

## Helping Your Overweight Child By Denise Schipani

Having your child be identified as overweight can be upsetting. But if you start now, you can instill good health habits that will serve her for a lifetime, says Marlene Schwartz, PhD, deputy director of the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity in New Haven, Connecticut. Here, how to talk to your child about her health, help her lose weight, and provide emotional support:

### Talk about health, not weight.

Weight loss shouldn't be tied to looks, clothing size, or even the number on the scale, says Schwartz. "I think it's always best to focus on the behaviors

that you want to change, such as eating healthy meals and being more physically active, rather than the concept of changing her weight."

**Involve the whole family.** "Everyone should get the same message—that we as a family need to look at what we eat and how much exercise we get," says Schwartz. Sit down with the family and brainstorm ways you can make smarter choices. Try cooking as a family, or go for after-dinner group walks or bike rides, for example. And even if the rest of the family doesn't have an issue with weight, it's a smart idea for everyone

if you rid the pantry of packaged cookies and chips, and instead opt for fresh, nutritious snacks.

### Strategize celebrations.

No child wants to feel as though he can't have a slice of birthday cake or pizza at a friend's house. It's not a matter of cutting out all treats, but rather of creating a strategy that allows for them occasionally, says Schwartz. If you know a birthday party is on the calendar, discuss how your child can look forward to one cupcake, then talk up how much fun the bowling/laser tag/museum visit portion of the party will be.

### Nip sibling teasing in the bud.

"Some parents mistakenly believe that mild teasing can work as peer pressure, but instead it has the opposite effect, stigmatizing the child," says Schwartz. Anytime you hear someone else in the family making a remark—even grandparents' gentle chiding—step in. Be sure the person understands that remarks can be hurtful. Same goes for school bullies: "It's hard for people to see that bullying the fat kid is the same as bullying a child with a disability, because there's a sense that being fat is someone's fault," says Schwartz, who stresses the importance of,

immediately addressing school bullying issues with teachers and administrators if necessary.

### Tackle the "it's unfair" question.

So one of your daughters gains weight easily, while her sister can devour bowls of ice cream and remain rail-thin? If your overweight child moans about how unfair that is, agree with her, says Schwartz. "Then point out that everyone's body is different. She may know someone who can't eat peanut butter, or who has to take asthma medicine. That's their thing, and your child's thing is that she gains weight more easily

and so she has to be more active and limit her treats."

### Short-circuit negative self-esteem.

It's one thing to deal with teasing from others, but what if it's your own child saying, "I'm so fat, no one likes me"? In that case, Schwartz advises, "Acknowledge his feelings and encourage him to talk about them. Then tell him what you see when you look at him." List things that are specific and true (kids see right through lying and attempts to pump them up), like how kind he is to his sister, or what a good basketball player he is becoming.