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'Fat Is Not a Feeling' and Other Things to Tell Your Teenage Daughter About Body Image

By Andrea Holwegner BSc, RD

My mom and dad raised me to be a strong chick. As a teenager I felt OK about my body, learned different sports and ate a wide variety of foods guilt-free (both veggies as well as chocolate chip cookies). I took for granted that this was a normal way to grow up as a teenage girl.

Many of the challenges around food and self-image start in the adolescent years. This is a critical time that parents and caregivers can positively influence how girls feel about their body, food and exercise.

I've been fortunate to work collaboratively with some amazing psychologists to help young adolescent girls grow stronger and comfortable in their own skin. Here are some of the things that I have learned along the way.



Fat is not a feeling

When your teenager says, "I feel fat," gently reply that fat is not a feeling, just like the colour green is not a feeling. Ask her what she would say if the words "I feel fat" could not be used. Is it angry, lonely, discouraged, rejected, nervous, scared or sad?

Your teenager needs help to figure out what was happening before the "I feel fat" comment was made. Remind her that feelings come and go just like the weather, and help her with some coping suggestions that make her feel stronger and more in control.

The influence of words

Claire, a Grade 9 English teacher recently told me about a powerful quote from one of her students from an assignment. "If you tell a girl she's pretty, she won't believe it. If you tell a girl she's fat, she'll believe it for the rest of her life."

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This week share this quote with your teenage sons and daughters around the dinner table and ask them their thoughts. This could be one of the most important teaching lessons they have about the power of their words, text messages and Facebook posts and how they influence others profoundly.

While disordered eating can manifest in many ways in response to a lack of control in one's life, when I've asked my clients with anorexia and bulimia about where things started, here are some of the things they have said that demonstrate the power of words:

My ballet instructor told me to suck in my belly because it was hindering "clean lines."

My brother called me thunder thighs since my legs were bigger than his.

My mom told me I wasn't allowed to have dessert (but my other siblings who were skinnier seem to be allowed and not monitored).

My coach told me I needed to lose five pounds before competition.

I was always taller than the other kids and they teased me about being big. I wish someone had told me there is a difference between big and tall.

It wasn't the words that hurt it was the lack of words. I didn't get told I was good enough.

Normalizing curves

Through adolescence, a female's body and hormones are changing faster than her brain can often handle. Moving from a flat chest and narrow hips to higher body-fat and womanly curves is a big adjustment that is often difficult. Throw in media images of air-brushed and digitally "skinnied" models and societal messages that contribute to the over-sexualization of girls and you can see why adolescent teens feel inadequate and unsure about their body.

While a healthy body image does come from within, it certainly helps when our parents, coaches, boyfriends and friends remind us that cellulite is normal and curves are in. One of my teenage clients with an eating disorder, who is struggling to adjust to her new body after puberty, has a boyfriend who said it best: "Guys are not like dogs, they don't chase sticks." I think this helped her feel just a little bit better.

Kids learn what they live

Do you think your kids didn't see you skip carbs all day while following yet another fad diet? Stuffing uncomfortable emotions with food? Wonder why your adolescent girl is obsessing about the number on the scale? Kids learn what they live.

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The best job you can do as a parent and caregiver is role model regular healthy meals but also save room for fun foods like chocolate or potato chips chosen for non-nutrition reasons. Expose them to moderate physical activity to keep the body strong. Remind them that just like we accept that we all wear different shoe sizes, we also need to accept that we all wear a different body size too.

Most importantly, give your teenage girl permission (if not encouragement) to flip out and have messy emotions. After all, it is the stuffed and starved emotion you should be more worried about.

Andrea Holwegner, known as the Chocoholic Dietitian, is founder and president of Health Stand Nutrition Consulting Inc., a member of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers and a media expert for the Dietitians of Canada. For nutrition counselling information and to sign up for a free monthly newsletter loaded with nutrition tips, recipes and more visit www.healthstandnutrition.com. Twitter @chocoholicRD.

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