

# Dinner Table Talk

What happens at the dinner table may predict your child's weight into adulthood.

by Mary Jo Rapini, LPC

**i**f a child is overweight or underweight, the first person a health care professional turns to is Mom. Mom is usually responsible for what is served at the dinner table and for what foods are brought into the home. Although dad is starting to fill this role, a new study just published in The American Dietetic Association found that "School-age children whose mothers tightly control their diets may be prone to overeating, while those with moms who pressure them to eat tend to be picky about food." Moms often say the reason they restrict certain foods is because their child has a weight problem or the reason they force foods is because their child is underweight. What the ADA announced is nothing new; many articles have laid the blame on moms before. However, now there is evidence supporting moms. *Maybe she is reacting to the child's problem that came first, but is inadvertently making it more likely her child will grow up with a weight problem that will carry over into their adult life.*

Research from a new study with Dr. Jane Wardle and colleagues at the University College London surveyed 213 mothers with children between the ages of 7 and 9 from five London schools. The mothers completed a questionnaire that asked about their children's "responsiveness" to food—that is, whether the child would typically overeat if given the chance. They also looked at signs of food "avoidance," like eating slowly or routinely failing to finish meals. Moms also kept track of their own mealtime strategies, including whether they tried to get their children to eat even when they said they weren't hungry or whether they believed their children would overindulge if they were given no eating restrictions.

*Dr. Wardle's team found a correlation between mothers' pressure to eat healthy and children's degree of fussiness over food.*



## Tips from my weight loss patients:

**1.** If your child is heavier, don't criticize or comment on their weight, especially at meal time. Keep meals a time to connect with family by talking about what your child does that is kind or helpful. Most obese adults remember meal time being stressful and, therefore, began eating more and hoarding as a means of comfort.

**2.** Don't compare your kids. Siblings grow differently. When one child is favored because they are thinner, the heavier child begins to see body size as part of their self worth.

**3.** Kids are watching you. If you are eating bad foods and give your overweight child healthy or steamed food, your child will become resentful of you and develop self-hate. If you are asking yourself why your obese child has low self esteem, compare what you are eating to what you are asking them to eat.

**4.** Get rid of junk food for the whole family. It is toxic and NO ONE should eat it regardless of their weight.

**5.** If you tell your child to exercise when you don't exercise at all, it is analogous to telling your spouse not to spend money and save while you spend money with total abandon. It doesn't work.

**6.** Lastly, love has nothing to do with size. Keep the focus on what a great person your child is. When you talk about weight, keep it correlated with your child's health. Make a family plan that the whole family will get healthier.



*Similarly, mothers' restriction of food correlated with children's responsiveness to food; the more restriction, the more likely mothers were to say their children would overindulge if allowed. These results were seen regardless of the child's weight. Dr. Wardle and her colleagues concluded that moms were responding to what they saw in their child. If their child was underweight, it was a mother's worry for the child that made them force feed, where as an overweight child caused mothers to restrict food.*

Most health experts continue to suggest getting your child interested in healthy food from a young age. The American Dietetic Association recommends offering colorful foods to your young child and staying away from fast food restaurants or places where there is distraction. My work with obese adults has taught me several other tips to help parents encourage their heavier child to make wise choices at mealtime.

Growing up with a weight problem is complicated. It has to do with genetics, food, and one's relationship with food. There are correlations with sexual abuse, obesity and anorexia. If your child has a weight problem, begin by doing an inner-search as a parent. From there, elicit the help of your pediatrician as well as a dietician and counselor. Go back to preparing food at home; make family dinners sacred and involve the kids in preparing meals each evening. Children who grow up appreciating different foods and experimenting in the kitchen learn that food is fuel. *They learn that family and friends comfort and love you so food won't have to.* ●



### about mary jo...

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