

A LINE ON LIFE

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Parents Promote Eating Patterns *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Not only is obesity become more evident as a problem with adults, we are becoming more aware of obesity in children. What can parents do?



Some parents ignore the problem, stocking their homes with doughnuts, potato chips, candy and other sweets. Other parents swing to the opposite extreme. They ban all "bad foods" from their homes. They assume their children will never develop a craving for fattening foods, if those foods are not encountered. (Of course, parents cannot control the foods that their children eat outside the home.)

From current psychological research, neither approach is best. There is a middle ground. What seems to be best is to give moderate amounts of a wide variety of foods – and to season this well with exercise.

At the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, nutritionist Jennifer Cousins indicates that banning "junk food" is likely to increase children's craving for it. On the other hand, too much fat and sugar in the diet can lead to life-long struggles with obesity. The struggle with obesity is becoming more prevalent. In the last decade, according to the National Center of Disease Control and Prevention, the proportion of overweight American teenagers increased from 15% to 21%.

The American diet has improved in recent decades. However, currently less than 25% of Americans have diets that are rich in fruits, grains and vegetables.

To find out why children eat the way they do, we need to look at the eating habits of their parents. Children mimic the eating habits of their parents. Psychologist Ruth Striegel-Moore of Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, does research on eating disorders. She finds that – when parents frequently diet, skip meals or binge on snack foods – their children copy these unhealthy habits.

**In raising children, the motto,
"Do as I say, not as I do,"
is just as mistaken with eating habits.**

Parents can also influence their children's attitudes toward their own bodies. In her 1994 article in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, Striegel-Moore discussed her survey of 1,276 adults who had children between the age of 2 and 16. As the children grew older and gained weight, she found that parents were more likely to disapprove of their children's physique. This criticism can lead their children to have a preoccupation with food and dieting. This is more dangerous for girls. The boys weighed relatively more on average. However, with the "thin" standard for women in our culture, the parents were more likely to criticize the girls as being overweight.

At the University of Missouri-Columbia, psychologist Mark Thelen did a study on girls' dieting behavior. He related this behavior to parental urging for weight control. The parents' fear of their children becoming fat is likely to lead to harmful dieting among their children. "For some children, food issues get tied up with how Mom and Dad feel about them." In other words, many children get a message that – if they are

overweight – they are less lovable. In striving to be lovable, they may fall into the trap of becoming anorexic or bulimic.

According to psychologist Leonard Epstein at the State University of New York-Buffalo, merely encouraging children to diet is not an effective approach. Obese children are more likely to lose weight, if parents **model appropriate behavior**. Parents need to exercise with their children and join them in eating well-balanced meals. According to Epstein, *"If parents want to positively affect their children's eating and exercise habits, they need to lead a healthy lifestyle themselves."*



Cousins believes that a healthier relationship with food can be fostered by offering children a choice of healthy foods and letting them choose the ones they prefer the most. Playing the "food pyramid game" with them also helps. This game encourages children to eat their daily 5-10 servings of fruits, vegetables and grains before they have their sweets. This method with girls who are at risk for obesity.

However, Cousins warns against using dessert as a bribe or denying desserts. *"If you're telling a kid they can't eat their chocolate cake unless they finish their beans, you're sending a message that chocolate cake is more desirable than beans."* In contrast, children can be encouraged to fill up with nutritious foods. In this way, they are more likely to be satisfied with smaller desserts.

Fruits and vegetables are more likely to be eaten, if they easily accessible. Healthy foods can also be made more attractive to children. Although it may take a little more effort, foods can be presented in a more appealing manner. Isn't that why cookbooks are written?

* Adapted from Bridget Murray's "'Children's eating patterns most affected by parents,'" [*The APA Monitor*](#), March, 1997, page 43.