

HOW TO RAISE INTUITIVE EATERS

from toddlers to adolescents

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INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of childhood obesity has increased dramatically among children in recent years, including a significant rise in severe obesity among children ages 2 to 5, since around 2013.

This has caused immense concern in the public health sector and among health care providers. Simultaneously, there has been an increase in eating disorders in children and adolescents in recent years as well, with more children struggling with feeding issues and poor body image at younger ages. With an increase in body stigma around children, misdiagnosis of child obesity, and unwarranted interference with children's normal eating habits, it is no coincidence that we are seeing a rise in eating disorders in children, including anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder, and ARFID (avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder).

While obesity and eating disorders have become more prevalent among children and adolescents, there are a host of other feeding issues that parents are encountering in their children, from toddlers to younger children to adolescents. This may include but are not limited to picky eating, food avoidance or refusal, difficulties transitioning to solids, overeating, undereating and more.

Helping families learn effective feeding strategies that support their child's innate ability to eat according to their body's own individual needs can help reverse and prevent many common feeding issues. Additionally, by supporting families with feeding strategies that allow their child to honor their own hunger/fullness signals and autonomy when it comes to eating, they are giving their child the opportunity to develop lifelong eating behaviors that will support a healthy relationship with food and their bodies.

STATS AND REFERENCES

Here are a few statistics showing the latest research on what children and adolescents are facing:

- Significant increases in obesity and severe obesity in children aged 2 to 5 years and adolescent females aged 16 to 19 years from 2015 to 2016, compared with previous years, show that obesity is increasing in these subgroups.
- Childhood-onset obesity, gender, maternal history of eating disorders, and dieting were associated with a positive history of EDs at a later age in children.
- Studies have found that binge/LOC eating was prevalent among more than one quarter of children and adolescents with overweight and obesity.

UNDERSTANDING THE SITUATION

Disconnect of parents and feeding

Parents today are faced with information overwhelm when it comes to understanding how to raise and nurture a healthy eater. In addition to feeling confused with knowing how to navigate many common feeding issues, many parents are commonly experiencing their own unresolved issues with food and their own bodies.

For example, a parent who is a chronic dieter will be less likely to trust their child's innate ability to regulate their food intake and will be more likely to enforce unnecessary restrictive eating tactics that can interfere with normal eating. Parents who are being confronted with fear-mongering messages (whether from a health care provider, friends/family, or in the mainstream media), will be less inclined to understand what their child may be facing as feeding issues surface. Child feeding issues often present as an issue that solely has to do with the child, but in reality, it is a family issue.

Dual Household

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, over 60% of families in the United States are a dual-income household, meaning both parents are working. With the rising cost of living and childcare, many families are dependent on a dual income. This can make important aspects of child feeding more difficult to come by, such as regular family meals and/or time to engage in family activities. It is helpful to understand the landscape of today's families in order to know how to best help and support positive changes for moving forward.

Deeper sense of cultural issues

Earlier this year, Weight Watchers announced its plans to offer free memberships this summer to children ages 13 to 17, stating intentions to help young people develop “good habits at an early age”. Behind this marketing scheme is a strategy for a large global business to more than double revenue by the end of 2020. Ultimately, this recruitment tactic is a dieting trap to create lifelong customers from a young age, carefully hidden under the guise of “healthy habits”. This is not an uncommon marketing tactic, in terms of targeting vulnerable children and adolescents, especially during a time when many kids want to do what is necessary to feel accepted. Our culture in general is obsessed with an unrealistic thin-ideal, and dieting among parental figures often transcribes unhealthy weight control behaviors to children.

Ultimately, it is important to address child feeding issues as family issues and present solutions that are applicable to the entire family.

In working with children, you will likely begin to uncover issues that stem from the parents, unresolved eating disorders, chronic dieting, restrained feeding tactics, and more that need to be addressed as a whole. Gently guiding parents and caregivers toward feeding and parenting well, accepting their child's natural size and shape, and avoiding interference can all be helpful in building a healthy foundation for the entire family. In many cases with child feeding issues, it is entirely necessary to work with parents first individually to repair harmful dieting patterns, restrictive feeding tactics or beliefs that are interfering with their child's ability to eat normally.

- **Toddlers** - Parents should be encouraged to learn to read and respond to baby/toddler's feeding cues. This is also an important time to avoid feeding for emotional reasons. For example, feeding when a child needs comforting or wants to play teaches them to use food for emotional reasons. With toddlers, it is important to honor their desire to feed themselves as they begin to master more tasks with eating. For toddlers, family meals are critically important in supporting eating competence and teaching toddlers to be part of the family meal pattern.

SOLUTIONS FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

- **Younger children** - Younger children continue to be excellent at regulating food intake, but outside interference can interfere with that regulatory ability. Again, family meals are an integral part of forming healthy feeding habits. Parents should retain leadership with family meals and food selections. This is a good opportunity to help parents learn how to maintain the division of responsibility and how to develop an effective structure at home with meals and snacks. Maintain division of responsibility in feeding and respect the child's ability to decide what and how much they want to eat. Family style meals can be helpful, as can incorporating the child in the kitchen and applying cooking principles.
- **Adolescent** - Continue to have family meals; parents should restrain leadership with family food selection. Parents should be encouraged to help their child know about their intuitive eating capabilities. Give the expectation that your child will feed themselves responsibly, including participating in family meals. Adolescents can help plan family and independent meals as well as learn to prepare food and balanced meals.

The overall theme for helping parents implement helpful feeding strategies is to encourage parents in knowing that children are capable and can be trusted to eat innately according to their bodies needs. Children are such good regulators that they intuitively eat more or less depending on their growth rate, activity, and the amount of calories in their food. Ultimately, children have a powerful and resilient tendency to grow consistently and predictably, in the way nature intended them to grow. Parents should be encouraged to maintain the division of responsibility to optimize feeding from birth through adolescence.

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