

## **Your Child is Fat. (Straight talk for parents.)**

By John R. Morella, Ph.D.

I could have said, “obese,” “overweight,” “corpulent,” “stout,” or “chubby” instead of “fat,” but that would be using verbal reformulations, which are nicer ways to say “fat.” It’s sort of like saying “enhanced interrogation” of prisoners, instead of “torture.” I believe we all know what fat means and I think it is straight talk that best expresses how our children in general feel about being “fat.” Fat looks and feels ugly for them and for us. So, I will use the word fat. Their peers don’t call your children obese, they call them fat. I realize that this expression of body weight is harsh but we have a current national health crisis and it is projected to get worse. According to the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Center for Human Nutrition, 2007 study, “if the rate of obesity and overweight continues at its present pace, by 2015, 75 percent of adults, and nearly 24 percent of U.S. children and adolescents will be overweight or obese.” Perhaps we all need an “in your face” dose of reality. By the way, I would never directly tell any kid that he/she is fat, but your kid’s peers will and even their non-fat siblings will.

Parents, you may believe that there is nothing you can do about it. The majority do nothing. Parents, if one or both of you are fat, you probably feel you have no right to try to intervene with your youngster. After all, your kid will surely say to you in response to any sincere effort to help them, “Look who’s talking about being fat!” –and you know what, the kid is right. If you can’t deal with your own weight issue, you are not a creditable source for counsel. Right? But there is still hope, so read on.

Now, if neither of you are fat, I guess you believe you are a viable and creditable source to counsel, offer support, and perhaps model for your son or daughter. Right? Well, more right than fat parents. But, there are so many things to consider and understand about your fat children. They are emotionally hurting. They receive frequent reminders that they are too big—their mirrors broadcast it; their peers at school callously tease them and television and teen magazines remind them of how they should look. They are on a path to being fat adults with even greater health issues.

Children do not focus on the health issues of being fat; they fixate on how they are accepted by their peers. Thus, lecturing about current and potential health problems (diabetes) does not make an impression nor provide much if any, motivation to lose weight. They want to be included, valued, and liked by their peers. They become aware that their fatness prevents them from achieving these powerful and normal needs. At this junction, they have a greater potential for depression and anxiety, which may lead to more over-eating.

Girls tend to internalize their distress through depression, anxiety and poor self-esteem and boys tend to externalize, perhaps by acting-out, physical fighting, drug/alcohol use or other anti-social behaviors. They feel their normal childhoods are stolen from them, their discontents are enormous, and their futures are bleak. How do I know this? They have shared these feelings with me in psychotherapy. I felt their pain as their therapist.

With the expected cautionary advice, children should receive a thorough examination to rule out any medical issue that may be contributing to their weight status. When a medical issue exists, it is the joint responsibility of the doctor and the parents to assist the child. Consult with other professionals such as a nutritionist or dietician. If no medical issue is viewed in the etiology of being fat, parents need to actively assist the child in weight loss. They need to keenly observe life-style choices that are being made by their youngsters and themselves, for ideas to initiate changes. This is easily said, but very difficult to do. Understand that children, and those youths that are now called tweens (ages 11, 12, and 13) are not fully developed in self-discipline skills (psychologists call it self-regulatory traits) and perform poorly in supervising their own behavior choices. It becomes the parent's responsibility to assist them without coming off as lecturing, nagging and creating power-struggles. This is a difficult balancing act. I hope to offer some tips to achieve this task.

Parents of 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders (tweens) as well as their teachers will confirm that these are difficult ages for all. Kids can be cruel, nonexclusive, and punitive to the kid who is fat. Girls appear to suffer more self-esteem pain than boys as our society and cultural bias to being slim and beautiful exerts a greater impact on our females.

With the onset of puberty, the changing body of both sexes can be overwhelming for *some*. Recent research on the effects of puberty clearly indicates that for *most* tweens and teenagers, puberty is *not* perceived as a negative event. Puberty does not cause your child to be fat. For those without a medical basis, what does cause our youngsters to be fat? Let's examine what you already know.

