

WEIGHT: A BIG ISSUE?

While weight can be a sensitive issue for many adults, we have found that most – but not all - children are less concerned about their weight than their parents. Nevertheless, parents can be uneasy about raising the issue of overweight, fearing that to do so will hurt their child's feelings, damage self-esteem or make food and eating a 'big issue'. Like all sensitive issues there are more and less helpful ways of talking to your child about their weight. This guide to the Do's and Don'ts of talking to children about weight is based on our experience of talking to hundreds of children and families about weight problems.

SHOULD I TALK TO MY CHILD ABOUT WEIGHT?

Before talking to your child, it is a good idea to make sure whether they are actually overweight. It can be difficult to know if you should be concerned about your child's weight. Health professionals use several measures to check if a child is overweight including Body Mass Index (BMI), waist circumference and body fat.

Whether or not you want to talk in detail to your child about weight might depend on what you expect them to do about it.

- Children up to the age of 7 have little direct control over what they eat and how they spend their time. Your child's weight can be managed by controlling

their access to sugary and fatty foods and making sure there is plenty of opportunity to be active. At this age, few children would benefit from talking about weight, although parents should still emphasise healthy messages about food and activity.

- Primary School age children (age 7 – 11) have the opportunity to make more choices about what they eat and what they do. Managing weight during these years usually involves some degree of co-operation between parent and child. Because of this, it can be helpful for parents to talk to their child about why they are being asked to eat fewer unhealthy foods.
- Adolescents (age 12 onwards) have quite sophisticated views about nutrition and health and strong feelings about whether they like the look

of their bodies at a heavier weight. They have more (but not total) responsibility for the food that they eat and how they spend their time. They can understand the idea of managing weight, and with support, can come up with creative ideas about this.

WHAT ABOUT WEIGHING MY CHILD?

At any age, weighing your child regularly – no more than once a week – can help you keep an eye on the problem and prevent it getting any worse. Keeping an overweight child's weight stable as they grow is the safest way to help them lose excess fat and achieve a healthy body shape. Large weight losses for children are not recommended and should only be attempted for very overweight children with regular specialist supervision.

HOW DO I INTRODUCE THE SUBJECT?

The easiest way to make something into a big issue is to have a 'big talk' about it. Therefore we recommend avoiding the big talk unless your child obviously wants to have a discussion. Instead, take the chance to talk a little bit about weight when suitable opportunities arise. Good ways into such conversations could involve asking a child how they feel about the following situations:

- When other family members or friends comment (often in a well meaning way) about how 'big' a child is.
- Clothes shopping; when you have to buy clothes that are for an older child or adult.
- Times when your child tells you about being teased about their size at school.

You can ask your child whether such situations bother them and whether they would like you to help them do something about it. Sometimes another family member has an illness related to obesity and it can be helpful to acknowledge this to the child, showing that you don't blame them but want to help.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF NOT TALKING TO MY CHILD ABOUT THEIR WEIGHT?

Conversations about sensitive topics are always difficult and it's tempting to avoid them. The following facts might give you more confidence to talk to your child about weight:

- Most overweight children do not lose weight without adult support. You wouldn't expect your child to learn how to read without being taught. Learning how to eat healthily is also a skill and needs teaching.

TALKING TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT THEIR WEIGHT

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

- Being overweight is something children can't hide. Even young children are aware of teasing about weight. Not talking about it may give your child the message that being overweight is something that can't or shouldn't be talked about.
- Research shows that children as young as 7 can be unhappy about their being overweight and may try to lose weight without asking their parents for help. These children are more at risk of developing eating problems than children who can talk openly about their overweight and feel supported by their parents.

weight) and behaves another way (demands an ice cream). The following are common pitfalls to avoid when talking to your child about their weight:

Don't tell your child that they are 'greedy' or 'lazy'.
Do tell them that you recognise how hard it is to make healthy choices at times.
Don't make your child feel guilty about their eating habits. **Do** praise them lavishly when you see them eating healthily.
Don't tell your child that they are not helping themselves.
Do ask your child how you can help them eat more healthily.
Don't scare your child into trying to lose weight. **Do** ask them what would be good about being less heavy.
Don't moan about your own weight and how 'boring' being on a diet is.
Do set an example and do everything that you expect your child to do.
Don't comment negatively about other people (friends, family, celebrities) who are overweight. **Do** point out those things that you consider nice about your child's appearance: their choice of clothes, their eyes, their hair, etc.

WHAT NOT TO DO...

Even the most well-meaning parent occasionally gets frustrated and tongue-tied when their child says that they want to do one thing (i.e. lose

Don't tell your child that they will only be happy at a normal weight. **Do** talk to your child about positive effects of managing their weight.
Don't tell your child that their weight is their fault.
Do make sure that they understand that some people have a great deal more difficulty controlling their weight than others - life isn't fair, but perhaps in other ways they are lucky.

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAY, IT'S THE WAY THAT YOU SAY IT

Finally, we thought we would end with what children have told us about how parents should talk to them about their weight:

- "Keep calm - don't shout" (Sally, age 9)
- "Tell your child about the good things about losing weight like being able to keep up with his friends, buy nicer clothes and play more sport" (George, age 11)

- "Remind your child that he is still loved and tell him about all the good things that you like about him" (Ahmed, age 13)
- "Tell her what's good about being healthy and stuff like that" (Pippa, age 10)
- "Don't go on and on about it all the time" (Emily, age 12)

WHAT HAVE YOU FOUND HELPFUL?

Weight Concern is interested in hearing your views on how to motivate your child to get healthy. Email your do's and don'ts about talking to your children about their weight to:

healthychild@weightconcern.org.uk

ABOUT WEIGHT CONCERN

Weight Concern is a registered charity dedicated to providing independent, reliable information on the physical and psychological health needs of overweight and obese children and adults. We conduct research into prevention and treatment options, train health professionals and promote lifestyle programmes for people wanting to manage their weight. You can calculate your child's BMI using the calculator on the Weight Concern website: www.weightconcern.org.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Dr Paul Chadwick is a clinical psychologist specialising in the treatment of obesity in children. Helen Croker is a specialist dietician in obesity management and currently works with Dr. Paul Chadwick on the Traffic Light Child Obesity Management Study at Great Ormond Street Hospital. Professor Jane Wardle is Professor of Clinical Psychology and has published widely on the causes and treatment of obesity in adults and children.

FACT: 350,000 UNDER 16'S IN THE UK ARE OBESE AND AT RISK.