

Parents with eating problems

Bringing up children is always hard. As parents we aim to pass on our good habits and hopefully none of our bad ones – and the eating habits we give them are no exception!

But many parents bring up their children whilst struggling with their own eating problems. Perhaps this is a lifelong struggle with their weight, or with difficult feelings of hating their own body. For some it is, or has been at times, a full-blown eating disorder. The reality is that as much as we would like them to 'do as we say, not as we do', the main influence on children's attitudes about their eating, weight and bodies is the things their parents say and do about their own eating.

The eating habits of children in the UK are causing great concern. The obesity epidemic is well documented and hardly a day passes without another newspaper article with worrying predictions about the future. Around one in five of children are obese, but many more are caught up in patterns of unhealthy eating.

It is not just over-eating that is the problem. Many teenagers in particular are using unhealthy, and potentially dangerous, ways to try to control their weight. For example, irregular eating such as skipping meals is very common, with around a third of teenage girls admitting they skip meals in order to try to control their weight. Others may starve themselves for days at a time, making themselves sick, or even take laxatives or diet pills, all in an attempt to gain the body they desire.

Learning from mum

I remember from quite a young age being aware that my Mum had this odd relationship with food. She went on all kinds of different diets and ate some very strange meals – huge bowls of soup, or salad and not much else. Then she would go out for a meal and spend the rest of the weekend worrying about how much she had eaten. She weighed herself regularly, and she and a group of friends plotted their weight on a graph to try to encourage them to lose weight. She'd be on these strict diets, but then I would find her hiding in the spare room furtively eating chocolate buttons. And though she ate very small meals she was constantly nibbling; half a hot

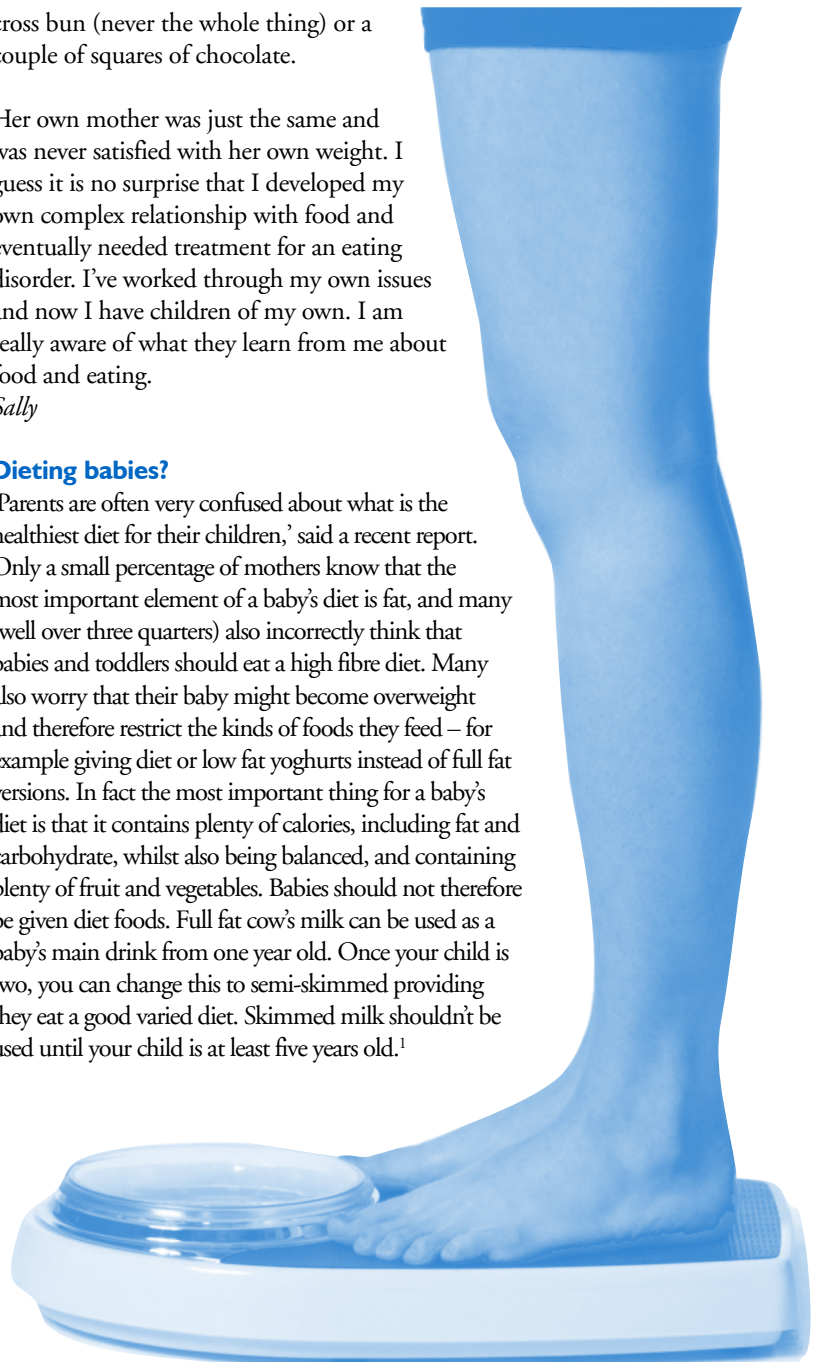
cross bun (never the whole thing) or a couple of squares of chocolate.

