

## The American Counseling Association's "*Counseling Corner*" Weekly Columns

### Helping Your Child Reach A Healthy Weight

from the American Counseling Association

The percentage of children who are overweight, or even obese, is still very high. And while most parents are anxious to try and help their children get to a healthier weight, it can be a difficult task to accomplish.

However, it's a goal worth striving for. Overweight children often have self-esteem issues, face teasing or bullying and are at increased risk for a variety of health issues.

One starting point in helping is to realize that reminding the child of his or her weight often makes the problem worse. An overweight child is well aware of the issue, and constant reminders of it, especially from a parent, can leave him or her feeling ugly, hopeless and unloved. Such negative emotions often lead to emotional eating as a means to temporarily minimize those feelings.

Often, what seems like help, such as simply reminding your child to eat healthier, can feel like nagging. Other actions, like pushing a child to be more active in sports, or playing "food police" by controlling or restricting what can or can't be eaten, can also produce negative reactions.

So how can a parent really help? Start with a frank, non-judgmental discussion with your child about his or her feelings. Let the child identify negative messages you may have been sending (usually unintentionally). Try to respond to any negative feelings the child may have with positive, sincere messages.

It's also important to set an example. If you're eating healthier yourself, it will be easier for your child to do the same. You may also want to encourage more exercise by again setting the example yourself. Encourage your child to be more active by doing things together. Take after-dinner walks or bike rides together. Have a game of catch with a baseball or kick a soccer ball around the yard together. There are many easy ways to spend time with your child while also burning a few calories.

Most importantly, provide your child with healthy food choices. Kids often have different eating patterns than their parents. That after-school snack can be important. If a bowl of fruit is available, you're giving your child a better choice than providing a box of cookies or a bag of chips.

Weight loss is never easy. Compliment your child on even small moves in the right direction. Most importantly, be sure to offer love and support, not criticism.

*Counseling Corner* is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to [ACAcornet@counseling.org](mailto:ACAcornet@counseling.org) or visit the ACA website at [www.counseling.org](http://www.counseling.org).

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