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TO PREVENT EATING DISORDERS & INSPIRE WELL-BEING

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# A Simple Guide for What to Say



**WHAT to SAY**

WithAll 

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# Hello There!

For many adults, talking to kids about body image, food, and exercise is overwhelming, but WithAll's What to Say wants to help grown-ups like you raise kids with healthy bodies *and* healthy minds. Research has shown us that the words we use around kids can impact their relationships with body image, food, and exercise and that's why WithAll is committed to providing simple principles that you can use as a "home base" when deciding what to say to kids related to food, body, and exercise.

WithAll's Simple Guide for What to Say is the foundation of our What to Say initiative. Every pledge signer receives a complimentary copy of the guide and additional follow-up resources to help them talk to kids about diet, exercise, and body image.

To learn about the tools you can use to help your kids make healthy choices for the rest of their lives, keep reading!

# AVOID SINGLING OUT KIDS BASED ON SHAPE OR SIZE

Singling out individual kids (or subgroups of kids) as needing special attention surrounding diet, appearance or exercise can make kids question if something is wrong with their body and needs to be fixed. This leaves kids feeling guilty or ashamed of their bodies and can lead to unhealthy behaviors to try to change their bodies. While you may have internal concerns over a child's weight or their eating and exercise habits, try not to create special rules for individual children based on their weight or shape.

## PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

*‘I had an eating disorder for many years, and I still struggle with body image and my relationship with food. One thing that contributed to my ongoing struggles was being singled out as a child because adults who loved me were concerned that my metabolism was slower than my siblings, and that I would be ‘heavier,’ etc. So, the ‘food rules’ and hypervigilant weight focus in our house applied to me—not my siblings. That forever changed how I saw myself, my body, and my food. I’m 38 and still working to unravel the impact.*

*I only recently learned that all this concern about my weight and size also deeply impacted my cousin, who, as a child, had a naturally smaller body than mine. She heard comments about my body and felt the stress of needing to stay ‘skinny’ so adults would continue to admire her thinness. This, for her, also led to an eating disorder.” – Maria, What to Say Pledge Signer*

## EXAMPLES:

01

Limiting entire categories of food (i.e. dessert) for one child

02

Making worried comments about one child's portion sizes, food preferences or body shape/size

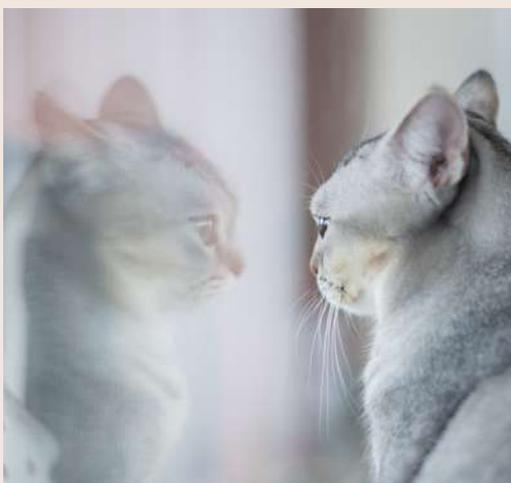
03

Encouraging one child to exercise when others are present and available.



## WHAT TO SAY

Apply everything you say related to food, body, and exercise to all kids in your life equally. If the changes you are recommending are about health, everyone can do it together!



## REFLECT

If you are concerned about the size or shape of specific kids in your life, ask yourself: *Is my concern about appearance bias, or is it truly about health?*

## GO DEEPER

- [Should I tell my child to gain or lose weight? – What to Say Video](#)
- [A parent's advice on helping kids love their bodies - Blog post from the National Eating Disorders Association](#)

**Have a specific question about this principle? [Submit it here and we'll get back to you with an answer soon!](#)**

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# DON'T MAKE HEALTH A NUMBERS GAME

Our culture has long taught us that health can be reduced to a numbers game based on weight, growth chart percentiles, and BMI. However, health and overall well-being are a result of many factors. Furthermore, research has shown us that focusing on these numbers in conversations about your child's health can negatively influence their beliefs about their body and their worth and does not lead to healthier outcomes. These negative beliefs have been associated with an increased risk for anxiety, depression, weight cycling and weight gain, fear of weight gain, and eating disorders.

## PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

*‘Someone who had been one of our many awesome volunteer coaches for my high school team came over to wish me well after the season, and after talking for a few minutes they casually threw out ‘wow, you look a lot bigger than you did in high school! Have you gained weight?’ The casual comment about my size and shape of my body was what I would call unintentional cruelty. In fact, when I look back on it, they may have even intended the remark as a compliment! But whatever the intention was, that evening, I slid back into my eating disordered habits for the first time in over a year.’ - Jessie Diggins, Olympic Athlete and What to Say Ambassador in her book Brave Enough*

*‘Almost all clients I see have a vivid memory of someone in key moments of their lives saying something that negatively impacts how they feel about their body and how they eat.’ - Geri Scherer, MA, LP, Therapist/Licensed Psychologist for Eating Disorders*



## EXAMPLES:

Saying in front of your child that you've noticed someone has gained weight.

01

- *Why? - Even if you are not saying this about the kid themselves, when they hear these judgements made of yourself or others they can question and wonder if there is something wrong with their weight and body as well.*

Complimenting someone on losing weight or exercising more frequently.

02

- *Why? - Although this seems like a great way to acknowledge someone seeking to improve their health, losing weight might not be healthy for them - they might be engaging in eating disorder behaviors.*

Try these helpful swaps of "What to Say Instead" of commenting on weight or body shape and size.

03

## WHAT TO SAY

Instead of commenting (negatively or positively) on your weight, your child's weight, or anyone else's weight, redirect conversations about body size and shape to discussions of health and wellbeing. What to Say instead.

## REFLECT

*Do I worry often about my child's weight? Is my concern for their health or is it something deeper?*



## GO DEEPER

- If weight is not an indicator of health, what is? - What to Say Q&A Video
- What is weight talk? - What to Say Blog Post
- Why is it so important to not talk about weight with judgment? - What to Say Blog Post
- But what about health? Isn't it healthy to be mindful of your weight and to help your kids do so? - What to Say Blog Post
- Aren't we all just being a bit too sensitive? Shouldn't we instead be helping our kids to not take everything so personally? - What to Say Blog Post

**Have a specific question about this principle? [Submit it here](#) and we'll get back to you with an answer soon!**

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# REMEMBER THAT SELF-WORTH IS NOT SKIN DEEP

In our culture, many people derive their self-worth from their appearance or their size, but research has shown that this cultural obsession with the “ideal body size,” can leave many people feeling depressed and anxious. We want to protect our kids from these mental health challenges by teaching them that their value does not come from their size or shape, particularly when that size or shape is unrealistic or unhealthy. By modeling healthy self-talk to our children and others, we can begin to teach them how to derive self-worth, not from their size or shape, but from who they are.

## PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

*‘I started to realize just how much of my worth, and others’, I put into appearance. I think we all have those judgy thoughts and these thoughts are what lead me to be self-conscious because I believe others are thinking the same things about me. But when I think about the people I love and why, it’s never because of their appearance. When I think about the people who care about me the most, it’s for reasons outside my appearance.*

*I want my kids to be free from the fears that live in my head and I want to make sure I’m not reinforcing them by the little comments that come out of my mouth when I’m feeling insecure. Things still slip out, but I know it’s happening less and that it matters.” – Aimee, What to Say Pledge Signer*





## WHAT TO SAY

Instead of commenting on someone's physical appearance or size, try complimenting their character. Don't judge people based on their appearance, here are some simple swaps of what to say instead.



## REFLECT

Do worries about my weight or appearance keep me from being fully present in my life?

## GO DEEPER

- How do I model a strong body image for my kids when I struggle with my own? - What to Say Q&A Video

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# LET KIDS BE KIDS BY LETTING FOOD BE FOOD

When we talk about food using phrases such as “clean eating,” “junk food,” or “bad foods,” we inadvertently assign those foods moral value and set our kids up for confusion and shame around eating. Foods with lower nutritional value are all around us, and many of these foods are very tasty! When we tell our kids that the foods they love are *junk food*, they may begin to fixate on limiting or eliminating entire categories of foods from their diets in ways that can be unhealthy or dangerous to their health. This fixation can contribute to behaviors such as hiding or sneaking food or overindulging in it. This fixation also means our kids are spending more time thinking about food and eating, and less time on being kids!

## PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

*‘I grew up with my parents telling me candy was bad, that hamburgers are junk food, and more. I thought these were the right terms to use, and have been using these with my kids. On reflection, these terms made me sneak foods as a kid and feel guilty for eating too much at a party. I don’t want my kids to feel like this too.’ - Sam, What to Say Pledge Signer*



## WHAT TO SAY

Instead of talking about foods using moral terms (such as “junk food”), just let food be food and let your kids be kids by helping them make decisions about foods that support their overall well-being. Here are some helpful swaps of “[What to Say Instead](#)” when talking about different types of foods.

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## REFLECT

Do worries about my weight or appearance keep me from being fully present in my life?

## GO DEEPER

- What is diet talk and why is it harmful?- What to Say Blog Post
- But there are certain foods that are better for us, right? shouldn't we be helping kids to understand and make good food choices? - What to Say Blog Post

**Have a specific question about this principle? [Submit it here and we'll get back to you with an answer soon!](#)**



# LET FOOD BE FUEL AND FUN

A healthy relationship with food is all about balance and variety and, while our bodies may work best when we fuel them with whole, fresh foods, other foods with lower nutritional values are often fundamental to community and family traditions and celebrations. Kids should feel comfortable and confident around all foods because this confidence is important to their social and emotional health. Many parents would prefer it if their kids ate strictly whole, unprocessed food, but by giving them access to both carrots and candy, we can empower them to make food choices that nourish their bodies and minds without guilt or shame.

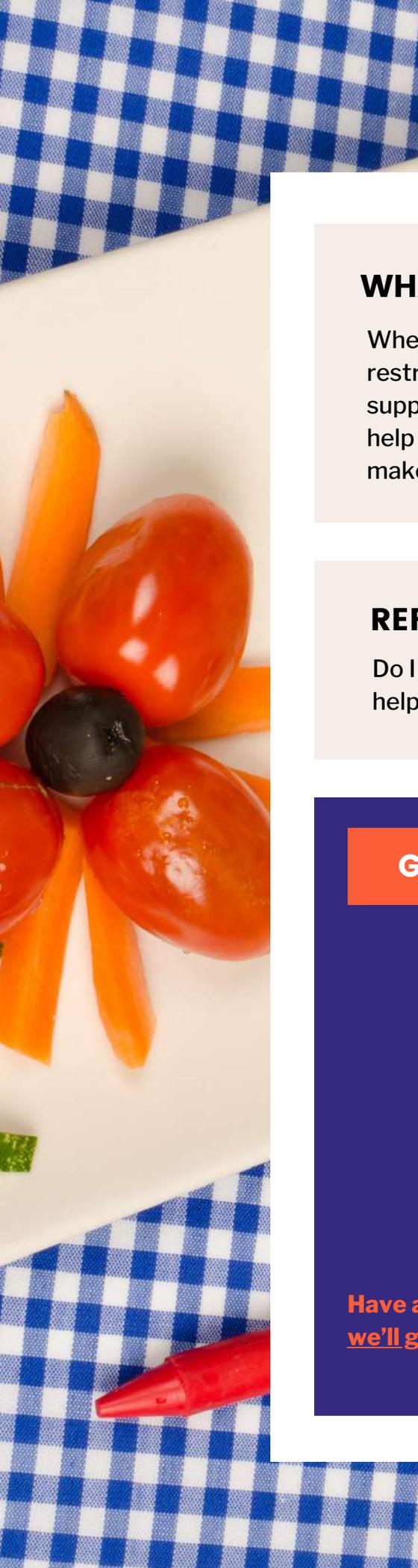
## PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

*‘NUTRITION MATTERS TO ME. But, you know what else matters to me? Not giving my kids a weird complex about food.*

*I realize I have sort of done this by not letting them drink soda. My oldest is that kid at a party who drinks all of the Sprite as soon as his mom leaves. I gave him \$15 to take to a birthday party the other day in case he wanted to buy extra snacks at the venue, and he spent it all on Mountain Dew. Clearly, I have made some mistakes.*

*I want to teach my kids that moderation is key and that even junk food has a place in our lives. Also, I have a wicked sweet tooth and I want to have access to a million tiny Halloween Almond Joys.” -Madison Mom, Let your kids eat Halloween candy*





## WHAT TO SAY

When talking about food choices, emphasize balance instead of restriction. Focus on teaching your children how they can use food to support their growing bodies and minds. [Here are some fun facts](#) to help you talk to your kids about how vitamins in the foods they eat make them feel good and have the energy they need for the day.

