

Kids will pick up on adult signals about food

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By the time they hit puberty, skipping a meal has led to dieting. Anemia and bone calcium loss leading to osteoporosis are usually the greatest risks of prepubescent and adolescent dieting. That's because red meat and dairy products are often the first things to go when a young girl's fancy turns to fat loss.

That statistics can be sobering. A 1992 Health and Welfare Canada study showed that by age 11, 37 per cent of girls say they need to lose weight. By age 13 that number has risen to 42 per cent, and edges up to 48 per cent by age 15.

Another Canadian study cited that the number one fear of girls in grade 3 and 4 was gaining weight.

It beat out biggies like the death of a parent, nuclear war, and cancer.

So far there is no clear way to map out why some kids are more vulnerable to eating abnormalities than others. What is clear is the greater mental distress a child is under, the more likely she is to breeze by the dysfunctional eating route and run headlong towards an eating disorder.

"Usually the girls who suffer an eating disorder have a greater degree of psychological distress," explained Margaret Beck of the National Eating Disorders Information Centre. "More distress can lead to full blown eating disorders."

In fact, 65 per cent of people with eating disorders have experienced some kind of abuse in their lives, while 35 per cent have experienced childhood sexual abuse.

There's no simple way to help children avoid the land mines of disordered eating and eating disorders. In fact, it requires a com-

plete societal overhaul.

"What we really have to address is the social attitudes towards not only food but also fat people," said Ms Beck.

If that seems too large a task, remember the positive affects of at-home role modeling and take a closer look at the attitudes that flourish in your own kitchen.

"Don't count calories or diet in front of your kids," said Ms Beck. "Many people think nothing of having fat free yogurt in the fridge but having a lot of fat free foods sends a message to your children."

Commenting negatively on your own or others' bodies also packs a powerful punch to the self-image of young girls. That means putting a moratorium on asking 'Do I look fat in these pants' in front of them. It means no cooking one meal for your family and another for a dieting parent.

Even teachers can be read the riot act for accidentally reinforcing disordered thinking about food.

"Teachers in elementary schools who think they're doing good will teach a nutrition class and label foods 'good' or 'bad'," said Ms Beck.

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Ask The Professionals



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Q: I was a client of yours and you helped me greatly but people that I know would benefit from counselling, seem afraid to call. They say that they don't know what to expect and they do not know if counselling is right for them. Could you help me by discussing this?

A: These are common concerns. Most of us are afraid of things that are new to us. Many people are surprised when they see my office and its location. My office is a cosy, country home in a tranquil setting, minutes from town. It is not in my home, but rather, is completely private and away from any other activity. Inside, is a living room, complete with fireplace and comfortable seating. It is not at all clinical or office-like. The next room is a playroom where I meet with children. It has toys, games, doll-houses, art supplies and a huge chalkboard. When I am working with children we may go outside for a walk to visit our horses or catch frogs at the pond. They learn to trust me and, therefore, talk more openly.

People who come for counselling are no different from anyone else. They are healthy people that are coping but feel that something is preventing them from being truly happy in all areas of their life. They are the same family members and friends who tell us their problems but now want to do something about them. They may want a professional and confidential, impartial third party who will not take sides. Their problem may have been with them for years or it may be something that has recently come up. Some live nearby and others come from farther away.

When coming to see me, the individual does not have to commit to a certain number of sessions. They may come as many or as few times as they like. There is no obligation. My only goal is to help them reach their goals, in whatever way I can.

Elayne Tanner is a Certified Social Worker in private practice in north Milton. If you have further questions or if you would like to arrange an appointment, please call (905) 854-0801. Confidentiality guaranteed.