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Understanding Health and the Impact of Diet Culture

Sometimes I look at my daughter next to her thinner friends with a knot in my stomach. I tell myself she's healthy and strong but definitely worry she's "too big." I grew up with comments about my portion sizes, warnings not to "let myself go," and relatives who were always on one diet or another. I don't want my daughter to feel that kind of shame, but I can already feel how it shapes the way I see her.

—Tara

HAS THERE EVER been a moment in your parenting journey when you thought, *There has got to be a better way?*

Maybe it was when your child told you their snack wasn't "healthy," and you wondered where they picked that up.

Or when the pediatrician mentioned your child's weight and you were instantly transported back to being eight years old, hearing the same comments about yourself.

Or maybe it was that moment at the dinner table when you heard yourself say, "No dessert until you finish your veggies," and thought, *I sound just like my mom.*

Whatever sparked it, you felt it—the pull to do things differently and break the cycle. To do that, we first need to take a critical look at the messages about health, food, and bodies that got us here.

What If We've Had the Wrong Definition of Health All Along?

Most of us learned about “health” long before we understood the word. It came bundled with food rules, weight talk, and labels about “good” and “bad” choices.

- Being healthy meant being thin.
- It meant eating “right” and avoiding “junk.”
- It meant not gaining too much weight.

And without even realizing it, we've carried those ideas into snack time, onto our dinner plates, and into the way we talk to our kids.

Those ideas didn't come from out of nowhere. They came from **diet culture**, a system of beliefs that links body ideals with health and worth, promotes weight loss both necessary for health and a moral obligation, and teaches us that only certain ways of eating are “right.” It fuels shame, disordered eating, and disconnection from our bodies' natural cues by keeping us focused on our body sizes instead of living life to its fullest.

And it's not just personal. It's a system that harms people in larger bodies, women, people of color, LGBTQ+ folks, and those with disabilities most of all.

But the real question is, are those messages actually helping us raise healthier kids? Think back to how they made you feel growing up. Did they leave you feeling confident or ashamed? Did they build trust in your body or teach you to second-guess it?

Chances are, they didn't lead to lifelong joy around food. They led to guilt, fear, and a complicated relationship with eating. And these messages don't just shape the way *we* think about food—they influence our kids. Studies show that children exposed to parental dieting, weight-focused conversations, or food rules are more likely to develop disordered eating, body dissatisfaction, and lower self-esteem.

And the scariest part? Kids internalize these messages *young*.

- By age 3, children begin to associate larger bodies with negative traits.
- By age 5, they start worrying about their own body size.
- By age 9, many kids have already experimented with dieting.

This is why the way we talk about food and bodies matters, every single day. So, what if we stopped repeating those messages and started rewriting them?

Health ≠ Weight

Most of us grew up equating health with a number, the one on the scale, the one on the growth chart, or the one on the Body Mass Index (BMI) report that came home from school. But here's the truth: **Health is not a body size.**

Instead of teaching kids to monitor their weight or earn their food, we can help them build skills they'll use for life: listening to hunger and fullness cues, trying new foods with curiosity, and learning to respect their body as it grows. We can create environments where food is joyful, mealtimes are safe and predictable, and we move our bodies because of how good it feels, not how many calories it burns. We can model self-care and body respect for ourselves, showing our kids that health isn't a number but a lifelong practice of caring for our bodies with joy, compassion, and trust.

EXPERT INSIGHT: Health Is More Than a Number: A Weight Inclusive Researcher Perspective

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Over the last few decades, health and fitness professionals have tried to “fix” chronic disease with “just lose weight” messaging, which completely negates the very complex health puzzle.

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In a lot of ways, telling someone to lose weight actually increases stress and worsens health. Now we know that weight is a terrible indicator of health and that health is impacted by many factors outside of the individual's control such as trauma, poverty, food insecurity, unsafe neighborhoods, stigma, and discrimination.

Weight is one of the many factors that make us diverse humans—just like height, hair color, skin, and eye color. Our genetics largely drive body weight, shape, and size. Instead of shaming people for their bodies, we need to celebrate size diversity.

