Protecting Kids From Dangerous Diet Culture Messages

Here's how you can help your child be resilient in the face of rampant food- and body-shaming.

By **Leslie Schilling**, Contributor Dec. 19, 2019

RECENTLY, A DISTRESSED mom reached out to me via social media and asked how to talk to children about diet culture messages. She was specifically concerned about an advertisement her daughter saw on television.

(ISTOCKPHOTO)

BabyFirst TV, which she thought was “safe” viewing for little ones, showed a Noom diet program ad that was targeting new moms. Although her daughter is only 4 years old, she caught the message and asked, “Why does she say she wants to lose weight?”

This worried mom did a quick Google search about how to talk to kids about diet advertisements. Sadly, the search results were much of the same, inappropriate diet recommendations and the demonizing of certain foods.

Seeing this type of advertising is inevitable in our weight-centric culture. But we can help protect our kids from these harmful messages that promote body dissatisfaction, fat phobia and a fear of eating.

The first step is to become more aware of where these messages may appear. The mom who reached out to me didn’t think a baby channel would promote dieting to moms. At the same time, I had no idea children's shows would turn foods like burgers or fries into villains that needed to be destroyed.

Sometimes, the insidious messages of diet culture appear in supposedly "safe" places like children's channels, educational lessons, school lunchrooms, churches and medical offices. If we keep our eyes and ears open, we can bring many of these diet culture untruths to light for our children.

[**READ:** Food Rewards Backfire: What Parents Should Do Instead]

Correcting Diet Culture Messages

"Kids hear diet messages everywhere,"

says Sarah Ganginis, a Maryland-based dietitian. From school cafeterias displaying “healthy” versus “unhealthy” choices to overhearing adults discuss their latest attempts to lose weight by dieting, she says it’s hard to escape these dangerous topics.

Ganginis feels so strongly about these dangerous messages in schools that she started a Change.org petition to urge the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to reevaluate the tool used in assisting school systems in setting their health curriculums.

She along with thousands of other health practitioners who have signed the petition understand that these well-intended nutrition messages often carry weight bias and nutrition misinformation. That's due to a lack of education about weight stigma, eating disorder prevention, and the encroachment of the diet industry into the fields of health, medicine and education.

These messages may be around every corner, but when we notice them, we can immediately take a timeout to discuss them with our kids. My daughter was doing her first-grade reading homework about a lady named Beth shopping for “healthy” food. The story talked about how she liked to buy grapes and oranges.

My health propaganda meter starting spiking, and for good reason. The follow-up question asking what this story told us about Beth gave the following options: lazy, sloppy or healthy. The story did not speak to Beth’s health practices, it only spoke of her financial privilege and food preferences.

How would a child feel if his or her family couldn’t afford to put those foods in the grocery cart? Does it make the child unhealthy, sloppy or lazy? Of course, it doesn't. This wasn't just a reading exercise; it was an opportunity to bring the untruths of diet culture to light. When youngsters are left to process diet messages on their own, that can plant seeds that grow into something very dangerous.

Maria Paredes, a counselor and professor of counseling and educational development at UNC Greensboro, says that it's important to teach children that we can live out our family values without judging others. She suggests telling kids the following in response to dieting questions or advertisements: "Everyone gets to make decisions for their own body, so we don't judge others for dieting. But that's not something we do in our house. In our house, we try to respect our bodies and listen for when we're hungry or full."

Paredes helps those she counsels understand that some people can feel very pressured by these messages. When that happens people can try to change their bodies in ways that can be harmful. She says that this is a time when kids can benefit from body affirming messages that counter diet culture themes, like “Your body is just what it’s supposed to be and I’m so glad for that."

[**READ:** Focus on Wellness Instead of Weight Loss.]

Protecting Kids

We can’t avoid these messages altogether, but we can reduce kids’ exposure to them. One way parents can help children absorb less dangerous information is to block, delete or avoid apps or shows with this type of messaging.

Years ago, when I noticed the “good” food versus “bad” food stories on children’s programming, I decided that our family wasn't going to watch that channel. As my daughter has gotten older, I've noticed how the messages are weaved into games, books or television shows. A show may villainize eating "treats" or sugar, while a book may make fun of larger bodies.

Sometimes my daughter even looks at me before I hit the pause button, and asks, "Mom, is this health propaganda?" This is when we will have a conversation about why this show isn't a safe thing for her to watch.

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Shows or apps that have underlying weight bias or blatant body-shaming will be blocked on our home television and devices. When we notice food- or body-shaming messages in books, we get creative and rewrite them.

Talk About and Celebrate Body Diversity

Sadly, diet culture advertising isn’t going away any time soon. When the shaken mom reached out to me about the weight loss commercial her daughter saw, she knew she had to do or say something to combat it before the seed of body dissatisfaction was planted in her daughter's mind.

"If any of my children asked me about an advertisement for a diet, I'd reassure them that their body isn't broken and it doesn't need to be fixed," says Emily Fonnesbeck, a Utah-based dietitian and owner of Emily Fonnesbeck Nutrition Consulting. She hopes to help her children and clients recognize and celebrate body diversity and choose respect rather than manipulation for their own bodies, no matter their size or shape.

Ganginis echoes the need for parents and caregivers to reinforce body diversity and respect, teaching kids that our bodies are meant to change throughout our lives. She urges adults to help kids learn to respect their ever-changing bodies. Because, if children feel the need to intentionally restrict their bodies, the innate trust they have with food and their bodies can be broken.

