

WHAT to SAY

WithAll 

SHARING WHAT TO SAY WITH OTHER ADULTS IN YOUR CHILD'S LIFE

Thank you for taking the pledge to stop diet and weight talk around the kids in your life. As you're living out the pledge, you may notice other adults your child looks up to do not know the importance of their words about food, body, and exercise. You may notice some of them do not and might be inadvertently saying harmful things to your kid or other kids.

Asking another adult to change how they talk to and around kids might feel tricky or uncomfortable. Here are a few simple tips and conversation starters for sharing What to Say with other adults and inviting them to join you in supporting your kid's health.

How to start the conversation



TIP

Share how important they are in your kid's life and keep the conversation about your kid's health. Remember, they care about your kid too, and the goal is to have them on your team and to put the conversation in the light of helping your kid be happy and healthy.



TIP

Be humble – share how you are still learning in this area as well. Try not to lecture or use a condescending tone.



TIP

Think about a time you were corrected or encouraged to change your actions (either it was received by you well or poorly). If well, what did you like about how they approached you? If not well, how do you wish they did it differently? Take this with you as you enter the conversation.



WHAT to SAY

Here are a few sample templates* you can use as an email, note, or conversation starter to share our What to Say Guides with adult role models in your kid's life. These one-sheeters can be given directly to the adult or used for further conversation.

Family or Other Mentors

Hi [Mom/Dad/Name],

[Insert however you learned about the pledge and What to Say].

I have learned so much about food and body and how the words we say affect kids' health that I had no idea about. Since you're such an important part of [kid name(s)] life, I wanted to share it with you too so you can help me give [kid name(s)] the lifelong gifts of a positive relationship with food and appreciation for their body.

Love,

[Name]

A Teacher

A great opportunity to share this with a teacher could be at your child's conference.

Dear [Name],

Thank you for all you do for [kid name(s)].

[Insert something here that you or your child appreciate about the teacher].

[Insert however you learned about the pledge and What to Say].

I have learned so much about food and body and how the words of the adults they look up to affect kids' health that I had no idea about. Since you're such an important part of [kid name(s)] life, and I know you care about all the kids you teach, I thought it might be helpful to share a resource that WithAll created specifically for teachers.

Thank you for all you do!

[Name]

A Coach

A great opportunity to share this with a coach could be at the start of the season.

Dear [Name],

Thank you for all you do for [kid name(s)].

[Insert something here that you or your child appreciate about the coach or what you are looking forward to in the season if it's a new coach].

[Insert however you learned about the pledge and What to Say].

I have learned so much about food and body and how the words of the adults they look up to affect kids' health that I had no idea about. Since you're such an important part of [kid name(s)] life, and I know you care about all the kids you coach, I thought it might be helpful to share a resource that WithAll created specifically for coaches.

Thank you for all you do!

[Name]

A Doctor

A great opportunity to share this with your child's doctor could be at their annual well-check visit.

Dear [Name],

It is great seeing you again.

[Insert however you learned about the pledge and What to Say].

I have learned so much about food and body and how the words of the adults they look up to affect kids' health that I had no idea about. Since your words about my kid's health are extremely important to me and [kid name(s)] I wanted to share with you a resource they have specifically for health care providers so we can partner in protecting [kid name(s)] health and well-being.


Thank you for all you do!

[Name]


*The prompts provided might need to be adjusted based on the age of your child or relationship of the adult role model. Our goal is to give you a starting point to find the words that work best for your situation.


How to respond in the moment if an adult says something harmful*


We've all been there. Someone says something unhelpful or harmful around your kids, and you might not be sure how to respond. Although every situation is different, here are a few helpful tips for navigating these situations.


 **TIP** It is entirely fair to get angry or emotional in the moment since this is a topic that affects all of us on a deep level. The same is probably true for the person you're talking with as well! Trust your gut if it is right for you to discuss this now or later when everyone has cooled down, or (maybe more importantly) when kids are not listening.


Below are some ideas of how to pivot harmful conversations. Every situation is different so trust your gut on if these are the right fit for you. Have a specific question? Contact us at whattosaynow.org/question.

 **TIP** Were you unable to respond in the moment? That's ok! If you're comfortable, try to have a conversation with the adult later using the tips above for "How to Start the Conversation."


 **WHAT to SAY** *If they are commenting on someone's body and seemingly inviting you to comment as well.*
> "We/I actually try not to comment on other people's bodies."