Instead of focusing on changing your child's weight, focus on loving them just the way they are. Teach them that every *BODY* is unique and worthy of love and acceptance.

The Problem with BMI

What do you think of when you hear the phrases “healthy weight,” “overweight,” and “obese”?

In medical terms, these phrases refer to categories outlined by the BMI, a chart that labels weight status as “healthy,” “overweight,” or “obese.” But the BMI was never designed to measure individual health. It was created in the 1830s by Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet to study averages of “the normal man”—white, European men, to be exact. It doesn't account for gender, age, ethnicity, muscle mass, mental health, or lifestyle. Yet, for decades, it's been used as a gatekeeper for healthcare, insurance, and even school report cards.

Thankfully, things are shifting, and even the American Medical Association acknowledged the BMI's limitations in 2023. But many of us still hold the belief that smaller bodies = healthier bodies.

Research tells a different story: People in larger bodies can be metabolically healthy, and people in smaller bodies can have the same health concerns we blame on weight like diabetes and heart disease. A major meta-analysis (a study of many other studies) by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in 2013 found something surprising: The lowest risk of death was in the “overweight” group, and the highest risk

was the “underweight” group. And the “healthy weight” group? Their risk was practically identical to those in the “obese” group.

So why does this matter for parents? Because when we use BMI or weight as our main health marker, we’re not looking at the whole child and we risk missing what’s really important, a child’s emotional well-being, growth pattern, and relationship with food.

Words About Weight Matter

Terms like “overweight” and “obese” are common in healthcare but carry stigma and reinforce weight bias.

“Obese” comes from a Latin word meaning “to have eaten until fat,” which is misleading and inaccurate—bodies come in many shapes and sizes for reasons that have little to do with what we eat. While words like “overweight,” “obese,” and “healthy weight” are common in medicine, research, and everyday conversations, this suggests there’s one “right” weight for health. But research shows health can’t be measured by a single number.

Throughout this book, we’ll use more respectful, inclusive, and accurate language that affirms all bodies such as “small,” “large,” “thin,” and “fat” because bodies don’t need fixing, but the words we use to talk about them do.

What *Real* Health Looks Like

When we strip away diet culture’s influence, health looks very different than what most of us were taught.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as, “A state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

That’s the vision we want for our kids, a whole-child approach to health that asks:

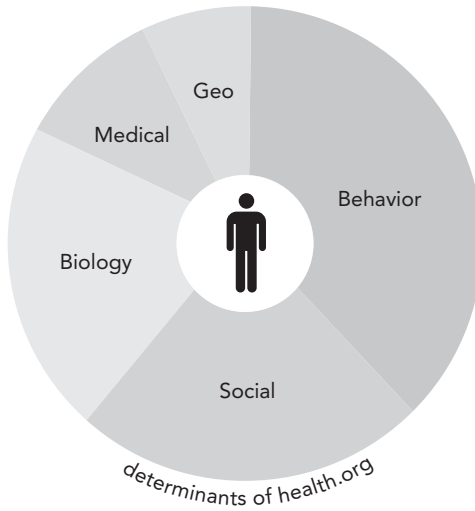
- **Physical well-being:** Are they growing, sleeping, and playing well?
- **Mental and emotional health:** Do they feel happy, supported, and resilient?

- **Social well-being:** Do they feel safe and connected?
- **Body trust:** Can they recognize and respond to their hunger, fullness, and emotions?

When we look at the whole child, it's clear that raising “healthy” kids isn't just about controlling what goes on their plates. It's about fostering an environment that supports *your* child's individual needs and helps them develop the skills they'll need to thrive.

Zoom Out: The Bigger Forces at Play

Once we let go of the idea that health is just about weight, we can start to see the bigger picture. That our kids' well-being is shaped by far more than what's on their plate or how much they move their bodies.



Research shows that only about 30–40% of health outcomes are shaped by individual behaviors (like what we eat, how we move, if we smoke, and whether we wear our seatbelt). The other 60–70% are influenced by factors outside of our direct control and come from the world around us. These are the opportunities, stressors, and access to resources that make up daily life known as the Social Determinants of Health (SDoH).

