



A Parent's Guide to Children's Weight

Weight is one of the many personal characteristics that distinguish children from each other. It has implications for both the physical and mental health of the child. Unfortunately, it also has the potential for causing many parent-child disagreements about what is or is not eaten and in what amounts.

What is the “right” weight for my child?

It's natural for parents to want their children to be as perfect as possible. When it comes to weight, however, “perfect” must be broadly and individually defined—a task that's often hard in our thin-conscious society. Children grow at different rates and may have different body structures from their siblings and playmates. Standardized growth charts plot height and weight of boys and girls at different ages and can be used in consultation with a pediatrician in determining a child's recommended weight range.

What can parents do to help a child who is medically defined as overweight or obese?

Beyond reassuring the child of parental love regardless of the child's weight, the appropriate parental action depends on whether only the child or the whole family has a weight problem. If the whole family needs to change some eating and exercising habits, then the parent and child need to work together to initiate and plan those changes for everyone's benefit.

For example, many social traditions are related to food and eating, such as giving food as a reward for completing a task, as a sympathetic gesture to ease hurt feelings, or as a cure for boredom. These habits may lead the child to expect food in those situations, regardless of any feelings of hunger. By helping the child learn that such behavior is occasionally—but not always—permissible, the child may avoid forming some of the dependent habits that can cause later weight problems.

If the child is the only family member to have a weight problem, then other factors should be considered, for example, possible medical problems or emotional stresses that might influence a child's eating behavior.

How can parents help an underweight child?

A child who is too thin needs the same emotional support as one who is too heavy. Discussing the size of other family members and visiting with a pediatrician can help put the child's size in perspective and provide a basis for reminding children that individuals grow at different rates. Growing slowly is not bad.

However, whenever a child shows a sudden weight drop, other medical or emotional problems can be suspected. Professional help from a pediatrician, dietitian, or child psychologist may be necessary.

What can parents do to help children reach and maintain their best weight?

Parents, and their care-giving substitutes, have three responsibilities in feeding children.

1. Parents need to offer the child a variety of nutritious foods at regular intervals. Planned meals and snacks give the child regular sources of energy, help the child develop sensible eating patterns, and encourage the child to learn correct food behavior in social situations. Studies of overweight children indicate that those children who eat regular meals control their weight more successfully.

2. Parents can help the child learn to identify and pay attention to feelings of hunger and fullness. This starts with learning to distinguish a baby's “I am hungry” cry from other cries. It means not forcing a toddler to eat one more bite. It means sometimes allowing second or third helpings on some meal items.

3. Parents can demonstrate a healthy lifestyle. Children learn by example. They are likely to want to do what parents do, whether that's eating chips and watching television, or bicycling.

What actions should a parent avoid?

Since a parent's primary role is to give support, any action that denies support should be avoided.



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For example, when a child is upset by playmates' teasing, a parent who responds with, "when you get thinner they won't tease you anymore," only reinforces the child's suspicion that there is indeed something wrong with him or her. A more positive response is for the parent to listen to the child express his or her feelings about that teasing, and then perhaps, ask the child if other children are getting teased and for what reason. This can lead into a discussion of, "what do you think you can do about this situation?"

Another way parents deny support is by treating the overweight child differently from the rest of the family; for instance by forcing the child to eat meals, desserts, or snacks that are different from what is served to the rest of the family.

Likewise, putting children on a weight reduction diet is a form of punishment that asks them to ignore feelings of hunger and may lead them to believe there is something truly wrong with themselves for wanting to eat more than their parents want to give them.

How can parents help their children avoid future weight problems?

Prevention is the very best cure. Ideally, parents help their children learn to recognize their own feelings of hunger and choose appropriate, nutritious foods to satisfy that hunger. They also can help the child learn to see food as only one of many possible ways to celebrate a happy event, to ease disappointment, or to erase boredom.

Here are seven specific actions parents can take to help their children learn good eating habits.

1. Be enthusiastic about eating a variety of foods. Help children learn what foods are in the different food groups and why it's

important to eat some of each group daily.

2. Introduce new foods gradually. Offer the child a small portion but do not force the child to eat it. Tasting will come more readily as the food becomes more familiar.

3. Plan and provide regular meals and snacks for the family. Parents set a good example by practicing healthy eating habits themselves. Mealtime should involve pleasant conversation, not discussion of problems.

4. Serve realistic portions. The appropriate serving size depends on the child's age and size. One possible guideline is to offer 1 tablespoon of meat, fruit, and vegetable per year of age up to age 5. Physical activity and growth spurts also influence appetite. Plan meals to include some lower calorie food items that can be offered for second helpings.

5. Buy fewer high-calorie, low-nutrient foods. Encourage children to think of such foods as occasional treats, not regular fare. Involve children in planning, shopping, and label-reading.

6. Avoid making nagging comments about a child's weight. Children who are above or below their "right" weight need emotional support.

7. Encourage family involvement in regular physical activity. Set an example by walking or biking instead of driving, using stairs instead of the elevator, planning weekend hikes, or swimming outings, or simply walking around the block after dinner.

Want more information?

Check your local library for these books:

Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense, Ellyn Satter. Bull Publishing Company, 1991. (For infants and toddlers.)

How to Get Your Kid to Eat...But Not Too Much, Ellyn Satter. Bull Publishing Company, 1987. (For pre-schoolers and older.)

If My Child Is Overweight What Should I Do about It? University of California Publication #21455, Available from Communication Services—Publications, 1-800-994-8849, or <http://danrcs.ucdavis.edu>

These publications are available from ISU extension county offices:

Altering Recipes, NCR 473

Cholesterol Guidelines for Children, NCR 431

How to Eat Less Fat, NCR 336

Check these web sites.
<http://www.healthtouch.com/level1/leaflets/119064/119077.htm>

Articles on children and body weight.

http://www.dole5aday.com/5-A-Day_fruits_and_vegetables_activities_games_fun_learning_for_kids

[http://www.bcm.tmc.edu/cnrc/Children's Nutrition Research Center](http://www.bcm.tmc.edu/cnrc/Children's_Nutrition_Research_Center).

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