Think of the word sedentary. Now think television, cell phones, video games, movies, classroom chairs, driving or being driven in a car, school bus riding, reduction of school physical education classes, increased hours dedicated to sleeping and a host of other behaviors, and you realize that all of these activities are not active, but sedentary. With huge numbers of Moms in the work force, food preparation, planning of nutritional meals and the resolve to monitor their kid's intake of fatty foods is weakened by the fatigue of contemporary life styles. Pizza delivery places, burger joints and fried chicken shacks line the major arteries of our towns and cities, beckoning the family to park their big butts and eat this stuff with fries on the side. Of course, all of this can be super-sized!

With the advent of the both parents working, maid service and lawn care are often incorporated. I've lived in several middle-class subdivisions, where lawn service workers descend upon the neighborhoods to edge, cut, trim and groom the home's lawns, while their tweens and teens casually walk around with their cell phones stuck to their ears, and of course, multitasking by eating a peanut butter/jelly sandwich on white bread. I don't think children are lazy, but simply are not guided effectively by their parents. Think of the calories that could be burned with pushing a vacuum cleaner or lawn mower or washing the car!

You and I could posture many more examples of events that may be contributory to American kids getting fat. The point is this. Our kids need to move more and be less sedentary in their life choices and it is up to we parents to monitor it all, and by getting off our big butts and becoming effective models in our eating and activity practices.

### **Parent Do's and Don'ts.**

- As parents, don't complain about the way you look. It's likely that your child will do the same. Also, don't make negative comments about other people's sizes, as your children will incorporate the ideas that if they grow to look like the people you criticize, they will disappoint you. They don't want to be a failure in your eyes.
- If one or both of you are fat, don't instruct your fat child to do what you don't do. In other words, if you can't model an appropriate diet or exercise program, keep your mouth shut until you are able to be an effective model. If you want them off the couch, you get off the couch.
- Without nagging, encourage physical exercise by making it a family activity. Make a *request* for your child to join you, never make a *demand* as the latter might ignite a power-struggle. If you don't get what you request, desire or wish for, you will not be as upset if you don't get what you demand.
- Avoid on-going discussions about diets. Most children and teens are fully aware of diets. If you push the issue, they are more likely to become oppositional and defiant.
- As a family, learn about nutrition and exercise. They are more likely to cooperate.
- Debunk the myth that "looking good" is the most important thing in their acceptance by others. Honestly focus on their attributes independent of their body type.
- Most healthy meals can be prepared in about thirty minutes, about the same time it would take to drive to go eat at a fast food place. Try to eat most of your meals at home so you can reduce the fatty foods.
- Take your children grocery shopping with you. Together pick out foods that they might enjoy that are part of a good diet.
- When you view your children making efforts toward healthy eating and exercise, praise them.
- When all possible, eat together as a family. Make an effort to have pleasant conversations with your children. Eating becomes associated to positive activities as oppose to food and eating being associated to reduce anxiety. Parents, never use food as a positive reinforcement with your children.
- Plan celebrations around a pleasant activity, not a food fest where over-eating may occur.
- If your child reaches out to you as parents, and confides that he is being teased for being fat; listen, comfort, don't lecture, don't threaten to go to his school and confront the teasing children, the principal, teacher; just listen and comfort. Ask the child if you can be of any assistance, and accept his answer.

- If the child asks for help, act on it to the best of your ability. If you need assistance, find resources in the community. Behavior modification programs have been demonstrated to be effective for weight and self-esteem issues.
- If you suspect that your child has an eating disorder, such as compulsive eating, bulimia or hiding food in their rooms; seek professional help.

Obesity in children, in most cases can be resolved. It requires a dedicated effort by the parents. Once unhealthy eating patterns are established, it is difficult, but not impossible, to reverse. Parents have to be the ones who will guide and direct their children who have this debilitating disorder. This *must* be the parents' mind-set. Obesity can evolve into a life long issue with serious consequences for your child. If you rely on the child to do something about it, you have established faulty thinking. If you think your child will "out grow" the problem, you are wrong. As parents, you must respond as if your child has a treatable disease. There must be discussion between Mom and Dad so you will be on the same page as to what concerted plan is in place. You must be in concert, and not acting independently. More than anything else, model what you wish your child to witness in your eating habits, exercise and life-style. Let them see you denying yourself the second serving of the mashed potatoes, getting off the couch to go walk, taking the stairs rather than the elevator and washing your own car. Day after day, they will gradually witness good habits, and without a word being spoken, they will follow. Do it. Your child's health, body image and self-esteem are worth this effort. Don't you think so?

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