

## Foster Healthy Body Image in Your Child

**A** Are you concerned that your child may be at risk of developing an eating disorder? Unfortunately, many children today are “wasting their minds minding their waists,” says Jessica Setnick, MS, RD, LD, a Dallas-based dietitian who specializes in young clients with eating disorders. At a national meeting of the American Dietetic Association (ADA), she explained that parents can help their children develop healthy eating behaviors and a positive body image. To promote a healthy body image in *your* child, use the tips below, adapted from Setnick’s advice to professionals.\* With this information you can counter misconceptions about eating and body image and help your child understand that food is fuel for the body and *not* a solution to emotional issues.

**1 Recognize the Danger.** According to the National Association of Anorexia and Associated Disorders, about 7 million women and 1 million men in the United States suffer from eating disorders. The vast majority of these people say their disorder had started by the time they were 20. Between 0.5 and 1 percent of teenage girls develop anorexia nervosa, and 5 percent of older adolescent girls and young adult women develop bulimia nervosa.<sup>1</sup> Even more common than these full-fledged eating disorders is disordered eating—not as extreme, but still a threat to normal growth and development.

**2 Separate Food From Feelings.** Eating disorders are not about food, says psychotherapist Abigail H. Natenshon, MA, LCSW, BCD, who has specialized in treating these disorders for 31 years and is the author of *When Your Child Has an Eating Disorder, A Step-by-Step Workbook for Parents and Other Caregivers*. “[Eating disorders] are about the individual’s misuse of food to solve emotional problems.” Any time your child asks about weight loss, consider what might be going on below the surface. Respond carefully. Also, understand that weight loss is *not* going to give your child a personality transplant or bring about any other unrealistic changes!

**3 Discourage Dieting.** In one study of 9th to 12th graders, 60 percent of girls and 23 percent of boys reported trying to lose weight; 8 percent of the girls and 2 percent of the boys admitted using diet pills.<sup>1</sup> Let your child know that even

short-term diets can lead to disordered eating. Explain that maintaining a healthy weight is a lifelong process and any weight that takes a superhuman effort to maintain is probably not a healthy weight. Serve as a role model yourself by conveying a balanced attitude toward food and by not dieting.

**4 Legalize All Foods.** Never suggest that any specific food is “bad for you.” Be objective and teach that all foods provide nutrition, although some provide more than others. Setnick suggests adopting this attitude: “The only foods that are ‘bad’ are foods that are moldy or spoiled . . . or that you are allergic to.”

**5 Educate and Empower Your Child.** Every time you interact with your child, you have the opportunity to provide him or her with a positive or negative experience. Children are surrounded daily by messages that their bodies are not good enough. Tell your child the opposite—and don’t talk negatively about your own body either. (For Natenshon’s suggestions on how to instill body pride in a child, see [www.empoweredparents.com](http://www.empoweredparents.com).)

**6 Get Help for Your Child.** If you are concerned that your child may be developing an eating disorder, seek help from a registered dietitian or a counselor who specializes in this area. ♦

\* The tips from Setnick were compiled by Susan Kundrat, MS, RD, LD, who reported on the session for *IDEA Health & Fitness Source* magazine.

<sup>1</sup> Kreipe, R., & Birndorf, S. 2000. Eating disorders in adolescents and young adults. *Medical Clinics of North America: Adolescent Medicine*, 84 (4), 1027-49.

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