Her own mother was just the same and was never satisfied with her own weight. I guess it is no surprise that I developed my own complex relationship with food and eventually needed treatment for an eating disorder. I've worked through my own issues and now I have children of my own. I am really aware of what they learn from me about food and eating.

Sally

Dieting babies?

'Parents are often very confused about what is the healthiest diet for their children,' said a recent report. Only a small percentage of mothers know that the most important element of a baby's diet is fat, and many (well over three quarters) also incorrectly think that babies and toddlers should eat a high fibre diet. Many also worry that their baby might become overweight and therefore restrict the kinds of foods they feed – for example giving diet or low fat yoghurts instead of full fat versions. In fact the most important thing for a baby's diet is that it contains plenty of calories, including fat and carbohydrate, whilst also being balanced, and containing plenty of fruit and vegetables. Babies should not therefore be given diet foods. Full fat cow's milk can be used as a baby's main drink from one year old. Once your child is two, you can change this to semi-skimmed providing they eat a good varied diet. Skimmed milk shouldn't be used until your child is at least five years old.¹



References

1. www.eatwell.gov.uk/agesandstages/baby/weaning/#cat341502

Who really teaches children how to eat?



Children receive many mixed messages about eating, dieting and weight. Some messages come from school lessons on nutrition; some from magazines and popular culture. Others come from their friends and peer pressure. But it has been shown that the strongest influence, time and time again, comes from their own parents.

One study looked at children as young as six, and their awareness of dieting and what it meant. The study found that the children who did have an awareness of dieting and their own weight at a very young age (nearly half of the six and seven year old girls questioned in the study wanted to be thinner than they were) were the same ones who also talked about their parents' own dieting and struggles with their weight and body image.

Similarly, girls who show signs of extreme or risky dieting and disordered eating are more likely to have mothers who also regularly diet.

If parents place a lot of importance on being slim, children are much more likely to become concerned with their weight. Interestingly, parents are often wrong about their children's weight, with one study finding that nearly half of children who were encouraged to diet by their parents were not overweight by recommended guidelines.

It is important to watch your words and your actions. It is easy to think that children do not really notice the things we say, but every parent has been surprised when their toddlers come out with sayings or phrases that they use regularly! Researchers asking young children to define what dieting was found that many of those questioned answered by quoting their parents word-for-word. So watch out for the things you say without thinking which might teach them an unhealthy attitude about food.

Be particularly careful of teaching them that certain foods are forbidden or 'naughty'. Also be careful of teaching them that your weight determines how good a person you are. Think about what you learned from your own parents – are you passing on some of the same messages yourself? If you know that you have issues and feelings about your weight which you cannot hide from your children then when they are old enough,

discuss these with them and be as honest as you can. Make sure that they can bring their own concerns about their body and weight to you if they have them.

A survey by a teenage magazine found that two thirds of under 13s who responded had already been on a diet and wanted to lose weight. In fact, of those who wanted to lose weight, nearly half wanted to lose more than a stone. However, the reality was that only 19% were actually overweight. Only 8% of girls replying to the survey were happy with their bodies.

Think positive!

As parents we spend a lot of time feeling guilty and worrying about the things we might have done wrong. But it is important to remember that your attitudes and opinions can also have a very positive impact.

Research looking at children and teenagers who have high body satisfaction has found that their parents have often helped them develop a positive attitude about their bodies. For example, these groups of children are more likely to report that they can discuss weight issues with their parents, and they are encouraged to eat healthily at home and to exercise regularly to stay fit, rather than just to keep their weight down.

Worried about my baby

I'd been struggling with bulimia for about 13 years when I found out to my amazement I was pregnant. It was a complete miracle as I had been so ill. The pregnancy was trouble free and my little girl was born by caesarean section. I found feeding her difficult from the start. I started off breastfeeding but I would get so anxious because I had no way of knowing how much she was getting. I thought about it almost constantly and never really relaxed, and I was taking her to be weighed every week because I was so worried.

My health visitor tried to reassure me that she was gaining weight fine, but in the end I couldn't cope any more so I changed to bottle feeding. Then I hit a new problem, because she guzzled away on the formula and I started to worry that she would become fat.

It felt like every time I read a newspaper there was something about bottle-fed babies being more at risk of becoming overweight than breast-fed babies. Then of course it was time to wean her and that was a nightmare for me. I had no idea how much she should eat and what kinds of foods to feed her. I used to compare her to other babies in case she was getting fat and would worry about every

little fold on her legs in case it meant she was overweight. Other mums let their babies have snacks but I was always too worried to give her anything extra.

Eventually someone lent me a book, which was really detailed and gave some guidelines about how much babies should eat. This book helped, but it was still very hard. Even now that she is old enough to tell me when she is hungry I fight a constant battle with my feelings. I don't want her to pick up my issues around food but I also don't want her to eat certain foods because I worry that they will make her fat. I so desperately want her to grow up slim and happy that it's impossible not to let that influence the way she lives her life.

