

Debunking the Role of Genetics in Obesity

As a dietitian, I often hear, “I’m overweight, so my kids are bound to be heavy.” While it is true that genetics play a role in body size and weight, the environment and lifestyle choices are just as important! For example, genetics alone did not cause the recent obesity epidemic—changes in the physical environment, the types of food consumed, and the activity levels of people within our society also played a large role. Rather than resigning to a life of overweight or obesity, try to focus on the factors you do have control over. Simple changes can make a huge difference! Some of the changes include:

Allowing your child independence—Your job as a parent is to provide nourishing meals for your children; it is not to police their intake. When you constantly push your child to stop eating, or even to eat more, you may create emotional stress that will then be connected with food. When your child is constantly told that certain food choices or eating behaviors are incorrect, he/she may become disconnected to internal hunger and satiety cues and have trouble regulating his/her eating behavior. This can lead to [low self-esteem](#) or disordered eating behaviors. Instead of being a helicopter parent, simply serve food to your family and let your child decide which foods and how much of these foods to eat. Try your best to hold your tongue, since it’s crucial to keep family meals relaxed and drama-free!

Modeling healthy eating behaviors—It’s true: your children will tend to copy your [eating habits and lifestyle choices](#). If you eat ice cream after dinner each night, they will form the same habit. The habits they form from watching you will likely carry into adulthood. Try paying attention to the eating habits you have. Do you always eat a snack in front of the TV? Do you swing through the drive-through after sports games? Do you always carry water with you to sip throughout the day? Make a list of your habits and consciously decide which ones are positive and which ones you’d like to change. For the ones you’d like to change, come up with alternatives, such as enjoying fruit for [dessert](#) or serving snacks at the kitchen table instead of in front of the TV.

Staying active as a family—[Family activities](#) are not only fun but are also a great way to bond with your children while being physically active. You’ll be amazed at the deep types of conversation you’ll have with your children when they are unplugged from technology. Make it a habit to go on after-dinner walks with the family, take weekend hikes, or go to the park on the weekends. By planning active family time, your children will form the belief that active time is normal and desirable, and they will likely continue these behaviors with their own families in the future.

Emphasizing being “fit” not “thin”—Pay attention to the language you use around your children. Make sure you’re emphasizing the importance of health and fitness, not appearances and thinness. Then walk the walk! Small choices, like lifting weights in the living room, being active with friends, or swimming in your backyard pool, show your children that being fit and healthy is much more important than looking a certain way. Listen to this [free webinar on easy and fun ways to eat and live healthier with your family](#), available until February 7th.

Not dieting in the house—Try your best to watch your words and not discuss dieting in front of

children. Diet-talk sends the message to children that it is normal to dislike your body and want to change it. Instead, practice positive body talk by praising yourself and other family members for their healthy habits and beautiful bodies—no matter what their shape!

Being realistic- It's easy to go overboard when making lifestyle changes. Many of us fall into the trap of all-or-nothing thinking. Either we are 100% healthy, or we're over-indulging on everything in sight. Instead of preaching perfection, practice an 80-20 rule. Make 80% of your choices healthy ones, but leave 20% for indulgences -work your way towards 90/10. Learn how [stickers and small rewards](#) for healthy choices may lead to better eating habits. This teaches your kids that no foods are off limits, but some should be saved for special occasions. By not depriving your children, you can help set them up for a healthier relationship with food later on in life.

Now that you know genetics won't solely determine your child's body weight or size, start taking stock of your own lifestyle behaviors and upgrade them to be health- and fitness-promoting!