

How to Have Those Tough Conversations with Parents About Their Child's Health and Weight

Tip Sheet

Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment Child Care (NAP SACC)

Healthy Child Care Project

FORWARD DuPage

www.forwarddupage.org

As early childhood educators and caregivers, we generally have no problem having a conversation about a child's ear infection, a fever, a communicable disease, norms and milestones and general concerns, but when it comes to having a conversation about a child's weight, staff often admit that they are not comfortable and tend to avoid the subject with families. For some staff, weight is personal and they are not sure how to best approach this delicate subject. For others they are afraid of how the family will react or they don't want to put parents on the defensive or make them feel bad. Some staff have said, "I'm not sure it's my business" and others have questioned their credibility in having this conversation with families when they themselves are overweight. Others feel they just don't have enough information to be an "expert" on this matter.

Although there are a number of reasons staff are reluctant to engage a family in a weight discussion, there are also a number of reasons why we should. Early childhood educators and caregivers entered the field because they care about children and want to be a part of helping create an environment for children to excel physically, emotionally, socially and intellectually. Given that commitment, it feels like we're ethically bound to do what is best for children's health and in some cases this means having a tough conversation with parents. If we choose to say nothing, we risk normalizing overweight and we add to the likelihood that a child's habits will continue throughout childhood and into adulthood. And we know from training, that if children carry too much weight, they are at risk for long term chronic illnesses and weight-affected ailments that will impact their health, the quality of their lives and their wallets/pocketbooks for years to come.

We should approach any conversation with families using these basic communication best practices:

1. Be positive and encouraging.
2. Use I statements (do not put the family on the defensive).
3. Ask for permission to engage in the discussion (does the family have time, are they ready to engage in a conversation about this topic).
4. Open with a series of questions. Try to understand the family's position.
5. Be empathic (share your own struggles).
6. Be careful not to sound judgmental (a lot of families struggle with this).
7. Remind them they have a partner in this effort (the center or parent educator).
8. Focus on goal setting but be specific (baby steps, one or two goals at a time, build momentum, celebrate success).

9. Reflect back and summarize what you heard the parents say.

In my search for the best tips, I stumbled upon this piece from The Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. On their website, they share these great tips for Pediatricians for how to talk to parents about children's weight. These same tips seem relevant for early childhood educators, providers and home visitors.

How to Discuss Weight with Parents of Overweight Children¹

When treating an overweight or obese child, it is important to provide parents with appropriate information and to address the topic of weight with sensitivity. Here are some issues to consider:

1. **Educate parents.** Many parents do not have an accurate perception of their child's weight. As a provider, it is important to educate parents about BMI, and to explain the associated health risks at different BMI levels.
2. **Avoid blaming.** There is a certain "stigma" towards parents of overweight children, who are often blamed in society for causing their child's obesity. When parents feel blamed, they are less equipped to help their children, and more likely to be dissatisfied with pediatric care. Avoid using language that places blame on parents, while communicating to parents that they are an important part of the solution to improve their child's health.
3. **Approach weight sensitively.** When talking about weight with parents, and in front of children, certain words that are used to describe body weight can be offensive (e.g., "fat", "obese", and "extremely obese"). As a provider it is important to be mindful of the language you use, and to address the topic of weight with sensitivity using terms such as "weight". You may want to begin by asking the parents and child for their permission to discuss the child's weight. You can also ask the child for preferred terms to describe his/her weight
4. **Have resources available.** Many parents know that their child needs to lose weight but may lack the information to determine how best to help their child or find the information that they have been provided unhelpful (e.g., improve diet and increase exercise). Educators and Providers can guide parents to appropriate resources and suggest specific steps that parents can implement to improve their child's eating habits and physical activity, or how to monitor and measure improvement in their child's behaviors.
5. **Make it a family affair.** It is difficult for a child to successfully improve their eating and exercise patterns if parents and siblings are not doing the same. Providers can encourage parents to make healthy lifestyle changes as a family, rather than imposing a certain health plan only on the child. Give parents examples of appropriate behavioral goals to set for their child, and for the family (e.g., eliminating intake of sugared sodas, or increasing consumption of vegetables).
6. **Share behavioral goals.** Give parents examples of appropriate behavioral goals to set for their child, and for the family (e.g., eliminating intake of sugared sodas, or increasing

¹ Weight Bias Resources for Pediatrics. <http://biastoolkit.uconnruddcenter.org/toolkit/Module-6/6-01-PediatriciansHowTalk.pdf>

consumption of vegetables). Explain the importance of setting realistic goals, and monitoring progress.

7. **Focus on healthy behaviors.** Explain the importance of setting realistic behavior change goals, and monitoring progress. Emphasize to parents the importance of focusing on healthy behaviors in their child, rather than just how much their child weighs. Providers can communicate to parents the importance of providing ongoing positive reinforcement for improvements in their child's health behaviors.

At the very least, as educators we should be prepared to support families in these ways:

1. Look for ways to **engage parents**. Say "I've been concerned about Sam's energy level". "I can't help but notice that Sam holds back and isn't active during outdoor time. I'm concerned because he isn't as active as the other children." "I've noticed that Sam can't seem to get enough to eat when we sit down for a snack or lunch. What are you seeing at home?" "I know we've talked about how Sam carries some extra pounds; I was hoping we could work together to get him to a healthier weight for his body type. May I suggest some materials/tips for you to read and consider." "I've noticed that Sam starts off each morning with a donut and a chocolate milk. The number of calories in the donut and milk can be as much as a third to one half of the calories a child his age should take in each day. Might I suggest Sam have his first or main breakfast at the day here at the center."
2. Keep your **center/program website** up to date with new tips, recipes, and resources. Pull from the NAP SACC handouts, from WE CAN, from the US Department of Agriculture, from Let's Move and any number of sites out there to support families in their quest to help children maintain a healthy weight and develop healthy habits.
3. Send home **handouts or information packets**. Check out FORWARD DUPAGE at www.forwarddupage.org for suggestions on what materials to send to families through the year.
4. Hold **parent workshops**. Ask families what topics they would find interesting and worth their time.
5. Speak with parents (**coach**) at drop-off or pick-up times. Some center staff use this time to "coach" families. Use this time to share children's eating and activity habits, to ask questions and to offer suggestions.
6. Organize **family events and activities** that your families can participate in (Health Fair, Family Night, and Healthy Living Showcase).
7. Start a **Parents Advisory Committee** or Parent Support Group.

Again, while avoiding the issue might be more comfortable, it is highly likely that the family is aware of the issue and may have their own concerns. They may look at your silence as an indicator that no such problem exists or that it is not serious enough to merit a conversation. You could be losing your own credibility by delaying these tough conversations. If the parent responds as you hope they will, you can work together to help children develop healthy eating and physical activity habits. If the parent is not yet ready to address the issue, you'll at least know that you planted a seed and when they are ready for help, you'll be there.