

10 Things Parents Can Do to Help Prevent Eating Disorders

By: Michael Levine, Ph.D., and Linda Smolak, Ph.D.

1. Consider your thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors toward your own body and the way that these beliefs have been shaped by the forces of weightism and sexism. Then educate your children about (a) the genetic basis for the natural diversity of human body shapes and sizes, and (b) the nature and ugliness of prejudice.
 - Make an effort to maintain positive, healthy attitudes & behaviors. Children learn from the things you say and do!
2. Examine closely your dreams and goals for your children and other loved ones. Are you over-emphasizing beauty and body shape, particularly for girls?
 - Avoid conveying an attitude which says in effect, "I will like you more if you lose weight, don't eat so much, look more like the slender models in ads, fit into smaller clothes, etc."
 - Decide what you can do and what you can stop doing to reduce the teasing, criticism, blaming, staring, etc. that reinforce the idea that larger or fatter is "bad" and smaller or thinner is "good."
3. Learn about and discuss with your sons and daughters (a) the dangers of trying to alter one's body shape through dieting, (b) the value of moderate exercise for health, and (c) the importance of eating a variety of foods in well-balanced meals consumed at least three times a day.
 - Avoid categorizing foods into "good/safe/no-fat or low-fat" vs. "bad/dangerous/fattening."
 - Be a good role model in regard to sensible eating, exercise, and self-acceptance.
4. Make a commitment not to avoid activities (such as swimming, sunbathing, dancing, etc.) simply because they call attention to your weight and shape. Refuse to wear clothes that are uncomfortable or that you don't like but wear simply because they divert attention from your weight or shape.
5. Make a commitment to exercise for the joy of feeling your body move and grow stronger, not to purge fat from your body or to compensate for calories eaten.
6. Practice taking people seriously for what they say, feel, and do, not for how slender or "well put together" they appear.
7. Help children appreciate and resist the ways in which television, magazines, and other media distort the true diversity of human body types and imply that a slender body means power, excitement, popularity, or perfection.
8. Educate boys and girls about various forms of prejudice, including weightism, and help them understand their responsibilities for preventing them.
9. Encourage your children to be active and to enjoy what their bodies can do and feel like. Do not limit their caloric intake unless a physician requests that you do this because of a medical problem.
10. Do whatever you can to promote the self-esteem and self-respect of all of your children in intellectual, athletic, and social endeavors. Give boys and girls the same opportunities and encouragement. Be careful not to suggest that females are less important than males, e.g., by exempting males from housework or childcare. A well-rounded sense of self and solid self-esteem are perhaps the best antidotes to dieting and disordered eating.