

Helping Overweight Kids
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Today Contributor

Like it or not, our kids are growing up in a culture of cruelty. Daily in school they face peers who can be wonderful, friendly, nice and inviting...or rejecting, insulting, bullying and down-right nasty. When you're a kid, it's politically correct to be just like the others--ranging from having the same neat lunchbox to similarly cool clothes and interest in the same music and sports. Of course there are children who do not reside "inside the box" who do fit in with their peers--but too often these children have to display either extraordinary wit, personality, intelligence, athletic prowess...or their folks happen to own the largest house (and pool) in town. This cruel culture is inappropriate and we denounce it as adults (but at times behave similarly with our own peers!), but it is real for kids and must at least be recognized by parents and teachers.

And, one of the major aspects that lead to perceptions of not fitting in is being overweight as a kid...whether your child is a boy or a girl. I constantly chide my kid clients for engaging in "looksism"--judging a person's value upon their physical appearance. A good friend is a *good friend*--someone you can count on to be there for you when the going gets tough, someone who is accepting of your personality and behavioral quirks, and most of all someone who displays good values and responsibility. It's important for parents to preach to their children that looks definitely do not make the person, and to encourage their children to embrace diversity in race, religion as well as body shape. In addition, parents need to walk the talk--to develop friendships with others who reside "out of the box", that is, diverse in interest, body shape, economic status, etc. Never doubt that your kids are watching what you do and how you perceive and treat others. And, be careful how you discuss diet vs. nutrition in your own home. Do push for a healthy diet and frequent, fun exercise in your home life. Don't focus upon diet for dress size.

You can only present the proper body-image perspective in your own home, though, and overweight kids are often left facing the negative assumptions, misperceptions and flat-out prejudices of their school and neighborhood-based social cultures on a daily basis. Many, many overweight children show distinct signs of depression, as young as 6 years of age. It's tough to be teased, not chosen for sports teams and ignored at the lunch table. So, what can you, as a parent, do to help them through this rough time? Here are some pointers to consider:

1. Be a good listener. When your child seems upset (teary, remote, moody) talk, question and listen. Let your son know that you understand how difficult it is to sit on the sidelines. Your daughter will cheer up a bit if she knew that you, too, had difficulty fitting in with the other girls at times in your childhood, or had trouble fitting into the stylish clothes that peers were wearing.
2. Spring into action. Just commiserating won't solve the problem. Get a game plan. Consider a fun exercise program for your children to increase calories burned, muscles toned, to hasten quickness in running, or polishing up hand-eye skills (shooting hoops). Your daughter may appreciate swimming, running, taking walks around the neighborhood. She may also benefit from some good advice about the style of clothing that fits most comfortably and looks the sharpest with her figure. Eat healthy at home and teach your kids about good nutrition--this will not only help with mental and physical stamina, but will most likely lead to some weight loss, but in a slow, systematic fashion.
3. Consider some new, sharp clothes or a snazzy hair cut--both are confidence builders--something that is often lower in children who are overweight.
4. Continue to encourage and to focus upon the really neat things about your child--intellectual curiosity, kindness to animals, great sense of humor, kind heart. Your child is one-of-a-kind, and

needs to feel confident and special in many ways. Encourage new activities, groups, lessons, classes. Broaden the scope of friendships so that she doesn't feel so alone at times. Religious youth groups, boy or girl scouts, and other activities lend themselves to all kinds of kids. Think outside the box--would computer class, air-soft competitions, or volunteer activities increase your child's world of friends and experiences? If so, check it out!

5. Consider professional help if your child seems "stuck". If sadness outweighs happy moments a visit to a good counselor may be in order. Sometimes hearing suggestions from an adult other than Mom or Dad does the trick. Or, if you're out of nutrition ideas, take the whole family to a nutritionist--everyone will benefit from a more healthy food environment in the home. Make it a family affair, so that the focus is not just upon the overweight child.

6. Have a frank discussion with your children about how to help peers who are struggling socially in school. Encourage friendships with these kids. Perhaps you can ask the teacher about encouraging your child's activities with kids who could use a buddy. If your child is being socially ostracized, ask the teacher and/or the school guidance counselor to help out in a similar way.

It's certainly not an easy task, but sitting on the sidelines without a definite game plan will not be of help to your child. So, listen and be communicative and supportive...develop a game plan to help your child to feel better physically and emotionally...and don't give up!