

10 Things Parents Can Do to Help Prevent Eating Disorders

- 1 Examine your own beliefs and attitudes towards food, weight and shape as well as those of others.** Pay attention to what you say about your body. Every time you criticize your body, you use phrases such as "I shouldn't eat this," or you put anti-fat magnets on your fridge. You are teaching your children that only certain bodies are acceptable and only some foods are o.k. to eat. Remember that fathers who make comments about their children's weight or their partner's weight are also telling their children that their bodies are not o.k.
- 2 Look at your dreams and goals for your children.** How much are they based on beauty and body shape for girls and strength and power for boys? How are you conveying these messages? How much are you imposing your own dreams and goals onto your children? Is it difficult for you to accept your daughter or son if their bodies are larger than what is promoted as the ideal? What can you do differently?
- 3 Get off your diet!** Mothers who diet are highly likely to have daughters who have learned to deal with the stressors in their lives by dieting. Instead, learn to talk to your children about what metabolism means and what really happens when you diet.
- 4 Get out the family photographs and help your children identify who they look like.** Talk about the relationships that they have with these people. Teach them that their body size is, to some extent, dependent on their genes. Help children who don't know their genetic make up fantasize about what their future children might look like based on their own body shape and size.
- 5 Help put an end to teasing and bullying** by giving your child the skills with which to fight back. Work with other parents to make teasing and bullying a school issue. Nobody has a right to make someone feel badly about their body.
- 6 Listen to your children.** Take time every day to encourage them to talk about their feelings, experiences and opinions. Share your own feelings, experiences and opinions with them.
- 7 Exercise for the joy of feeling your body move and function effectively** and encourage your children to be physically active for the same reasons. Try to integrate physical activity into your family life. Be on the look-out for children who are exercising mainly to get rid of fat or to compensate for the calories they have eaten.
- 8 Help your children identify when they are hungry and when they are satisfied.** Encourage them to eat for joy, energy and strength. Try not to categorize food as 'good' food and 'bad' food or 'low fat/low carb' vs bad/dangerous, forbidden/fattening food. Strive for balance and not restriction in your choices.
- 9 Teach your children communication skills** and help them recognize and deal with conflict. Practice these ways of dealing with conflict in your family.
- 10 Give your children feedback every day** about their skills, abilities, qualities and talents so that their self-esteem is not just based on the size and shape of their bodies. We may not be able to change the messages from the media but we can change how we respond to them.

“What!” I exclaimed, “She’s only eleven years old.” When I found out that other girls that age were also beginning to develop eating disorders, I started to look at what my husband John and I could do to help Megan and her nine-year-old sister Erin resist today’s pressures to be thin and perfect.”

The Russells are learning how they can prevent eating disorders. Read their story on www.jessieshope.org.



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