## REFLECT

Do I believe my kids can eat all foods and be ok? What is my role in helping them develop healthy eating habits?

## GO DEEPER

- [Can I really trust kids to make their own food choices? What is my role in helping my kids develop healthy eating habits?](#) - What to Say Q&A Video
- [How can I support my child who has special dietary restrictions due to food allergies or other medical issues?](#) - What to Say Q&A Video
- [Let Kids Eat Halloween Candy](#) - Madison Mom Blog Post
- [A fun way to learn how foods help your body](#) - What to Say Mealtime Conversation Cards

**[Have a specific question about this principle? Submit it here and we'll get back to you with an answer soon!](#)**

# Make Movement Joyful

Our bodies were made to move, and movement is important to our physical and mental health. When we make physical activity about weight, shape, or size, we eliminate the experience of joy in movement. To ensure our kids love movement and exercise for the rest of their lives, we must teach them that physical activity is joyful, and not a means to a BMI or size-based end.

## PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

*‘I grew up constantly hearing (and still hear all the time if I’m honest!), ‘I have to work out later because I ate so much at breakfast.’ or ‘Let’s go for a walk to work off our dessert.’ I realized that little comments like this have made me focus on movement that would result in the most calorie burn rather than what I would most enjoy. For a long while, I dreaded working out and felt guilty when I didn’t because I was seeking activities that were solely focused on weight loss. What to Say has helped me see that connection and seek to find ways to move that I enjoy. I know my kids are watching and will notice the shift.’ –Ryan, What to Say Pledge Signer*





## WHAT TO SAY

When talking about movement in front of kids, avoid making a connection between exercise and weight. Help kids understand all the other amazing reasons we move our bodies, such as improving our focus, sleep, and energy levels, as well as reducing stress, risk of injuries, risk of infection, and so much more! Here are some helpful swaps of “What to Say Instead” when talking about exercise.



## REFLECT

How do I talk with my kids about exercise? How do I personally feel about movement and exercise? Is it for the joy of it or to reach a certain outcome?

## GO DEEPER

- [What are some practical ways that I can encourage my kids to get physical activity without focusing on weight?](#)- What to Say Blog Post

**Have a specific question about this principle? [Submit it here and we'll get back to you with an answer soon!](#)**

# YOU AREN'T ALWAYS GOING TO GET IT RIGHT. AND THAT'S OKAY

The goal of What to Say is to give you the tools you need to nurture your child's self-concept in ways that will increase their likelihood of positive physical and mental health outcomes. We're not always going to get it right and it's important that we have compassion for ourselves when we feel that we haven't responded to our kids' needs in ways that are helpful.

In these moments, it is important to remember that no one has the power to cause the kids in their life to develop eating disorders or other physical and mental health problems. What to Say is here to help you use your words and voice to build up healthy and happy kids, and, by learning these principles, you're taking a big step in the right direction.

## PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

*'I thought I was saying the right things to my kids about the food they are eating, but I've said harmful things without even realizing it. I talked with another parent about feeling discouraged about this, and she reminded me that that's true of so much of parenting! I'm also surrounded by people who say harmful things without knowing it and I don't judge them. It's just the way our culture has taught us to think about food and body. Instead, I try to model and share what I've learned. None of us are perfect and taking the step to educate myself and apply what I've learned is the best I can do and it makes a huge difference.'* –Adrian, What to Say Pledge Signer





## WHAT TO SAY

We hope that, by reading these principles, you feel confident to make simple and intentional changes that empower the kids in your life to make healthy choices around diet and exercise. Congratulate yourself on taking this important step to protect the kids in your life!

## REFLECT

What from these principles resonated the most? How can I implement it into my life or share what I learned with other role models in my kids' lives?

## GO DEEPER

- Thank you for reading A Simple Guide for What to Say! These principles and many more resources to help you support the kids in your life can be found 24/7 in the What to Say [Resource Center](#). Check it out to dive deeper into any of these topics.

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