

Pressuring kids to diet can backfire, damaging long-term health

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(HealthDay)—Parents want the best for their children. Eat well. Get

enough sleep. Exercise. But sometimes pressuring your teen to diet or lose weight may end up harming them, a new study suggests.

It found that [parents](#) who urge their kids to diet might actually be boosting their odds for obesity later in life. It's also tied to an increased risk for eating disorders.

The phenomenon can even stretch across generations, said study lead author Jerica Berge, professor and vice chair for research in the department of Family Medicine and Community Health at the University of Minnesota.

"This new study was conducted over many years, and we can see that these messages stay with someone longitudinally—someone who had [experienced] it now does that to their kid, passing it on, giving it to the next generation," said Berge.

One expert who works with kids who battle eating disorders wasn't surprised by the findings.

"We work with young people with serious eating disorders, and we work very closely with parents," said Ana Ojeda, a clinical psychologist specializing in pediatric patients at Nicklaus Children's Hospital in Miami.

"Some of our kids are hospitalized," explained Ojeda, who wasn't involved in the new study. "When you combine eating disorders with depression, anxiety or their own body image, it can lead to very bad consequences. We definitely do *not* encourage parents to make a foolish focus on a child's [weight](#). At certain developmental stages, it can be very damaging to self-esteem."

In the study, Berge's group looked at data from surveys completed by

more than 1,100 adolescents from the Minneapolis-St. Paul area from 1998 to 1999. Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed were girls.

The respondents then filled out follow-up surveys at five-year intervals beginning in 2003, until they entered their 30s.

By the third survey, more than 40% of [young women](#) and 27% of young men said they received encouragement from their mothers to diet to stay slim. About 20% of young females and 18% of young males said they'd gotten similar messages from their dads.

The study couldn't prove a direct cause-and-effect, but parental pressure to get and stay slim was associated with poorer health in young adulthood, the study found. There seemed to be a cumulative effect on adult behaviors centered on weight, weight-related behaviors and psychosocial well-being, the Minneapolis team found.

For example, by the end of the study—15 years after the first questionnaires had been filled out—girls who'd been pressured to diet had a 49% higher odds of being an obese young adult compared to girls who hadn't gotten that parental pressure. Boys who had a similar experience had a 13% higher odds of becoming obese young men, the researchers reported.

When it came to what the researchers called "extreme weight control behaviors," parental pressure to diet boosted the odds for girls by 29% and for boys by 12%, Berge's group found. Risks for binge eating, specifically, rose by 17% for girls and 39% for boys.

Messages about dieting from parents were also linked to a higher odds for poor self-esteem, body satisfaction and depression in young adulthood.

None of this means that parents who encourage dieting are trying to make their kids unhappy or unhealthy, Berge stressed.

"Parents are well-meaning and doing the best for their kids," she said. "They want them to be as healthy as possible, but they often undermine themselves with the language they use, making a kid feel guilty or ashamed and much more less able to change, because they feel about bad about themselves internally."

As Berge explained, there is a better way.

"If you say something about someone's weight, it's internalized as shaming, and it doesn't lead to behavior change," she said. "So, we're trying to refocus people's language on eating health. We relate it to something kids like to do. If your kid likes soccer, focus on the fact that eating right can help you run faster on the team. Whatever is of interest to your teen, hone in on that and tell them eating well is for that purpose, not focusing on weight."

How can parents prevent their [good intentions](#) to keep from backfiring?

Rebecca Puhl is deputy director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut. Reviewing the findings, she agreed that "there are better ways for parents to communicate [about weight] with teens."

First off, "what parents *do* is more powerful than what they say," she stressed.

"Parents who create a [home environment](#) where [healthier choices](#) are easier to make—fruits and vegetables are available, minimizing junk food, modeling healthy behaviors themselves—are more likely to be effective, rather than telling your teen she or he needs to lose weight,"

Puhl said.

Berge believes that it also helps families to focus on health and eating as a unit.

"Engage the family around it, rather than Mommy saying, 'stop this,'" she said. "Have a good culture in the family around eating. Communicate in a way that promotes healthy eating, not blame.

"We need to be modeling what's right for our own bodies," Berge said. "And communicating to children that what's far more important is their contribution and character than what they look like or the number on the scale."

The study was published recently in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

More information: There's more on kids and obesity at the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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