

Eating Disorder Toolkit | *Article*

## Health and Diet: Why Language Matters to Our Kids

In the journey from childhood to adolescence, when self-image is forged and habits are formed, the language parents use around health and diet plays a pivotal role in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of their children. Research underscores the profound impact parental words can have on the development of eating disorders: one analysis found that a mother's concerns about weight were the third leading cause of body image problems in adolescents and girls. Findings like these shed light on the critical importance of fostering a positive and nurturing dialogue around health and diet.

Words are not just expressions. They are the building blocks of perception and self-worth, particularly during the formative years of childhood and adolescence. The language parents use regarding body image significantly impacts a child's perception of themselves. Constant negative remarks or an emphasis on societal beauty standards can contribute to low self-esteem and a distorted body image, paving the way for the development of eating disorders in the future.

Among the ways parents may unintentionally contribute to the development of their children's body image and eating problems are through:

**Dieting practices:** Exhibiting extreme dieting or discussing weight loss in a negative light can influence children and teens to adopt unhealthy eating habits. A number of studies indicate that adolescents whose parents were engaged in dieting in order to lose weight are more likely to develop disordered eating behaviors.

**Controlling what and when children eat:** Many parents have rules for when kids can eat, allowing them to eat only at mealtimes, and forbidding snacks before dinner. Parents also often control what their children can eat, which



Adolescents whose parents were engaged in dieting are more likely to develop disordered eating behaviors.

Source: MDPI Open Access Journals



can result in them avoiding certain foods or labeling certain foods as “good” or “bad.” If children learn to shame themselves into believing that they’re bad because of their hunger outside of sanctioned eating times, or because of their food choices, it can lead to psychological distress, anxiety, depression and disordered eating.

**Body Image Comments:** Talking directly to a child about his or her body and weight can be problematic if done without sensitivity. For example, a well-intentioned parent who regularly tells her child that she is concerned about the child’s weight can negatively impact their body image. Indirect comments can also be harmful. For example, when a parent makes offhand comments or observations about others’ bodily frames, sizes or even eating habits, it can cause a child to assign a value judgment on a certain body type.

**Media Exposure at Home:** The pervasive influence of social media in households can contribute to distorted body image perceptions. An article in Psychology Today notes that multiple studies have shown that the use of social networks is associated with body dissatisfaction and eating disorders.

## Instilling Healthy Habits and Confidence Around Food

Positive reinforcement regarding healthy eating choices, exercise and overall well-being can promote a healthy mindset. Teaching children to view food as fuel for their bodies and emphasizing the importance of a balanced lifestyle can contribute to positive habits. Encouraging them to view their bodies by focusing on health, self-acceptance and individual strengths rather than conforming to societal ideals of beauty can foster a healthier attitude toward food and eating.

## Watching Our Words

Parents’ words and actions wield a profound influence on the development of eating disorders in children and teens. Recognizing the weight of words is crucial for fostering a positive and nurturing environment that empowers children to develop a healthy relationship with food and a positive self-image.

## #PracticeNourishment #FeedingHope

If you or someone you know is struggling with an eating disorder, you can find additional resources through the **National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA)** or call the **National Association of Anorexia Nervosa & Associated Disorders (ANAD)** Helpline at 888-375-7767.