

# encouraging healthy lifestyles



## Mother of three asks how to talk to girls about health

**Question:** I'm a mother of three girls, and I want to know how to talk to my girls about eating healthy and keeping fit but without putting pressure on them to be thin or make them worry about their weight. What is the best way to approach this?

**Answer:** This is an excellent question. We live in an incredibly weight- and appearance-conscious society, and this is especially true for girls and women. Unfortunately, psychological and sociological research also indicates that girls and women who are more attractive and conform more closely to the beauty ideals of the culture tend to get more social and interpersonal positive attention. Nonetheless, it is crucial to realize that girls and women come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and there are many types of beauty.

It sounds like you are most concerned with encouraging fitness, healthy eating and having your daughters maintain healthy weights and lifestyles. The most helpful approach is to encourage and model healthy eating and demonstrate your family's values in your everyday choices.

For example, families who spend weekend time together riding their bicycles on the wonderful hike and bike trails in this area, or spending time outdoors at one of the many open spaces or state and county parks in the area, are more likely to continue these activities into adulthood. When your daughters observe you taking care of your health, whether through walking, working out, taking yoga classes, or even stretching at home in front of the TV, they take in more valuable information than words can possibly convey.

In general, it is best not to put the emphasis on weight per se. It is important not to be rigid about setting goals for girls to

achieve a specific weight number, and to discourage them from thinking in these terms as well. It is more helpful to encourage girls to eat a variety of healthy foods and engage in activities they truly enjoy. A mixture of healthy and indulgent foods is the norm for most girls and boys in our culture. Deprivation of all treats is not an effective method of influencing your child, unless their personal style is to avoid these kinds of foods anyway. Some kids are naturally drawn to being healthy eaters or honestly don't care that much for fat, sugary and salty foods. It's hard to believe, but it's true.

Participation in team and individual sports at school can also boost your girls' self-esteem. Be conscious not to put too much emphasis on the competition and winning aspects. Learning to compete is important, but it is more important to achieve one's personal best and enjoy the activity.

Be careful never to make disparaging comments about your daughters' weight. These critical messages become deeply internalized and are very hard to overcome, even years later. Also, do your best to avoid comparing one daughter's weight to another daughter's weight and be aware not to give preference or more compliments to the daughter who is more conventionally attractive than the others. Society and school peers will do enough to push these messages onto your daughters; it is important that home be a safe and loving place for them to be themselves.

**Question:** Growing up I lived in a fairly clean but cluttered home. All my living spaces since the age of 20 have felt unorganized, not laid out the way they should have been or the way I

wanted. Now, I've just moved in with my boyfriend after living with my parents for the past few years. It is important to me to make the space organized, functional, clean and comfortable — in a word, perfect. But the task feels daunting. I'm afraid I will ruin whatever I create or that it will never meet my standards. Why is this so stressful and why is homemaking (at least for me) so fraught with emotion?

**Answer:** It is challenging to create and maintain a home environment that you enjoy and that really works for your style of living. It sounds like you are taking this opportunity to make a fresh start and create the home you really want to have. Moving in with your boyfriend is a great motivator, but it also means more "stuff" and more mess and dirt to manage. Be careful that you are not setting yourself up for failure by expecting perfection when you are actually moving into a more challenging situation.

I'm really not certain what role your "clean but cluttered" childhood home life may have had on your tendencies to be messy and disorganized in your own environment. It's amazing to see how children from the same home can emerge with utterly different levels of interest in keeping a clean and orderly house. One may be messy and not care at all, another may be disorganized but wish it were different, and yet another might be a "neat freak", obsessive about housecleaning and having things

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