 **WHAT to SAY** *If they are encouraging physical activity to "make up" for all the food you just ate.*
> "I'd love to go for a walk, but it is because I enjoy walking and spending time with you."
> "I'm not interested right now, and I like moving because it is enjoyable...if I think about it as canceling out calories, to me it feels kind of sad, you know?"

 **WHAT to SAY** *If they are labeling certain foods as "good" or "bad."*
> "Actually, all foods have a place. For us it is about balance."

 **WHAT to SAY** *If a fellow adult role model is commenting on portion sizes or what you or a child eats.*
> "For us, sometimes we want more food and sometimes we want less food...we listen to our bodies."

How to talk to your kid after something harmful is said

 **TIP** You know your kid best, and what you say will depend on your child's age. What to Say aims to reduce shame and stigma around food and weight, so be sure that you are not making it more uncomfortable for your kid when you address an uncomfortable situation. It's important to make sure they know what was said is corrected but trust your gut in how to bring this up. Here are a few respectful yet correcting conversation starters* for connecting with your kid after an uncomfortable situation.

*The prompts provided might need to be adjusted based on the age of your child or relationship of the adult role model. Our goal is to give you a starting point to find the words that work best for your situation.

 **TIP**

When talking with your kid, be sure to ask questions and listen to how they are feeling about what happened (examples below).

 **WHAT to SAY**

If a loved one comments on weight or food choices

- > “I heard [person] comment about your [weight/food choices]. I’m sorry [person] seems to feel other people’s food and bodies is their business.”
 - *How did what [person] said make you feel?*
- > I want you to know that what I think matters –the most important thing of all—is how YOU feel overall, about your body, and about the food you eat.
 - *How do you feel about your body?*
 - *How do you feel about the foods you eat?*
 - *How do you feel overall?*
 - *Is there anything I can do to support you? Because I think you’re fantastic... just the way you are right now.*

 **WHAT to SAY**

If a coach or doctor shares concern with your child about their weight or food choices

- > “I’m sorry that [doctor/coach] commented on your [weight/food choices]. Some people believe outside measures determine health, but we know that is not true. What they said was not good advice. We all, even coaches and doctors, make mistakes sometimes.
 - ***If in relation to sport's performance:***
“Instead, let's focus on practicing and improving our skills and having fun playing.”
 - ***If in relation to doctor's recommendations:***
“Instead, let's focus on some fun activities and meals that we can all share as a family to feel good and support our bodies and minds—just as they are.”

We hope these tips and conversation starters are helpful for sharing What to Say with others so your kids can be surrounded by adult role models protecting their health and well-being when it comes to food, body, and exercise.

Have a question we didn't address here?

Submit it at whattosaynow.org/question, and we'll work to get your answer.

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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WHAT to SAY

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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 one's 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.



“Ideal” body size = healthy.



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.



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.



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



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.



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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WHAT to SAY

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GUIDE FOR COACHES

Dear Coaches,

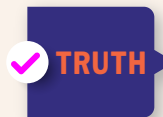
Being a great athlete requires great health – mental and physical.

Today more is known about the powerful impact our words, as coaches, has on our athletes. This is particularly true with what we as coaches say to and around our athletes about food, bodies (shape, size, weight), and overall exercise. These are things that coaches did not know or realize in earlier decades. But we know them now. Here are commonly believed myths, along with practical things coaches can do to support athletes' physical and mental health.

Common Myths about Food, Body & Exercise for Athletes



An athlete must be “skinny” to be good.



Healthy athletes come in all shapes and sizes.

Athletes do not have to look a certain way to be a good athlete.

- At every age, athletes compare themselves physically to others. Comparison is natural. However, comparison (especially to unrealistic images from media or to other body types that are genetically different) can quickly become detrimental to an athlete's self-esteem and body image.
- Commenting negatively about an athlete or anyone else's weight or body communicates to your athletes that their natural body is wrong and not capable of succeeding.

As a coach you have a powerful influence on your athletes; here are actions you can take:

- Model positive self-talk and body language with your athletes. Avoid saying negative things about your own body, your appearance, or others' bodies in front of your athletes.
- Listen for comments your athletes may make about their bodies, such as negative comments about their own size or shape or comparing/teasing teammates (even as “good-natured” fun).



Respond with: > “Healthy athletic bodies come in all shapes and sizes; think of ways your body helps you play [your sport] well.”



MYTH

Too much food or “bad” food makes you perform poorly.



TRUTH

Food helps you grow and gives your body energy to play your best.

Different types of foods have different nutritional benefits that our minds and bodies need to feel balanced and healthy.

