

# Children and Body weight

Children who are active and enjoy healthy eating will usually have a healthy body weight. Poor health is associated with being very underweight or very overweight.

## What if children are underweight?

Children who are underweight need to be encouraged to eat a variety of foods frequently throughout the day, and to stop play and other activities for these snacks.

## What if children are overweight?

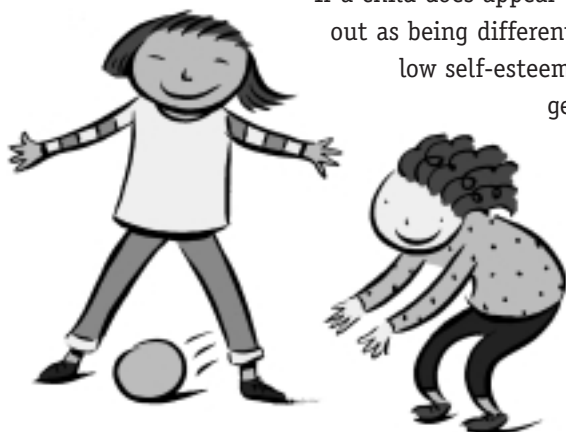
Children who are overweight should not be put on 'diets'. They need to be encouraged to be more physically active and to limit their intake of high-energy snacks such as chocolate, potato crisps, deep fried foods, confectionery and soft drinks.

Overweight children also benefit from being encouraged to eat a wide variety of foods, for example vegetables and fruits.

Family activities, such as bike riding or visiting the playground, are great ways to help children increase their physical activity and provide support for the child trying to manage their weight.



If a child does appear to be overweight, it's important that they are not singled out as being different to other children. Being treated this way may itself cause low self-esteem and lack of confidence. Management of the child who is genuinely overweight requires help from a professional such as an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) or paediatrician. Food intake should never be restricted, as inadequate food can lead to poor physical and mental development. As far as possible, the emphasis is on maintaining, rather than losing, weight and allowing the child to 'grow into' their weight.



## Body image

The way an individual perceives his or her body is called their body image. Unfortunately, society imposes particular body shapes and sizes as the 'ideal' for males and females, which influences our perceptions of our bodies and our value as a person. Children are also influenced by this concept of the ideal body. But body shape is inherited. No amount of physical activity and dieting will change its basic shape.

The way children perceive their bodies can affect their food intake, the way they perceive their abilities and hence their health. It's very important for children to understand their own body and learn about the physical changes that occur as part of growing up. The aim is to develop *normal* eating habits and feel relaxed and comfortable with food, and not feel guilty and afraid to eat for fear of putting on weight.



## Tips for helping your child have a healthy body weight and a healthy body image

- 1 Encourage children to enjoy healthy eating and to be physically active.
- 2 Help children to understand that food is important for good health and teach them how to make healthy food choices.
- 3 Be positive role models for healthy eating and physical activity – have plenty of healthy food choices available and participate in fun activities as a family.
- 4 Encourage children to develop a positive self esteem and body image by helping them to understand there is no ideal body shape and that good health can be achieved by many shapes and sizes.
- 5 Make children feel special about themselves for who they are. Help them understand that their appearance and body shape does not determine their value as a person.
- 6 Try to avoid making comments about body weight in general. Focus more on growth and less on scales. Weighing children who are already conscious of their weight can make them feel more uncomfortable.
- 7 Focus on improved fitness, health and having fun rather than on weight and food restriction.
- 8 Don't force children to 'exercise' or participate in activities that they do not enjoy – this can result in a negative attitude to physical activity throughout life.

If you think your child has a weight problem, seek professional advice.