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Helping Your Child Have a Peaceful Relationship with Food

The worst thing you can do for your child's relationship with food is to restrict the foods she is allowed to eat. Since diets create a deprivation mentality, parents who refuse to allow their children to eat high-sugar or high-fat foods may be creating just the problem they are trying to resolve.

Food restrictions usually creates a paradoxical effect: Children tend to find the restricted food to be more exciting and preferable to non-restricted foods. Kids who have been kept from certain foods, therefore, have more difficulties controlling their eating when presented with those foods.

The majority of the clients in my psychotherapy practice who have food or weight problems were put on diets during their childhood. The act of teaching a child to follow a food plan, ignore their own hunger, or deprive themselves of foods they want, sends a powerful

message to the child that they cannot trust their own body. That act of disconnecting from their own ability to listen to and obey their body's signals of hunger and satiety is the beginning of a lifetime of eating and weight problems.

Studies have shown that the risk of developing an eating disorder is eight times higher in dieting than non-dieting 15-year-old girls. This is especially difficult for girls going through puberty, when the average young girl's body fat increases.

The group Eating Disorder Awareness and Prevention (EDAP) has shown three things that raise the risk for eating disorders. They are referred to as the three "D"s: 1) Body Dissatisfaction, 2) Drive for Thinness, and 3) Dieting Behavior. We live in a world that



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reinforces the three Ds, and parents must be diligent about helping kids have a positive body image and healthy eating habits.

Children look to their parents to make sense of their bodies, so it is a parent's job to teach their child to listen to her body's signals. This job starts early on. Babies are born with an innate sense of how much food their little bodies need to take in. In studies where infant formula was diluted or more densely concentrated, researchers found that infants consumed the same number of calories by adjusting the volume of fluids they took in.

The early feeding experience sets the stage for more than just food regulation. When a parent chooses to feed their child on demand, as opposed to by a feeding schedule, they teach their child that the world is a safe place where their needs are met. In addition, the child learns about their own body.

Feeding "To Do" List

According to the book *How to Get Your Kid to Eat... But Not Too Much*, "The parent is responsible for what the child is offered to eat, the child is responsible for how much, and even whether, she eats." When children are taught to listen to their bodies and are able to eat whatever foods they want, studies show that over time they chose a balance diet. Contrary to popular belief, we don't need every meal to be a perfect nutritionally balanced feast. Research shows that the

body needs to absorb a certain range of nutrients over a one- to two-week period, not at daily intervals.

Sugar, Fats, Carbs, Oh My!

Most parents are terrified that if they allow their child unrestricted choices, they will eat nothing but gummy bears and ice cream for the rest of their lives. That is not my experience. Children raised to be what nutritionist Elyse Resch refers to as "intuitive" or unrestricted eaters naturally chose a variety of foods. Children who are used to food rules initially chose previously forbidden foods but eventually tire of them when they realize that those "forbidden fruits" will not be taken away.

Lisa came to see me after she noticed her 10-year-old daughter Casey was getting sick after she visited her girlfriends' homes. She found out from the other mothers that Casey would gorge herself on potato chips, crackers and candy. Lisa was a slender, attractive woman who had been a chubby child and lived in fear of gaining weight. She was on a low carbohydrate, sugar-free diet, and refused to keep any food in the house that were not on her diet. She was terrified of what would happen if she was around those foods and, even more importantly, she wanted to keep them away from her daughter. I worked with Lisa to help her bring those foods into the house slowly but surely. Initially, both Lisa and Casey binged on

those previously forbidden foods. After time, those foods began to lose their emotional meaning for both mother and daughter. They now stock their home with a wide variety of foods and are healthy intuitive eaters.

Be a Super Model

The greatest gift you can give your child is to model "normal" eating habits to your family. A study of mothers who engage in unhealthy dieting behaviors showed their 5-year-old daughters had more weight concerns and were twice as likely to possess awareness of and knowledge about dieting. Another study that looked at mothers who did not follow their own bodies' cues found that their daughters' eating habits mirrored those of their mothers.

Eating practices, neurosis and disorders are often handed down generation to generation. If you have issues with food, and most women do, you owe it to the next generation to resolve them before you pass them on.

Dr. Jenn Berman is a psychotherapist and sports psychology consultant. She regularly appears on television and radio as an expert on psychological issues. She has been on 48 Hours, NBC News, The Other Half, and many more. For questions, comments or advice to be used in one of her columns, she can be reached through her website at www.DoctorJenn.com.