

WAYS TO PROMOTE HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOOD AND BODY IN CHILDREN

DO

NEUTRALISE FOOD

It is helpful to move away from labelling food as 'healthy and unhealthy', talking about foods as 'bad or good', strictly avoiding certain food groups or demonising certain food (e.g., sugar). Talking about food as neutral and that some foods do more and less for our bodies can be helpful (rather than good or bad).

MODEL INTUITIVE EATING (IE)

Children learn a lot through what they observe and what is modelled to them. Modelling IE looks like eating a variety of foods, eating regularly, listening to your body and being able to enjoy food. Note: IE is not always accessible for some neurodivergent individuals (e.g., awareness of hunger cues).

FOCUS ON FUNCTION

Moving away from focusing on the body's appearance, shape or weight, it is helpful to consider what the body does for you. Focusing on the function (what you can do with your body) has been shown to be effective at promoting a healthy body image.

FOCUS ON EMBODYING EXPERIENCES

This includes movement and exercise (and lots of other activities) that feels good and brings joy. This step is about connecting with what the body needs and engaging in activities that feel good for the body - moving away from a focus on reasons such as moving for weight, shape, appearance or earning food/making up for eating.

DON'T

ENCOURAGE DIETING

Dieting is the single biggest predictor of eating disorders. Dieting is harmful and does not result in long term weight loss. Encouraging restrictive eating, avoiding food groups or demonising certain foods does not help children have a healthy relationship with food or their bodies.

PRAISE APPEARANCE AND WEIGHT LOSS

This can be a hard one to change. Praising weight loss and appearance serves to reinforce focus on how others see the child and often leads to linking self-worth to what someone looks like (weight loss = good). Consider what else is valuable about the child and focus on comments regarding those behaviours or attributes.

MAKE BODY/FOOD COMMENTS

Comments about bodies, weight, shape, appearance or judgement about food only serve to reinforce beliefs and labels (good/bad). They are not health promoting and often evoke feelings of shame. There are more interesting things to talk about with children than their weight, shape and labelling their food so consider how focus can shift to those topics.

PROMOTE WEIGHT = HEALTH

What determines how healthy someone is is far more nuanced than what they weigh or their BMI. Let's move away from these harmful messages and support children to embrace concepts like 'eating the rainbow/colours and variety (where appropriate)' and according to the body's incredibly clever cues and movement for joy, fun and because it feels good.