



9 TIPS FOR PARENTS

By Yvonne and Rich Dutra St. John

Being a parent or a caregiver of a teen dealing with issues regarding weight can be very difficult and can often leave parents feeling scared, guilty, embarrassed, desperate and alone.

Here are some tips to help.

1. Educate Yourself and Get Help

The problem will not just go away. Parents who feel powerless to change their child's behavior often go into denial or just hope the problem will go away. Rarely does compulsive eating or obesity just disappear. We must take steps to deal with the underlying issues. As parents, many of us have been brought up to think we should handle our family's emotional problems and challenges alone, as if to say, "What happens in this house stays in this house." However, if a pipe in our home breaks, we wouldn't hesitate to call a plumber. If your child broke his or her arm, you would go to a doctor. So why would we think we have to deal with weight problems or emotional issues alone? There are MANY resources available. **You don't have to do it alone!** Open a phone book or go online to research counselors, support groups, OA meetings, Weight Watchers and other helpful resources. Many churches and spiritual centers have services available for families. Give yourself, your child and your family the gift of getting help.

2. Have Compassion

Just being a teenager is hard. No matter how wonderful any family is, being a teenager means your body is changing, your hormones are surging, and people are constantly telling you what to do, where to go, how to be, what to wear, how to act. As teenagers attempt to deal with the

pressures of school, grades, and homework, not to mention trying to fit in or belong, they are also forced to face and digest an ever increasing litany of scary and potentially life changing events that continually seem to be happening all over the world. Let's face it, young people today are dealing with much more than any generation prior. To give you a sense of what we mean, in the 1940s a survey was done with teachers asking them to outline the biggest challenges they faced with students. The responses included things such as chewing gum, talking out of turn, tardiness and lingering. The same survey done recently pointed to issues such as alcohol, drug abuse, violence, rape and even suicide. Our kids need our support.

Find out what it's like to walk in your son or daughter's shoes. **If your child is dealing with obesity or a food addiction**, there may be much more going on. Perhaps they are getting teased, left out, humiliated, maybe physically hurt, beaten up or even violated in some way. You won't know unless you listen with compassion. Make it safe for your son or daughter to share the truth of his or her experience. Telling your child to "just go on a diet" or "just stop eating" is not the answer. If it was, they would have done that long ago.

3. **Discover What Your Child is Hungry For**

Do you know why your child is overeating? As with most all addictions, food addiction is often an attempt to "numb-out." Is your child lonely, sad or depressed? Are they grieving? Has someone left their life, are they experiencing a divorce, has someone moved away or even died? Are they being hurt in some way or dealing with unresolved hurts from the past? Have they been abused, raped, molested? Are they angry? Is your child dealing with emotional abuse? Has there been a major change in their life? Are they lonely? Are they missing you? If you discover their eating has to do with you, remember guilt does not serve you or your child.

4. **Feed Your Child You!**

So often children are starving for the people they love. In many cases our kids are hungry for love, attention, praise, and the need to know that they matter. Stop everything! Make time for your child! Turn off the TV, computer and phone. Set aside your "to do" list. Put regularly scheduled time in your calendar and...

Do something physical together. Go for walks, ride bikes, swim, dance, workout, fly a kite – anything that gets you moving.

Find out what they are passionate about or interested in, and join them. Adopt a hobby, take a class, spend time in nature, go to plays or sporting events, sew something, make crafts. If they don't have any interest, explore your options together.

Join them in their recovery. When appropriate, go to the doctor or nutritionist with them, go to counseling because you “get to” not “have to.” Join them for OA or Weight Watchers meetings, even if you are not overweight.

Do service for others. As part of the ***Be the Change movement***, we challenge everyone to do at least one “act of change” every day to add to the love and service on the planet. Find ways to do this with your child. Not only will you be spending time together, you will both be feeding your hearts and souls by serving others.

5. Listen

Do you really know your child? Do you really know how his or her life is or what s/he deals with from day to day? How well do you listen? How much time do you spend every week looking into your child's eyes and hearing what s/he has to say?

Real listening means...

You are patient and relaxed.

You are facing your child and making eye contact.

You are non-judgmental – sometimes it helps to pretend they are not your kid.

You are remembering there is nothing wrong. Your child is not broken or needing to be fixed no matter how they are feeling or what they are sharing.

You are curious, asking “what else?” when they stop talking because you sincerely want to know.

READ THE “What Else?” chapter from Rich and Yvonne's *Be the Hero* book for specific coaching on listening to intense feelings.

Real listening also means...

You are not talking.

You are not coaching or giving advice.

You are not fixing it.

You are not comparing.

You are not relating, therefore bringing the attention back to you.

6. Take Care of You

Your modeling is your best teaching tool. How do you eat? How much do you exercise? How do you deal with your feelings? The best way to help your child is to take care of you. Often kids are eating to numb out the pain they are experiencing at home or they take on the pain of their parents or guardians. The best thing parents can do for their kids is to take care of themselves and their relationships. Parents cannot give from an empty vessel. It is crucial that you find ways to nurture yourself. If you are emotionally unhealthy, your child will feel it. If you are in an unhealthy relationship with someone, your child will feel it. If you are ready to “pop” because your own emotions are not dealt with, your child will feel it. If you are not eating in healthy ways, your child will see it. If you are not exercising, your child will most likely follow your lead. Instead of feeling guilty about any of these things, use them as permission to take care of you. If you don't do it for you, do it for your child.

7. Compliment and love yourself in front of your child

For better or worse, your kids learn from you. If we are putting ourselves down in front of our children, they will tend to do the same. Let your child catch you feeling proud of yourself and loving yourself. Say things aloud like...

“Wow, I feel really proud of how I did that.”

“I like the way I look today.”

“I am a great friend.”

“I tried really hard at that, I am proud.”

“My hair looks great today.”

“We have a wonderful family.”

8. Compliment, validate, and say “I love you” to your child.

Does your child know how much you love and appreciate them... JUST BECAUSE? Do you just assume they know or do you tell them on a regular basis? We challenge you to compliment your kids for who they are and what they do. Tell them and show them how much you love them – often.

9. Great Opportunities To Notice Your Unconscious Habits

The best way to stop unconscious habits is to pay attention to your own behavior and the effect it may have on your child. None of us can change our behavior unless we first *notice* what we’re doing. Here is a great self-check list:

Do you lecture your child about weight or what they are eating?

Do you criticize your child or other people?

Do you compare your child to other children?

Do you tease, shame or humiliate your child?

Do you hit, slap or physically abuse your child?

Do you serve unhealthy food?

Do you eat in front of your child in unhealthy ways?

Do you control or manipulate your child’s eating?

Do you blame your child or others for their weight?

Do you make fat jokes?

Do you point out people who are overweight and judge them negatively?

Do you put yourself down in front of your child?

Uncovering the truth about ourselves can sometimes be painful but it’s often a powerful step toward positive change.

At Challenge Day, we believe that if children are SAFE, LOVED and CELEBRATED, they are less likely to turn to any destructive behavior – whether that is by using food or anything else.

If your child is being teased or bullied consider bringing a Challenge Day to their school. Or at the very least have them join you in attending one of our Next Step To Being the Change workshop where you can get a first hand experienced of the work you witnessed as part of Oprah's program.