

WHAT to SAY

WithAll 

GUIDE FOR FAMILY MEMBERS

Dear Family, we all want the kids we care about to do well, achieve good things, and create a happy life for themselves. Of course, this all requires good health – mental and physical. Today, more is known about the powerful impact our words, as adults, has on the kids we love. This is particularly true with what we say to and around kids about food, bodies (shape, size, weight), and exercise. These are things that adults did not know in earlier decades, but we know them now. Here are commonly believed myths, along with practical things we, as adults, can do to support kids' physical and mental health.

Common Myths about Food, Body & Exercise

 **MYTH**

Some foods are bad for you.

 **TRUTH**

A healthy relationship with food is all about balance and variety.

- While we know whole, unprocessed, fresh food is the better option for serving our bodies' nutritional needs, foods with lower nutritional values are often fundamental to community and family traditions and celebrations. Kids should feel comfortable and confident around all foods.
- When we tell kids that certain foods are “junk” or “bad” it can have two unintentional consequences:
 1. Kids overvalue or fixate on it (instead of learning to eat a certain food in moderation, they seek it out and overindulge when able).
 2. Kids avoid a whole category of foods altogether and miss out on certain nutrients or delicious foods. Eliminating foods from ones diet for nonmedical reasons is often the start of dieting, which can lead to very harmful (even fatal) consequences. If they do eat the food, then they feel unneeded guilt or shame.
- Both behaviors often lead to dieting – the #1 indicator of a child going on to develop an eating disorder.

 **WHAT to SAY**

Avoid labeling certain foods as good or bad or commenting on kids' food choices.

If you are not the primary caregiver, you can simply enjoy the kids you love—you do not need to spend your precious time together thinking or talking about food or body size. Focus on listening to them, learning from them, or playing together—there is so much more than food or weight to think about!

“I know it's bad, but I'm going to have a piece of pie.” > “Yes, I would love a piece of pie.”

“Are you sure you want that big of a serving?” > Say nothing.



MYTH

“Ideal” body size = healthy.



TRUTH

Health and well-being are a result of many factors, especially ones we can't see.

Body size and weight - despite everything we have believed for decades - is not a good measure of health or well-being.

- Kids' bodies change shape and size frequently as they grow, and these changes are all natural and healthy.
- Commenting negatively about a child or anyone else's weight or body communicates to the child that their natural body is wrong.
- To reach or maintain a certain body shape or size (especially if they will receive approval for doing so), kids might engage in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, starving oneself or using steroids. When we compliment or condone kids for their appearance, we could be encouraging unhealthy behaviors unintentionally.



WHAT to SAY

Avoid all comments on kids' weight, body size or shape, or about YOUR OWN or other people's bodies. Instead, talk about health and feeling good.

“You look great! Have you lost weight?” > *“It is so great to see you! What is something you are really enjoying right now?”*

“Wow, Judy has really gained some weight these past few months.” > *Say nothing.*



MYTH

We need to diet and use exercise to change or control our weight or body shape.



TRUTH

Research has shown that our cultural obsession with the “ideal body size” leaves kids (and the rest of us) feeling depressed and anxious... and neither mentally nor physically healthier.

- Let's protect the kids we love from these mental health challenges by teaching them that their value, and health, does not come from their body size or shape.
- When we talk about our diets, we unintentionally put much more emphasis on food than it should have. This leaves kids, who are always listening, to feel confused and shame around foods they love to eat.
- When we make physical activity about weight, shape, or size, we suck the joy out of MOVING! 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 size-based end.



WHAT to SAY

Don't talk about your diet or exercise regimen to lose weight or change your body.

Talking less about food lets food just be food. Instead, find a physical activity you and the kid BOTH enjoy- and do it for the JOY of it.

“I'm not eating dairy right now because it's helped me lose 3 pounds.” > *Say nothing or just say “no, thank you” if offered a food you prefer not to eat.*

“I need to go for a walk after all this food I just ate!” > *“I love doing things with you! Do you want to go on a walk with me?”*

Want to learn more?

Visit www.whattosayNOW.org and sign the What to Say pledge to receive more information on these topics, packaged in simple, easy-to-digest emails.

Thank you for all the ways you love and support the kids in your life.

Your words mean so much to them and your desire to support their health and well-being means the world to them and us.



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