



## KIDS' HEALTH

# Heavy Duty

FAT-SHAMING KIDS CAN LEAD TO OBESITY AND LOW SELF-ESTEEM. ARE YOU GUILTY OF IT?

By **Lauren Paige Kennedy**

Let's say you have a daughter who's 9 or 10, and you can't help but notice she's growing more solid around the middle, maybe thickening substantially in her arms and thighs. Should you be alarmed, or say something to her? Maybe tell her it's time to go on a diet?

Researchers at UCLA strongly suggest the answer is "no." Their study, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, tracked the development of 1,213 African-American girls and 1,166 white girls living in Northern California, Cincinnati, and Washington, D.C. Some 58% of the girls had been told they were too fat by age 10, regardless of whether they had a weight problem. The girls who were "fat-shamed" at such a young age had a 40% to 60% greater chance of being clinically obese by age 19, depending on whether the negative comments came from friends or teachers, or—more damaging—from siblings and parents.

Researchers also discovered a correlation between the frequency of fat-shaming during childhood and the likelihood of becoming obese nine years later. In other words, the more people made such comments, the



higher the chance the girl in question grew up to become a fat adult.

Jill Castle, MS, RD, LDN, a childhood nutritionist, is not surprised by the findings. "Age 10 is a tender age, both physically and cognitively," she says. "Most girls thicken up between 9 and 11 with prepubescent weight gain, and most get their periods around age 12.

It's not just the body that's changing. Self-esteem is developing, too. "Cognitively, this is an age of black-and-white thinking," Castle says. "Children hear these negative messages and take them

very seriously. Fat-shaming comments stick."

You should talk to your daughter, but Castle says the conversation should always focus on healthful eating, not weight. "Adults in the lives of children should be extremely careful and sensitive about weight. Talk about 'eating right' in a neutral, or even medical, way. This doesn't mean dieting. It means consuming a wide variety of foods, exercising every day, and achieving balance. Sugar or junk food isn't off the table. You're encouraging good health through a whole lifestyle approach."

## HEALTHY HABITS

NUTRITIONIST JILL CASTLE, MS, RD, LDN, HAS THREE DAUGHTERS AND ONE SON, AGES 12 TO 17. "JUST BECAUSE I'M A NUTRITIONIST DOESN'T MEAN MY FAMILY ALWAYS EATS PERFECTLY," SHE SAYS. SHE'S A BIG BELIEVER IN STRUCTURE TO MAINTAIN A HEALTHY WEIGHT—AND GOOD HEALTH, OVERALL.

### Checks and balances

"The trick is to be aware of what you're eating, and if you go off track, correct it the next day," she says.

**Sleep cycle** "Sleep and a predictable daily rhythm work together to create balance"—which aids weight control. "Overly tired kids reach for more snacks to boost their energy levels," Castle says.

**Stress relief** Monitor stress levels and blow off steam with regular exercise.

**Family affair** "Don't single out your child," Castle says. "Instead, incorporate good eating habits for the entire family."

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