- Focusing on how food helps our brains and bodies grow, think, move, and stay fueled throughout the day helps athletes see food as beneficial for playing their sport and feeling their best.
- Research suggests that adults’ beliefs and judgments about food can impact a child’s thoughts and eating behaviors. If adults are labeling food choices as “good/bad” or “clean/unhealthy”, it can equate food with stress or anxiety about being right or wrong.

As a coach you have a powerful influence on your athletes; here are actions you can take:

- Model non-judgmental thoughts and beliefs towards food with your athletes. Avoid talking about food in terms such as good/bad, clean/junk, healthy/unhealthy. Emphasize that balance and variety are what’s needed.
- Listen to how your athletes talk about food, whether they’re talking about their favorite snack, what they had for lunch, or what they’re having for dinner. If you hear them make comments about food in relation to body size or weight, try to redirect them.



WHAT to SAY

Respond with: >

“All food is fuel, and your body needs fuel to perform its best during practice or a game” or “Food is energy. You’ll play better when you have energy.”

- At the end of practice, bring your athletes together and ask them how they felt during practice. Tired? Energized? Hungry? Remind them that food, water, and rest helps them grow and gives their bodies energy to play their best.



MYTH

Athletes need to practice hard and every day to succeed.



TRUTH

Athletes’ brains and bodies need a variety of activities to be strong and succeed.

- In our fast-paced world, we are often disconnected from our body signals and what they mean. As a coach, you can help your athletes learn to listen to what their bodies are telling them and the value in doing and trusting what their bodies need (i.e. eating more, slowing down, or taking a break).
- Even young athletes may feel the pressure to obsess about or overdo a certain type of exercise to achieve their potential or meet expectations. It’s beneficial to remind them that variety, moderation, and off-days are crucial for them to perform at their best.

As a coach you have a powerful influence on your athletes; here are actions you can take:

- As you’re coaching, ask your athletes about how their body feels at different points during practice to encourage them to become more in tune with their bodies’ signals and what those signals are telling them.
- At the end of practice, encourage your athletes to listen to their bodies during the week. Tell them when they “refuel” at their next snack or meal to pay attention to when they feel full or if they are still hungry.

Want to learn more?

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

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What to Say Guide for Coaches is made possible through the generous support of RBC Wealth Management.

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WHAT to SAY

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GUIDE FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

Dear Health Care Provider,

Thank you for all you do to protect my kid's health. I have learned that the words of influential adults have a profound impact on a kid's self-concept and health outcomes, especially in our culture of unhealthy weight stigma and diet culture.

Please join me in these practices around my child to help protect their mental and physical health.

REQUEST:

While my child is present, please do not discuss my child's weight, BMI, or growth chart. Do not make suggestions for how they can manage their weight. If you have concerns with my child's growth, please talk with me separately, away from my child's earshot.

For more on my rationale for this request, please see the 2016 American Academy of Pediatrics' policy statement¹ that providers should not talk about weight with children or teens.

Focusing on weight leads to dieting, which is associated with increased weight, depression, and eating disorders over time.



instead:

- Ask me or my child about their health practices –their sleep, emotional well-being, favorite physical activities, eating a variety of food, etc.—without connecting the conversation to them needing to change their weight.
- If you have concerns about my child's weight, please discuss them with me privately. I may ask if there are other indicators for your concern (i.e.- abnormal test results, behavioral screenings) besides weight.

> Please put this request in my child's chart.

This resource was created by WithAll, a non-profit working to end eating disorders by inspiring prevention and well-being in kids. For additional information on health care providers' important role in eating disorder prevention and simple resources, visit whattosaynow.org. On the back, are helpful tips they recommend for pediatricians during well-check visits.

¹<https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/140/6/e20173034/38277/Stigma-Experienced-by-Children-and-Adolescents>

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PEDIATRICIANS CAN HELP KIDS PREVENT WEIGHT ISSUES OR EATING DISORDERS

1. Focus on health and well-being as the top priorities.
2. Discourage dieting, skipping meals, or using diet pills.
3. Promote eating a variety of foods, including whole (unprocessed) foods when possible.
4. Encourage a positive body image—reminding the child that how they feel about their body is what matters most.
5. Ask if there is a history of weight teasing or bullying and address any issues with the whole family. (Research has shown that parent or sibling teasing about weight, however it is intended, can be very harmful to a child.)
6. Watch for warning signs of an eating disorder (e.g., calorie restriction, meal skipping, compulsive exercise, intense fear of weight returning, body image distortions). Sudden weight loss should not be applauded—it can be a serious warning sign.



