



# Prevent Eating Disorders From Developing

by Dr Charles Fishman MD

In New Zealand, one in three children is overweight or obese, a fact which has instigated a \$76 million campaign by the government to fight the epidemic. While this action is to be applauded, kids are increasingly being exposed to 'perfect bodies' as portrayed on TV, in films, in magazines ... just about everywhere. **Younger and younger children are dangerously dieting in an attempt to lose or avoid gaining weight.**

Parents are in the best position to influence their children's behaviour. Rather than wait to see if your child does have a problem and then having to deal with them battling a tenacious eating disorder, there are things you can do now to stop eating disorders before they develop.

Eating disorders carry the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric condition, and are notoriously hard to treat. If

an eating disorder doesn't kill, it can leave a painful legacy of long-lasting medical complications, affecting bones, heart, hair and skin.

An increasing number of cases show that family therapy (under the guidance of a trained therapist) is a way to treat someone with an eating disorder, especially when this person is young.

## Is my child at risk?

Although therapists assure parents that nobody is to blame for a child's eating disorder, and that the causes of eating disorders are not fully known, risk factors for developing eating disorders have been identified.

Research shows there is a strong connection between children avoiding conflict and how they manage their behaviours and eating disorders. People with eating disorders tend to have family members who struggle with depression, alcohol dependency, drug abuse, anxiety, perfectionism, obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviours. Children in families where these issues are present should avoid dieting, and should not be nagged to lose weight, as dieting can trigger any genetic predisposition towards eating disorders.

Girls who diet rigorously are far more likely than non-dieters to develop an eating disorder. Once dieting is under way, it is easy for vulnerable children to become fixated on counting calories and weighing-in. Obsessive attention to calories, fat grammes, and weight can set up expectations that lead to anorexia and bulimia.

### What can I do to help keep my child healthy?

There are many things parents and family members can do to support healthy eating habits and healthy self-images among their children. The two most important things are to encourage frank and honest communication with your child, and create a value system in your family that has your child valued for their

mind, personality and spirit rather than their body.

Ultimately, actions speak louder than words – the best thing you can do is set a good example by being healthy yourself.

### Tips For Parents stop guessing – check your expectations

- Find out from your health practitioner how much your child 'should' weigh, given height and weight standards.
- Find out how much and what kinds of food your child 'should' be eating to maintain a healthy weight.
- Make sure you understand and can enlighten your children about normal, healthy physical changes that happen at puberty.

- Learn about the warning signs of both obesity and eating disorders.

### help your children develop healthy eating habits

- Expose your children to a good variety of food choices, both at home and when eating out.
- Tune in to your kids' appetites and help them to do the same. As long as it's clear they're not being manipulative, don't force food if they're not hungry or deny food if they are.
- Involve your kids in meal times; let them help choose menus and prepare meals, but set and maintain limits about your kids' control over family food decisions.
- Make time for family meals, and try to avoid the 'eat-and-run' approach so common in our busy daily lives. If this isn't practical for every day, set an achievable goal for family meals, and then stick to it.
- Avoid using food as punishment, reward or for comfort.

### give your children good feedback

- Focus your attention and praise on their strengths and achievements.
- NEVER make or tolerate 'fat jokes'. Words wound and influence behaviour.
- Listen to your child's concerns about his/her appearance and try to empathise without trying to deny his/her feelings. If you tell your child she is beautiful when she's feeling ugly, you'll lose her trust.

### set a good example by following healthy routines yourself

- Check your fridge and pantry – does it (mostly) reflect healthy choices? Keep in mind that most foods are okay in moderation.
- Check your body image – are YOU forever dieting or complaining about your body? Children follow your lead.
- Check your activity levels – do you exercise regularly? Do you enjoy healthy activity? If so, you're more likely to pass this on to your child.
- Check your language – what kinds of comments do you make about others' appearance (on TV, at the supermarket, at school) in front of your kids?
- Remember – it is important to NOT be perfect! If you are realistic about yourself, you can help your children be realistic about themselves.

### discourage dieting and focus on healthy eating

- For vulnerable young people, dieting can put them on a slippery slope towards eating disorders. Instead of dieting, focus on living a healthy lifestyle that includes good nutrition and moderate exercise.

### help your kids cope with the media's barrage of mixed messages

- Talk to your kids about the unrealistic body images presented as 'ideal' on TV and in film, magazines and video games. Explain how those 'perfect bodies' are achieved by air-brushing, trick photography, plastic surgery, unhealthy diets.
- Discuss the way these images affect us. Explain that they are intended to manipulate our fears and insecurities so we will buy things. Help your children be VERY critical consumers of media.
- Monitor or switch off the TV. Do you know that over half the ads aired during kids' programmes are food-related?

### get help when appropriate

- If your child is DETERMINED to diet, make sure he/she does so under supervision. Get your health practitioner involved. That way, if the diet spins out of control and you suspect an eating disorder has taken hold, a professional will already be involved and in a position to assist.

### What can I do if I suspect my child has an eating disorder?

Eating disorders are surprisingly difficult to detect. Youths can be moody, have inconsistent habits, and experience rapid growth spurts

that can dramatically change their appearance. This doesn't necessarily mean that any health problems are lurking within.

However, there are signs to watch for. Kids with eating disorders display obsessive or controlling behaviour around food (quantity or type); lie about what they are eating; or 'don't have time' to eat. They are also likely to be faint or dizzy; have difficulty concentrating; suffer heart palpitations; and feel continually cold and shaky.

If you suspect your child has an eating disorder, do not hesitate to take your child to your health practitioner first for advice. 📧

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