

# Why the Way You Talk About Food Matters

As we enter the holiday season, we're likely going to be surrounded by food. From Thanksgiving dinners to Hanukkah latkes to Christmas cookie baking, many family traditions and gifts from friends often center around food during the holidays. You encounter sugary sweets and rich delicacies, as well as salty treats. The concept of the holiday indulging is commonly known; everyone knows that holiday calories don't count. Regardless of whether you embrace the extra food or worry about its effects, there is undeniably extra emphasis on food during the holidays. This makes it all the more important to take a step back and think about how you talk about food in front of your kids, who gobble up all the words you say.

## Calling a food "good" or "bad"

You might find yourself saying, "Chocolate is bad for you" to your child, or "This needs to be my last cookie, cookies are so bad for me" to yourself. Alternatively, you might tell your child to eat his veggies because they are "good". Using such subjective terms to describe foods is unproductive-- calling something "good" or "bad" does not say anything about nutritional value. It can even be harmful. By using words associated with morality, your child may think because they eat chocolate, and chocolate is bad, then they are bad, too.



Guilt and shame are not healthy feelings to start developing around food, at any age. Instead, try using informative descriptors. Instead of saying chocolate is bad, say instead "Chocolate has a lot of sugar, which can be harmful to your body in big amounts, so it's best to only have a little bit at a time". By placing the emphasis on the nutritional value and facts, your child learns a helpful reason you don't want them to have too much chocolate.

## Saying a food will make you gain weight

"Oh, I can't eat this cake because I will gain weight" you might say. Your nearby child hears you, and begins to wonder why gaining weight is something you fear or worry about. They might start to think that perhaps they shouldn't eat cake because they don't want to gain weight, or they should feel guilty because they do eat cake.

Children don't understand the connection between balanced eating and healthy weight. You may understand that eating too many sweets, like cake, is unhealthy for your body because of the fat and sugar content, and a side effect of this may be weight gain, but your child does not. Or perhaps your main concern of gaining weight is that it will change your appearance. Evaluate your own relationship

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with food and your body. Understand why you may be worried about weight gain, and the reasons for those worries, and don't be afraid to reach out to others for support and encouragement.

To exhibit the best example for your children, it is best to not be critical of your body in front of them so that they do not learn to be critical of their own.

In addition to thinking about how you talk about food, consider these two small tips on handling your child's eating, which are especially relevant during the holiday season in which sweets are abundant.

## Letting your child have sweets with a meal

Consider giving your child small amounts of candy or a piece of a cookie with their lunch or dinner. This may seem counterintuitive if you are concerned about your child having too many sweets, but it could actually help normalize eating sweets and make them seem like less of a forbidden, limited treasure, that you child only gets every so often.

Instead of fixating and obsessing about a certain treat, you allow them to get used to seeing it so they learn they don't need to binge large quantities in one sitting or sneak some later because they don't know when they'll get to eat it next.

## Teaching kids to listen to their bodies

An important lesson for kids to learn is how they feel when they are full and how they feel when they are still hungry. This is especially relevant for large holiday dinners with so many fun, new foods to choose from - especially if they may have been snacking on treats ahead of time. Help your child learn by giving them a small first helping and once they finish, allow them to ask for seconds if they are still hungry.

Remember to enjoy the holiday fun and food, but keep in mind, kids soak up everything around them - statements said and unsaid - and can only process what is said at their understanding level. The more honest and positive the statements you share are - the more honest and positive your child's internal dialogue will be!

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Originally posted on the Now What? Blog on 11.11.20 The Now What? Blog served for nearly 7 years to

1. Normalize parents seeking support and help as a manner of child abuse prevention
2. Engage community in how they can work to prevent child abuse
3. Work to build resiliency in families through promotion of the 5 protective factors

Maybe you coach a baseball team or you help care for the neighbor kids from time to time. You are investing in the safety and security of the children in our community. Because it truly does take a village to raise our children, we want to offer the tools needed to bring awareness and education to preventing child abuse.

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