

Worrying about a child's weight and its impact

Focus on child's internal world and external will follow

QUESTION:

My husband and I are worried that my daughter (10-years-old) is going to get teased and may end up with self-esteem issues because she is a bit overweight. Should we put her on a diet or just let it go? I don't want her to be one of the girls that get left out of her peer group because of the way her body looks. Any ideas for me?

Answer:

Whether parents admit it or not, many have worries about their children not fitting in because they are not thin enough, or cute enough or have the right clothes. So, you are having worries that many parents are having. Let me share some of my thoughts that might be helpful.



I only have a small amount of information from you so I will assume for this article that your daughter does not have any underlying medical condition that is causing her to gain weight. Most young children don't, but we should always rule that out in case that is a factor.

Don't put your daughter on a diet. This would probably just make her feel bad and could potentially lead her

to a more secretive way of eating. Almost all women can relate to going on a diet, and then becoming obsessed with wanting to eat junk food and candy. Let's not set her up for that sort of relationship with food. Nothing can add more pounds to a person than a diet can.

The first thing I would suggest you do is look at your family's eating habits. Do you have healthy things to eat in the house? Are meals prepared that are high in nutrition and low in fat/calories? Does your family have dessert each night? I would expect that at 10 she is still eating the same food that is available for the rest of your family and that you or your husband are in charge of what you are buying at the store.

Setting an example for good eating habits is the best way to help our children learn how to eat healthy foods that help them maintain a healthy

weight. The change in habits must be applied to everyone in your family, not just your daughter. I know this can be very hard to do, particularly if you or your husband struggle with eating/body image. But asking her to do something that you and/or your husband may not be able to, or ever learned how to do, is a tall order for a 10-year-old.

The same things should be applied to exercise. Make sure you are setting a good example for her, not just expecting her to exercise when the rest of the family is not exercising themselves.

The next thing to look at is how you and your husband view body image. Do either of you "think" you are fat or make otherwise derogatory comments to yourself or to each other about how you look? When children observe parents or older siblings commenting negatively about their body image, they internalize

the shame and worry about their own body. Again, these feelings of shame, or feeling less than perfect, can actually drive children right to the refrigerator to either soothe or sabotage themselves, generally causing them to hide from the judgment that they are experiencing vicariously through others.

If you take a look at your family's eating habits, exercise routine, and relationship with body image and determine that you are in pretty good shape, then what I would suggest you look at is your daughter's level of anxiety in the world. Is she eating to soothe her level of anxiety about school, friends, family dynamics, or other areas in her life that are causing her distress? If this is the case, then the answer is to help her feel better, more soothed and less anxious, in ways that do not involve disconnected ways of coping, like eating too

much, watching too much television or playing too many video games. Try to get her to share how she is feeling, let her know you are there for her, and that you want to know if she is having a hard time in different parts of her life. She may not even realize that she is anxious about things because she has tucked them deep inside her and she just needs a parent to help reach inside and make it all feel better.

If anxiety is the underlying cause of her overeating, then focusing on her food intake or body image will just make the problem worse. Focus on her internal world and her external world will take care of itself.

Julia Staub-French, M.A., R.C.C., director of clinical programs, Family Services of the North Shore. Questions? Write onthecouch@familyservices.bc.ca or call 604-988-5281.

North Shore boasts a number of dance studios for kids and adults

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flamenco, Irish and belly dancing.

Classes are offered for both adults and children, but not all genres are offered for all ages.

OneDance owner Susan Heimsoth is very open-minded when it comes to patrons checking out the studio and even classes before they register, allowing one drop-in to try before you buy.

"The studio is about one dance, everybody can dance; all the world and every race, every color, every style. Dance is dance and everybody should be doing it," she says.

■ **Easy Dancing B.C.**

If you're looking for classical ballroom style dances, Easy Dancing B.C. owners Fred Ammann and Gemma Monzalez offer a variety of classes. Available through various recreation centres on the North Shore since 2002, some of the genres they offer are ballroom, Latin, swing and Argentine tango. Easy Dancing B.C. teaches classes for youth and adults — youth classes go from nine to 17, and the styles of dance they engage in can vary from the adult classes.

A unique quality about this business is that they offer dance parties where anyone can come to try out their moves. These parties include a

one-hour dance lesson from 7 to 8 p.m., followed by three hours of dancing with refreshments included. It's the only social dance party of its kind on the North Shore.

If you're worried that you might not fit in with the other members because of your age, think again. Easy Dance classes have participants all the way up to 90-years-old. Their motto is, "There is no generation gap at Easy Dancing B.C." Their classes are offered all over the North Shore, so there may be a location in your neighbourhood.

■ **North Shore Academy of Dancing**

Another dance studio offering adult and chil-

dren's programs is the North Shore Academy of Dancing on Fell Avenue in North Vancouver. This studio offers adult classes in hip hop, jazz, tap and belly dancing. For children and youth, they offer a variety of programs such as ballet, jazz and contemporary. They also have competition classes for the serious dancer who wants to compete on a regular basis. Their performance company does dance routines to crowds both locally and abroad.

For more information on these studios, a few of the many on the North Shore, visit www.onedance.ca, www.easydancingbc.com or www.nsad.ca.




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