

Talking to Parents and Guardians About Children's Weight Status - Guidance

Purpose

This document provides talking points to consider when having a conversation with parents about children's weight status.

Talking points: underweight children

Children who are assessed as underweight using BMI may be growing at a normal rate for them. A child who has a genetic tendency to be thin is different from a child who stops gaining or starts losing weight. Children may also experience a growth spurt in height and appear underweight until weight gain catches up.

The risk factors associated with underweight children can include social factors and/or medical conditions. It is important to ask families about recent changes that could affect a child's weight. Below are talking points to keep in mind when you have a conversation with parents and guardians about their child's weight.

- Ask about the child's growth history and if the child has consistently been at or below the 5th percentile for BMI. A child who has consistently been at this percentile may be growing at a rate right for them.
- Ask parent about meal and snack times and the child's appetite. Encourage families to eat together away from television, computer and other screen devices.
- Make mealtime pleasant and unrushed. Sit down together whenever you can and enjoy your food and time together.
- Encourage the parent to follow their child's growth over time. Children often have growth spurts in height and weight that are not correlated with each other.
- Encourage the parent to provide healthy foods. A child who is underweight needs calories from whole grains, lean protein, low-fat dairy and fruits/vegetables. It may be tempting to offer an underweight child food high in calories with little nutritional value. Processed snack foods and high calorie desserts are examples of foods that should be offered only occasionally, regardless of child's weight status.
- Encourage parents to offer healthy foods more frequently—often 'mini-meals' throughout the day are beneficial to underweight children and adults.
- Make sure the child isn't filling up on beverages like juices or even milk which can leave a child not hungry for meals.
- Encourage parents to maintain structure around mealtime by offering meals and snacks at consistent times and allowing the child to decide how much to eat.
- Encourage the parent to relax and not try to control the shape and size of their child's body. Understand that some children are thinner and smaller than others are.
- Encourage the parent to realize that their job as a parent is to be positive and supportive around eating and to model healthy behavior and habits.
- Explain to parent that you are referring their child to their Health Care Provider as a follow up and to make an evaluation for any underlying conditions that may be contributing to weight status.

Talking points: overweight children

The rise in childhood obesity is a serious concern. Research tells us that overweight kids are at greater risk of becoming overweight adults. The health problems that stem from being overweight go way beyond heart disease and diabetes. Being overweight can also affect a child's breathing, sleep, mood, orthopedics and energy levels. Overweight children often have a low self-esteem which can lead to depression and withdrawal from peers.

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- Encourage parent to follow their child's growth over time. Children often have growth spurts in height and weight that are not correlated with each other.
- Encourage parent to provide healthy foods with an emphasis on fruits and vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy products and lean meat. Remind them that canned or frozen fruits and veggies are good choices. Encourage them to choose canned fruits packed in their own juices and to rinse canned vegetables before serving to decrease the sodium content.
- Encourage parents to maintain structure around mealtime by offering healthy meals and snacks at consistent times and allowing the child to decide how much to eat.
- Encourage the parent to be active with their child. Have fun playing games with the child, but don't try to force him or her into an adult-type exercise program.
- Tell parents we strongly recommend children get a minimum of one hour of physical exercise each day and to limit the amount of time they spend in front of a screen to less than two hours per day.
- Let the parent know that overweight/obese children have a good chance of reaching a healthy weight through growth in height.
- Encourage the parent to realize that their job is to be positive and supportive around eating and to model healthy behavior and habits.
- Encourage drinking water and low fat milk. Discuss limiting sugary drinks, like soda, juice cocktails and fruit punches. They contain a lot of added sugar which adds calories and not important nutrients.
- Ask parent to explore with family the idea of listening to your body and recognizing when you feel full. Sometimes, people eat too much because they don't notice when they need to stop eating. Eating too much can make you feel uncomfortable and, over time, lead to unhealthy weight gain.
- Tell parents that their child will have a better chance of change if the whole family is involved. Start by eating together as a family. When families eat together they eat more nutritious foods and learn about serving sizes or portions. Family meals also provide time for teaching tradition, connecting, feeling more relaxed and comfortable with eating and also save money.
- Remind parents to accept their child for who they are and what they bring to family and friends. Find reasons to praise and focus on what they do well and not how they look.
- Explain that it is not good to use food as a reward, bribe, comfort, as a way to solve problems or to punish your child.
- Tell parent that withholding food from kids is not recommended. Children may not get enough food nutrients to grow properly, learn and play. They may learn to sneak food when it is forbidden and kids feel bad about themselves when they're treated differently. That feeling may turn to anger, stress or overeating. Children won't learn to control how much they eat if someone else is making the decision for them or if they are pressured to eat less.
- Suggest parents have a variety of healthy snacks on hand at home. Fruit or veggies cut up and ready on the table will be gobbled up sooner than whole fruits and veggies sitting in the fridge.
- Change the notion of junk food, "bad" or "forbidden" foods. Parents can teach children when to eat fun foods (once a week or in moderation) and how to eat fun foods (a donut with milk).
- Be aware of kids' hunger cues. Even babies who turn away from the bottle or breast send signals that they're full. If kids are satisfied, don't force them to continue eating. Reinforce the idea that they should only eat when they're hungry.
- Lead by example by watching less television and go for a walk with your children.
- Encourage families to receive nutrition counseling through WIC if the child is under 5 or if there are younger siblings. Many WIC clinics have implemented obesity prevention programs for preschoolers that help parents learn how to: increase physical activity, monitor mealtime behaviors, limit household TV viewing, drink water instead of sweetened beverages, consume 5 servings of fruit and vegetables daily and increase family activities to promote fitness.

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- Explore with families how to make healthier substitutions. For example, bake or broil instead of fry, serve frozen yogurt instead of ice cream, buy skim milk instead of whole milk, opt for pasta with tomato sauce instead of cream sauce, buy pretzels instead of potato chips, or offer graham crackers instead of cookies.