

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My daughter – Allison -- is going to third grade this year but is having a lot of trouble. She's a great kid but considerably overweight. Last year, her classmates teased her so much that she'd often come home in tears. Is there anything that I can do to help her?

-- Betty

Dear Betty,

It's sad but true – in spite of a changing consciousness about celebrating diversity – “obesity stigma” still rules many classrooms. There are three important things you can do to help your daughter: 1) Let her know that you love her just the way she is; 2) Help her develop coping skills for the teasing; and 3) Help her to lose weight because she will be physically healthier and far happier.

Children who are substantially overweight feel like they carry the weight of the world on their shoulders. In a society where the mantra is “you can never be too rich or too thin,” the obese kid is a target for the immature taunting of her peers. That's a lot of pain and a lot of kids. More than 15% of American children are obese (compared to about 30% of adults). This is a dramatic increase over the past two decades. Still, I'll bet the fact that Allison is not alone doesn't help her one bit when her schoolmates are making fun of her.

Let Allison know that she is loved unconditionally and help her to understand that people come in all shapes and sizes. We all identify with our bodies and it's easy for a young child – maybe adults as well -- to draw a conclusion that says, “fat is bad,” therefore “I am bad.” Help her to disconnect those two thoughts. Give her lots of praise for things she does well and show interest in her hobbies and activities.

Some recent research suggested that some children overcome teasing better than others. Kids who held their ground by asserting themselves with their classmates or discussed the problem with friends or adults seemed to maintain higher levels of self-esteem. Be a good listener. Encourage Allison to talk with you about her feelings. Support her if she wants to confront one of her peers who are making fun of her. There are healthy ways to do this. She may feel like knocking their blocks off, but let her know that she can express herself in ways that don't stoop to that level. Step up yourself and talk with her teacher if the teasing continues or escalates.

It's important that Allison get a handle on her weight problem now. A new study showed that – in addition to physical health risks like diabetes and heart disease -- children who are substantially overweight have a higher incidence of depression and psychological problems than other kids. Although media attention seems to zero in on weight problems of young girls, young boys were actually at a higher risk for weight-related depression. Both boys and girls were more likely to engage in oppositional or defiant behavior – a way of acting out their pain.

Did you know that less than 25% of children are physically active for at least 30 minutes a day? Gone are the days of kickball in the street and pick up baseball games.

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Instead, most kids spend hours in front of the television, playing video games, or shackled to computers. Combine that with super-sized fast-food meals (No, I don't believe we should all sue McDonald's for our love handles), high carbohydrate, high sugar food and you've got the makings of an epidemic.

Model good eating habits and help her learn good nutrition by your example. Prepare healthy, low-fat meals. Substitute fruit for cookies at snack time. Eat dinner at the table as a family (this is an excellent thing to do anyway) instead of in other locations (like in front of the television).

Let Allison know that you want to help her lose weight because she will be healthier when she does – and not because you think she is unattractive as she is. Encourage – even insist – that she have a higher level of physical activity. Limit television and computer time. Set up habits of regular exercise in ways that are fun – go bowling on weekends, join the YMCA and swim together, play kickball in the backyard like we used to do as kids. Express your confidence that she can change her life, because she can.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.