PEDIATRICIANS CAN HELP PARENTS PREVENT OBESITY AND EATING DISORDERS IN KIDS

1. **Encourage family mealtime.** Plan and eat meals together whenever possible. (This helps parents ensure their children and teens are eating a variety of foods.)
2. **Encourage parents to stop diet and weight talk.** Recommend parents stop talking about weight or diets with or around kids. (Suggest WhattoSayNOW.org for a resource on how to put this into practice.)
3. **Encourage parents to make a household rule about no body teasing or commenting.**
4. **Encourage parents to focus food choices on variety and balance.** Remind parents to be positive role models for their kids by eating a variety of foods.
5. **Encourage parents to help their child find fun physical activities—and decrease screen time.** Even short bursts of activity multiple times throughout the day can help a child's health and emotional well-being.

The AAP report also found that when pediatricians used **Motivational Interviewing (MI)** techniques when working with patients on these issues, they had a greater success rate.

Motivational Interviewing helps patients talk about the need for change in an accepting and nonjudgmental way, and when they are ready it helps them formulate a plan for that change. **Instead of trying to impose change on a patient who may be resistant or not ready, MI helps the patient find their own motivation for change.** For example, instead of telling a patient they are overweight and need to start an exercise plan, MI can help the patient talk about the weight issue from their perspective and find their own reason and inherent drive to make a healthy lifestyle plan. When MI was used, patients lowered their BMI by 3.1 more points than when no special approach was taken.

By redirecting the conversation from numbers to the more important conversation about health, pediatricians and parents can help alleviate the epidemic of obesity and eating disorders in young people across the country.

WHAT to SAY



GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

Dear Teacher,

Thank you for all you do for my kid and all the kids in your class!

I recently learned **we, adult role models, and the words we use related to food and body image, really affect kids.** Will you please join me in helping protect kids' health, particularly as it relates to how we talk about food and body?

At Lunchtime & In Everyday Conversations

- Avoid food policing (i.e. – asking kids to eat or avoid foods or eat foods in a certain order.)
 - Use lunchtime as an opportunity to focus on bonding (ask them questions, make jokes, listen to stories or music) and making mealtimes fun and stress-free (one of the leading preventive measures for eating disorders!).
- Avoid assigning a moral value to food (i.e. “healthy/unhealthy” “clean/junk” “good/bad.”). This often creates shame which often leads to dieting, the lead indicator of a child going on to develop an eating disorder.

✗ COMMON (HARMFUL) PHRASE “Sugar is unhealthy or bad.”

✓ SIMPLE (POSITIVE) SWAP “Too much of anything is not the best for my body. I try to eat a variety of lots of different foods.”

- Try to give compliments that are not appearance based. When kids value their inside, they are much more likely to take care of their health in ways that matter more than being a specific weight or size.

✗ COMMON (HARMFUL) PHRASE “You look so great today!”

✓ SIMPLE (POSITIVE) SWAP “It is so good to see you today!”

While Teaching

As a teacher, often you inherit and cannot change the curriculum—some of which may be heavily influenced by diet culture. Even if you are unable to change the curriculum or textbook, you can frame the content and help students think critically in these areas. Here are some tips to consider:

- **When setting your classroom rules or agreements at the start of the school year, consider adding “no body or appearance comments allowed.”** Remind the kids that each of us have a body that is special and unique, and it is not okay or permissible to comment on another person’s body or appearance.
- **Consider the books you have or read in your classroom: do they comment on weight or size and make moral judgements of foods or based on appearance?** How are bodies represented in the books – as impossibly thin or muscular? Consider discontinuing use of those books if possible.
- **If teaching a health unit, avoid weight or BMI as a primary indicator of health.** Health is bigger than either of these measures and focusing on them, especially when different kids are at different places in their growth trajectory, sets your students up to feel shame or feel bad about their body. See here for more: [2016 American Academy of Pediatrics’ policy statement¹](#)

Want to learn more?

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

WithAll also provides presentations to groups of adults full of practical ways to set kids up for a healthy body image and a lifelong balanced relationship with food. Contact us at www.whattosaynow.org/organizations/ to learn more or request a presentation for your next workshop day or your local PTO group.

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.



What to Say Guide for Teachers is made possible through the generous support of RBC Wealth Management.

¹ <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/140/6/e20173034/38277/Stigma-Experienced-by-Children-and-Adolescents>