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TEEN

By Kathy Sena

How Should You Talk with Your Teen about Weight Issues?

Are you concerned about your teen's weight? But are you hitting a brick wall when it comes to discussing it with him or her? You're not alone. This is a particularly tough, often emotional, subject for pretty much all parents and teens who broach it.

Teens are not unique in their resistance to discussing the topic of weight, says Dr. Steven Crawford, associate medical director of The Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt in

Baltimore.

"Consider how you, even as an adult, might react if someone commented on your recent weight gain or pointed out that your exercise and eating habits were really unhealthy," says Crawford. "These are, developmentally, very sensitive topics for teens, so some resistance is to be expected."

Weight is an especially tricky subject for moms and daughters, because moms tend to bring their "body baggage" to the conversation, says Dara Chadwick, author of *You'd Be So Pretty If...: Teaching*

Our Daughters to Love Their Bodies—Even When We Don't Love Our Own (Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2009).

"Daughters tend to shut down when they feel they're being lectured or when it's a 'do I as I say, not as I do' situation," she warns. "In other words, Mom tells the child to go out and play or get some exercise from her perch on the couch."

"Stay alert for natural opportunities to discuss healthy living—while you're in the kitchen together preparing dinner, while you're taking a walk after dinner, while you're watching a television show that makes fun of weight or features an actor who's incredibly thin," suggests Chadwick.

"Don't make your butt the 'butt' of every joke. And think twice before joking about your teen's body or appearance in any way."

—Dara Chadwick

"Using moments like these helps take the focus off the daughter. Instead, it's a more global discussion, which tends to feel safer."

Watch the humor, too.

"Don't make your butt the 'butt' of every joke," she adds. "And think twice before joking about your teen's body or appearance in any way."

"Never yell, bribe, threaten, or punish your child about weight, food, or physical activity," says

Dayle Hayes, a registered dietitian in Billings, Mont. "Shame, blame, and anger are setups for failure. The worse children feel about weight, the more likely they are to overeat or develop an eating disorder."

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And, Hayes adds, “Make sure that both parents and important relatives are all on the same page. Sending mixed messages about weight can have unhealthy consequences.”

Health, Not Dieting

“Make sure you set a good example for health, balanced eating, and body image,” notes Crawford.

He suggests, for instance, that rather than saying, “I’m concerned because you have lost so much weight over the past month,” a parent instead says, “I’m really worried about you because it seems like you don’t have as much energy lately. Are you feeling okay?”

Likewise, instead of saying, “You seem to be gaining weight. You’d better start watching what you’re eating,” Chadwick suggests saying, “I know you’ve been grabbing a lot of meals on the run lately. Let’s try to make some more time to have family meals together.”

“Always keep the focus on health, rather than weight,” says Hayes. “Losing weight is incredibly difficult, and it is not the only measure of success. If your family starts eating better and moving more,

your children may ‘grow into their weight’ as their height increases.”

And remember that *all* foods can be enjoyed in moderation.

“Have a treat and enjoy it,” urges Chadwick. “Show kids that everything—pizza, cheeseburgers, hot fudge sundaes—has a place in a balanced approach to healthy living. When you choose to have a treat, do it mindfully and let your child see you enjoy it. Proclaim it Treat Night and don’t say one word about how it’s going to your thighs or how you shouldn’t be eating it. Just enjoy!”

A Call for Help

Before you take your teen to his or her pediatrician to discuss this issue, inform the doctor of your weight concerns so that he or she can plan to ask the necessary questions, run the appropriate lab tests, and make a referral for any recommended treatment. Also, be clear in advance that you endorse a non-diet approach and that you do not want to focus on the number on the scale or discuss a need for weight gain/loss in front of your child.

And don’t put all your eggs in one basket, Crawford stresses. If your pediatrician dismisses symptoms and you still have concerns, follow up with an evaluation by an eating disorder specialist.

Finally, don’t be offended if someone else is able to get through to your child more easily than you are.

“Often a teenager that continually shuts down when confronted by a parent will respond more openly to concerns when they are expressed by a doctor, school counselor, or even a friend,” says Crawford. **BC**

Kathy Sena frequently writes about health issues and teens. Visit her parenting blog, Parent Talk Today, at www.parenttalktoday.com.