Jess

What parents can do to help

As eating disorders become more and more common, many more parents will be facing difficult issues like this when they are feeding their own children. Eating disorders fill your mind with anxiety and often having control over food and what is eaten is crucial to prevent this. Feeding children – where many a parent has felt totally out of control – is often extremely hard for these people.

If you are struggling with your own eating

Try to separate your anxieties about your own weight from your child and try not to let what they do or don't eat affect your anxiety. If their weight gain is satisfactory then you do not need to worry. On the whole, children are amazingly able to regulate what they eat without much guidance from you. As long as you feed them a balanced diet and offer them food when they are hungry, they should be fine!

Avoid the temptation to become obsessed about their weight gain the way you might have done with your own. There is no need to have them weighed every week, or even every month, apart from when they are very tiny babies. Ask your health visitor how often you should come and let them guide you. Children gain weight unpredictably, and if you check their weight too often you will only find things to make you worry!

Try not to set goals for what they eat – for example only being satisfied if they clear their plate or eat a certain amount of food. Sometimes you might slip into doing this because it makes you feel less anxious, but that leaves you very vulnerable on the day when they do not meet this goal. Try to be flexible about what they eat, how much they eat and when they eat it!

Try to find at least one person you can talk to about how you are feeling. This may be your health visitor, or a good friend or relative. Ask them to help you to rationalise what you are feeling and to work with you to ensure that your children are eating ok. Also think about seeking some further support (see 'Extra Help').



Some tips about feeding children

- Relax! Some books, websites and TV programmes make feeding your children seem very complicated, but in fact it is not as hard as it sounds. Most of us muddle through and, whilst some days everything goes right and our kids eat the perfect balanced diets, we all have days which are a nutritional nightmare. That's normal and it's okay!
- When your kids are younger, try to avoid mealtimes becoming very emotional. If you cannot avoid feeling tense or anxious when you are feeding them then try having mealtimes in environments that help you to relax – in the summer try a picnic or go out to a child-friendly café.
- Spend as much time as you can with other parents. Try to share mealtimes with them and their children occasionally so that you can get some reassurance from them.
- Try to avoid blanket rules about how your children do or do not eat. For example, instead of teaching them to finish everything put on their plate, try to help them to learn to eat as much as they need.
- Everybody has nightmare mealtimes from time to time – when the kids won't eat anything and you end up feeling really tense. Try not to dwell on it too much – it happens. The trick is to try not to make too big a deal of it and the chances are they will eat better at the next mealtime anyway.
- Try to be flexible in what and how much your children eat. Children – particularly when they are younger – are not consistent like adults and may have days where they hardly eat at all followed by days where they eat twice as much as you would expect! If you find one of those possibilities really hard then you probably notice every time it happens but do not realise that it balances out in the long-run. If your child's weight gain and general health are ok then you probably have no need to worry. Contact your GP or health visitor if you need more reassurance.
- It is generally better not to forbid certain foods – like crisps, chocolate, biscuits etc – or to limit them to certain times of day or to certain days of the week. If you do then they simply become even more desirable and as your children get older they will probably find ways to eat them when you are not around! It is better to teach your children a normal balance in what they eat – so these foods are fine but they shouldn't be eaten every day, nor should they form the main part of their diet.
- Never put your child on a diet. If you are concerned that they are gaining too much weight, or may need to lose weight, see your GP or practise nurse. If they agree that some action is needed then work to improve the quality of what they eat – don't call it a diet.
- If you know that you have a problem with food and eating yourself then find some help and support to work through it. It is possible for you to live your life without feeling trapped by those fears and your children do not have to grow up under those feelings.

Get moving!

As well as thinking about what your children eat, try to build exercise into your family's lifestyle. Studies have shown that children who exercise regularly because their parents encourage them to stay fit (rather than doing exercise to stay slim) are more likely to have a positive body image. So try to take family walks at weekends, go out together and kick a football around, or go swimming. If your children are used to being active they will find it much easier to keep fit and healthy as they grow up.



Extra help

Support groups

Anorexia & Bulimia Care

(www.anorexiabulimiacare.org.uk) – a Christian charity helping all those who suffer because of eating disorders.
Tel: 01934 710679

Email: mail@anorexiabulimiacare.co.uk

Helpline for those concerned about younger teens and children: 01934 710645

Beat

(www.b-eat.co.uk) – offering information and help on all aspects of eating disorders.

Tel: 0845 634 1414

Email: help@b-eat.co.uk

Helpline for young people: 0845 634 7650

Email: fyp@b-eat.co.uk

Bookshelf

Eating Disorders: The Path to Recovery by Dr Kate Middleton (2007). Lion Publishing. ISBN: 9780 7459 52789

Beyond Chaotic Eating by Helena Wilkinson (1993), Zondervan. ISBN: 0551027509

Care for a loved one with an Eating Disorder – The New Maudsley Way by Janet Treasure, Grainne Smith and Anna Crane, Routledge. ISBN: 9780415431583

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