

Diet-Free Schools and Activities

Free of Diet Talk - Weight-Neutral - Body Positive

Diet culture is everywhere. So, it makes sense that it is a part of our schools and activities. However, administrators, educators and coaches can be significant catalysts of change and work to make schools and children's activities diet-free - for the health and wellbeing of children.

Educators and Coaches! What can you do?

- Keep comments about weight, weight loss or dieting out of the earshot of kids.
- Talk positively about your own body.
- Provide structure for eating by having specific times for snacks and lunch.
- Allow children to regulate their eating by allowing them to decide how much they eat and in what order, without commentary.
- Coaches, remind kids and adolescents that they are still growing and that they need to eat enough to support their activity and growth.
- Talk about what bodies do, rather than what they look like.
- Talk about foods in a neutral way, rather than talking about foods being “good” or “bad.”
- Focus on where food comes from and offer fun food exposure experiences in the classroom.
- Respect and celebrate different food cultures and be cognizant of food insecurity and varying access to food.

What is diet talk?

“You’re lucky you can get a cookie. I can’t eat that kind of food.”

“Why do you have all that junk in your lunch?”

“I’m not going to eat that. I’m being good today.”

“I’m counting my steps so I can be ready for my cruise.”

“I need to lose weight.”

“Sugar is bad.”

“I’m going to be bad and eat the birthday cake.”

Why is diet talk harmful?

- Dieting is a risk factor for developing an eating disorder (1).
- Diets give the message that certain bodies are acceptable and others are not.
- Children interpret these messages differently than adults. They may be confused by an adult talking about their own diet, wondering if they should be doing what their trusted adult is doing.
- A focus on weight affects children's self esteem (2).



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How do diets cause harm?

- Adolescents that diet are more likely to exhibit eating disorder behavior 5 years later (1).
- Many people who diet fall into a lifetime of *weight-cycling*:
 - *The Promise*: The diet cycle first sucks you in with the promise of feeling better.
 - *The Praise*: Weight loss is praised in our culture, and that feels pretty good.
 - *The Loss*: When you're on a diet you miss out on important things in life, because your brain focuses on food, the basic need you are lacking. You also miss out on nutrients you need.
 - *The End*: Diets end and the weight comes back, and oftentimes, more weight than was lost. (95% of diets fail and 1/3-2/3 of dieters will gain more weight back after 5 years)
 - *The Shame*: Then, the shame hits. Many people spend their life in this cycle feeling as if there is something wrong with them, rather than the intrinsically flawed diets.
- Weight cycling and the shame involved is what is harmful to people's health (3).

What's the big deal?

- Children are supposed to be gaining weight. They are growing and weight gain is a sign of development and health.
- Puberty is a time of significant weight gain and often a time children begin to internalize negative, diet messages.
 - Children gain on average 40 pounds in the 4 years around puberty.
 - Girls' body fat percentage increases by 120% during puberty.
 - 2 in 3 13-year-old girls are fearful of gaining weight (4).

Children are fearful of gaining weight when they need to be gaining weight.

- A focus on weight affects children's self esteem.
- Children are born with the ability to regulate their intake and diets interfere with this innate ability.

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2. Davison KK, Birch LL. Weight status, parent reaction, and self-concept in five-year-old girls. *Pediatrics.* 2001;107:46-53.

3. Kajioka, Taeko et al. Effects of intentional weight cycling on non-obese young women *Metabolism - Clinical and Experimental* , Volume 51 , Issue 2 , 149 - 154.

4. Nadia Micali, George Ploubidis, Bianca De Stavola, Emily Simonoff, Janet Treasure. Frequency and Patterns of Eating Disorder Symptoms in Early Adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2013



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