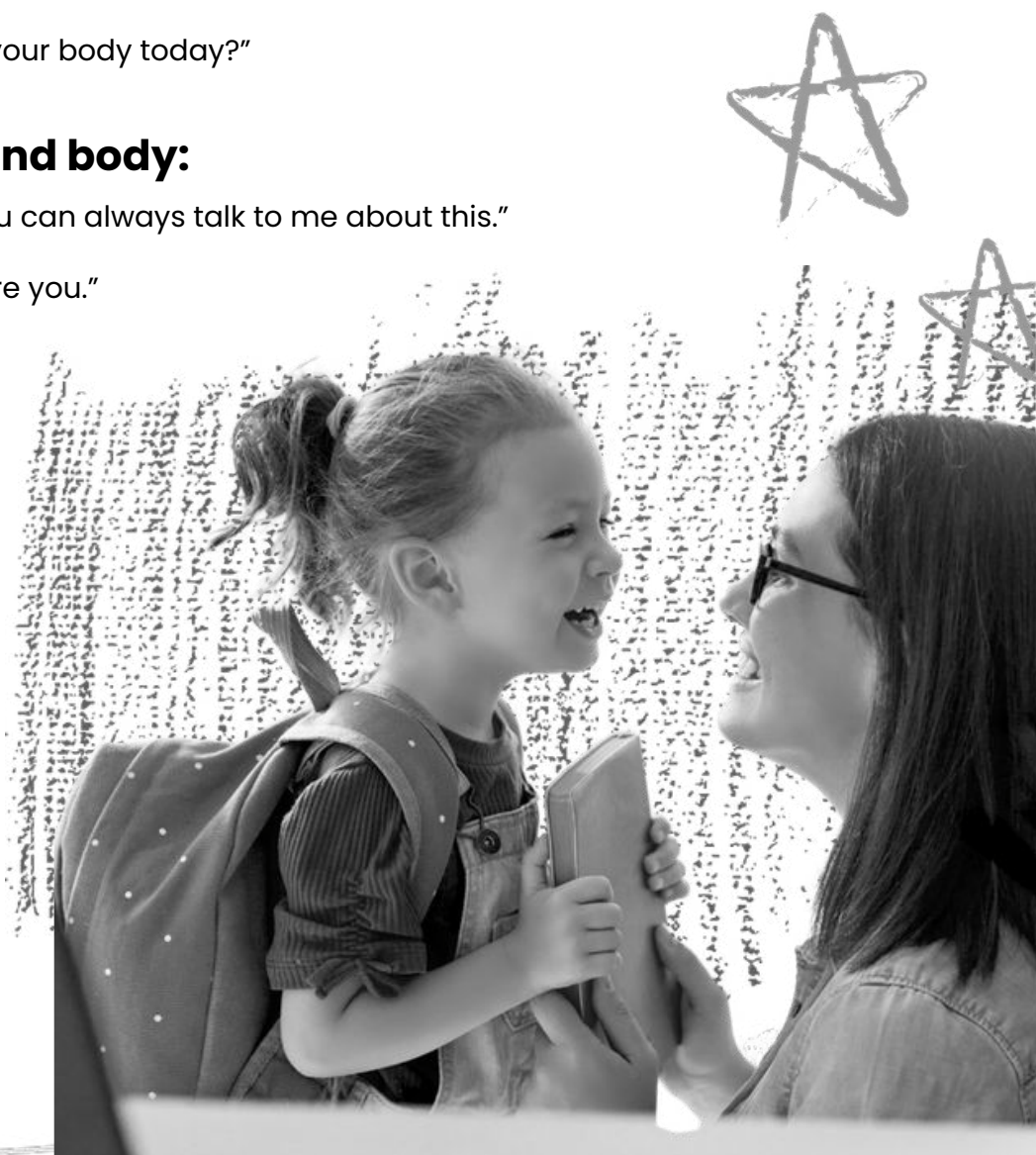
“Thank you for telling me. You can always talk to me about this.”

“Your body is good. And so are you.”

Shift the focus:

“Let’s talk about what your body helps you do—not just how it looks.”

These moments build trust and open the door for more conversations later.



SETTING THE TONE AT HOME

Small changes in how we talk about bodies every day can make a big difference.

Try this:

Skip appearance-based comments—even well-meaning ones

“We don’t focus on how bodies look. We focus on who people are.”

Praise effort and kindness instead of looks

“You worked hard on that.”

“You’re a great friend.”

Model it yourself

Watch how you talk about your own body, food, or exercise. Kids are listening—even when you think they’re not. And do your best to avoid commenting on other bodies

(including those on TV or online).

Make questions safe

Let kids know they can come to you with questions about bodies, food, or feelings, without shame or judgment.



This guide was reviewed by a member of our Expert Advisory Panel—leaders in public health, nutrition, medicine, sports, and eating disorder prevention—who help ensure our resources reflect the latest science and real-world best practices you can use right away.

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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.

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