There's hope for our kids even in the presence of diet culture. As we work to dismantle the oppressive and dangerous system, we can have conversations that bring us closer to those we love; and we can help our kids be more accepting of those who are different from us.

[**SEE:** 12 Potential Signs of an Eating Disorder.]

We have a saying in our home: "All bodies are good bodies." It is our belief that all bodies, regardless of their size, are fearfully and wonderfully made. In a culture learning to love and accept the diversity of all people, we simply can't ignore that celebrating body diversity is an integral part of that. As Paredes says, "It would be really boring if everyone looked the same, was the same size, had the same skin color, etc. I think it's kind of cool that we have so many different people in the world."

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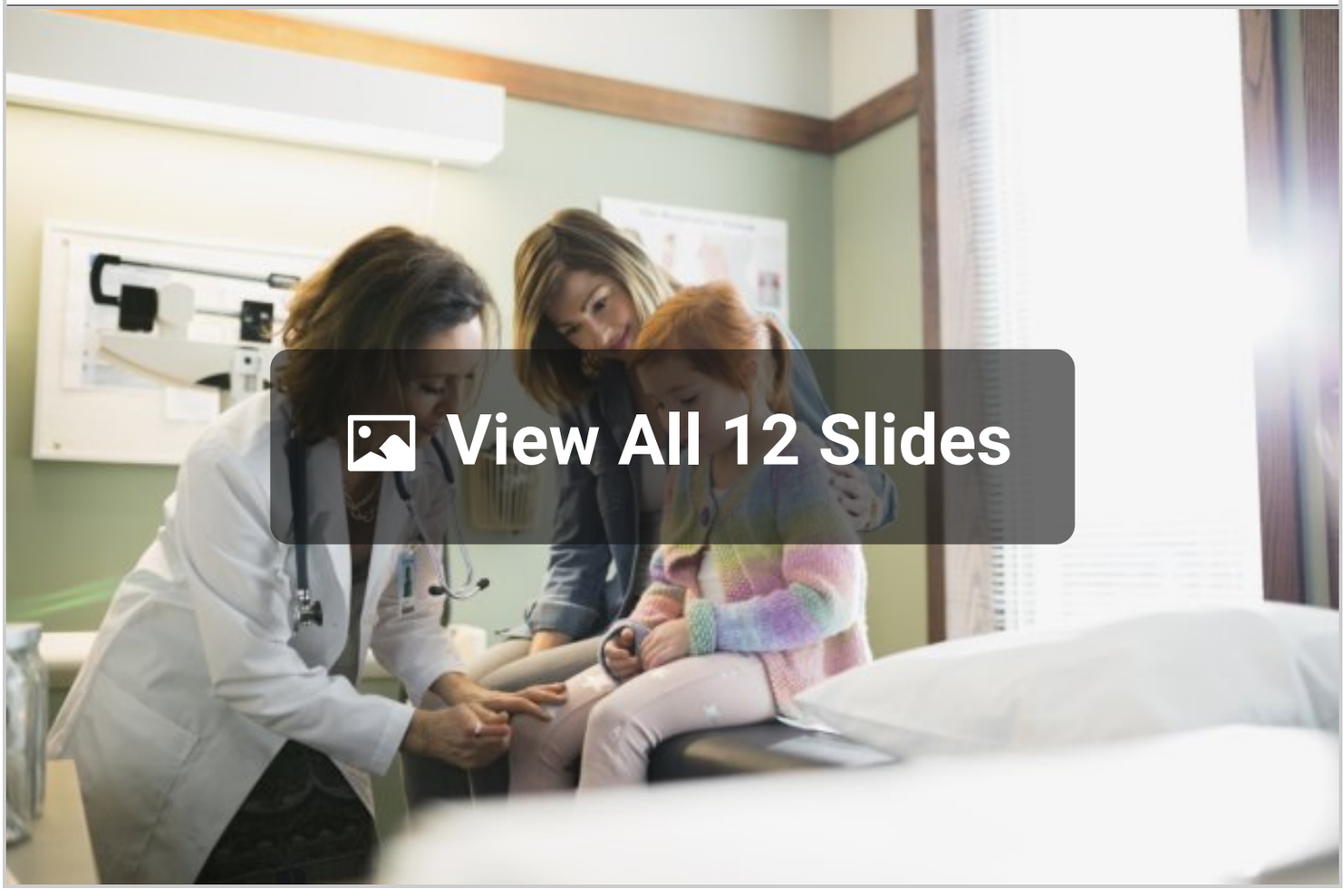

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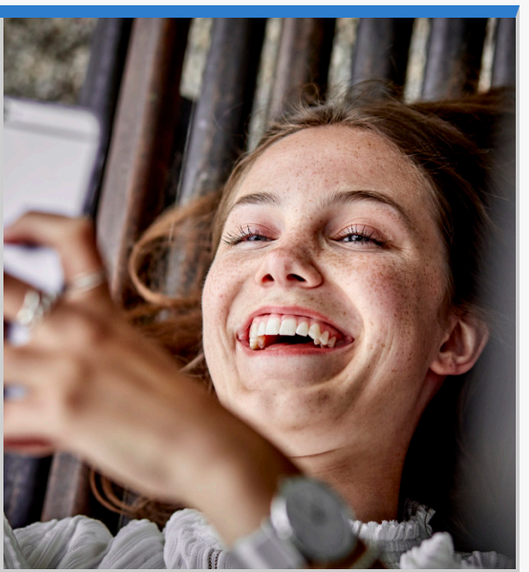

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