Weight loss can't be forced on children

Experts: Provide kids what they need, and take care not to make them feel worse

By Nanci Hellmich
USA TODAY

Browbeating won't work. Neither will bribes or threats. If you really want to help your overweight child slim down, set a good exam-ple, create a healthy environment at home and remember that real change has to come from within the child.

That's the advice of several authors who have interviewed children, parents and experts for their new books about weight loss.

"I would not use the word 'dieting' — ever," says Abby Ellin, 37, a freelance writer in New York and author of *Teenage Waistland: A Former Fat Kid Weighs In on Living Large, Losing Weight and How Parents Can (and Can't) Help.* (PublicAffairs, $25)

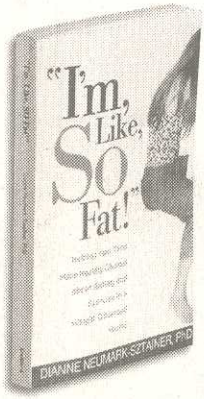
"Don't use shame, fear or humiliation as motivation for weight loss. It doesn't work," Ellin says. "It just makes kids feel worse, and it causes them to rebel."

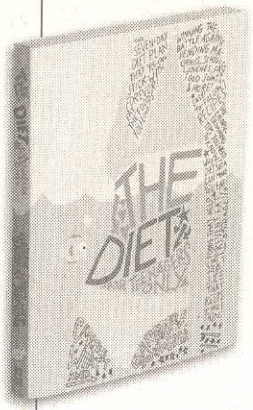
Instead, she says, "with younger children, the most important thing a parent can do is model healthy behavior: eating right, exercising and demonstrating a positive attitude by caring for themselves at any size. That's more important than lobbying school boards about sodas, or taxes on Twinkies, or shipping them off to fat camp."

Fostering an environment in which it's easier to have self-control helps, she says. "But the bottom line is the responsibility falls on the person trying to change the behavior."

"If you are a parent of a teen — only they can do it. They are rebelling, anyway, and if you make weight loss the end-all and be-all, they will not go there. It has to be an inside job. They have to be disgusted with themselves and feel fed up or want to wear certain clothes or bathing suits."

In an ideal world, she says, "they are going to come to you and say, 'I want to lose weight. Help me.' And then you do so, without ridicule or shame but with support and love."





What parents can do

Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, a professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Minnesota, is the author of *I'm, Like, So Fat!* (Guilford Press, $16.95). She and colleagues surveyed 4,746 adolescents in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area and interviewed 900 parents.

"There is a lot parents can do — modeling healthy behaviors, offering more fruits and vegetables, providing appropriate-sized portions, limiting sweets, not keeping soft drinks in the house, helping (kids) get more daily physical activity.

"Parents can do a lot for their kids, but they shouldn't feel blamed or shamed if things don't go perfectly."

What teens can do

Journalist Barbara Schroeder and nutritionist Carrie Wiatt are the authors of *The Diet for Teenagers Only* (ReganBooks, $18.95).

"Tell your teenagers it's not about being a skinny Minnie. It's about being at your healthy weight," Schroeder says.

The authors' suggestions: learn what portion sizes are supposed to look like; avoid fried foods; be aware of diet traps such as munching while on the computer; stop eating candy bars; take calcium supplements if not consuming enough milk.

Before eating, teens should also ask themselves: "Am I really hungry, or am I eating because I'm bored, lonely, stressed?"

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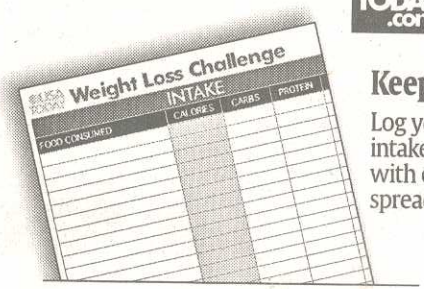

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