When we understand these bigger forces, we can release some of the pressure we put on ourselves and our kids to “get it right” with every bite.

Social Determinants of Health: If Health Were a House

Instead of thinking of health as a personal responsibility, think of your family’s health like a house. A safe, sturdy house keeps your family protected, but its strength doesn’t depend on willpower; it depends on when you build it, where you build it, and the materials and conditions available to build and maintain it. Below are the “building materials” in real life:

Blueprint = genetics + biology

Every house starts with a blueprint. Our inherited traits and body functions shape the frame we’re working with. Some frames are naturally sturdy; others need extra care and maintenance.

Daily upkeep = individual behavior

What you eat, how you move, your sleep, and other habits are like routine house maintenance. They matter, but they can’t fix a crumbling foundation or a leaky roof on their own.

Foundation = social circumstances

Education, job opportunities, income, race, and ethnicity, culture, social circles, and access to safe, affordable food form the base your house sits on. A strong foundation keeps everything steady. Cracks, like poverty, discrimination, or food insecurity, make it harder for kids to thrive.

Windows + doors = healthcare access

Compassionate, affordable, quality healthcare—together with health literacy—are like having working windows and doors. They let you get help when you need it. If care is too far away, too expensive, or not culturally sensitive, it’s like being locked out in a storm.

Roof + yard = environment

Safe neighborhoods, clean air, nearby grocery stores, and parks make up the roof and yard that protect and support your family. A strong roof keeps out harm and a safe yard gives kids space to play and grow. A leak in the roof or hazards in the yard—such as crime, pollution, or lack of grocery stores—invite stress and hardship, making it harder for kids to feel secure and thrive.

When we focus only on “personal responsibility,” we miss these massive drivers of health. It’s like blaming parents for a leaky roof without acknowledging that they were given faulty materials, no budget for repairs, and a storm overhead.

Health Is Not Just About Choices, It’s About Access

Most of us were taught that health is as simple as “eat well and exercise.” But real life isn’t that simple.

Because if health were *only* about making “better choices,” then what about the 47 million people in the United States who don’t always know where their next meal is coming from? What about families living in neighborhoods where fresh groceries are too expensive or just not available?

Here’s what we need to name out loud:

- **Food insecurity:** You can’t “choose healthy” if there’s no food to choose from.
- **Food deserts:** Some communities don’t have affordable grocery stores, or any grocery store at all, just fast food or corner stores.
- **Poverty and racism:** Families in lower-income or marginalized communities face higher rates of illness, not because they’re making worse choices but because they have fewer resources, less access to safe places to play, and fewer trusted doctors.
- **Racism is a health risk:** Yep, you read that right. Experiencing discrimination raises stress hormones, which can lead to high blood pressure, heart disease, and mental health struggles.

- **Weight stigma hurts health:** When people are judged for their body size, they're less likely to seek care and more likely to face chronic stress, disordered eating, and poorer health outcomes.

When we put the full weight of health on “personal responsibility,” we end up blaming parents and kids for things they can't control instead of fixing the systems that make health harder for some families than others.

The Role of Trauma and Food Insecurity

Trauma is a powerful force that can shape how kids relate to food. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are a clinical measure of potentially traumatic events—such as abuse, neglect, or household food insecurity, exposure to addiction, or a caregiver's mental illness—and leave a lasting imprint on a child's brain and body.

“Child abuse and neglect is the single most preventable cause of mental illness, the single most common cause of drug and alcohol abuse, and a significant contributor to leading causes of death such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, stroke, and suicide.”

—Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*

Research shows that higher ACE scores increase the risk for chronic diseases later in life, including diabetes, heart disease, depression, and, yes, disordered eating. Kids who experience ACEs are also more likely to struggle with emotional regulation and may turn to food as a way to cope.

And here's the kicker: Food insecurity itself is considered an ACE. Studies show that food insecurity is linked to behaviors like:

- Hoarding or sneaking food
- Eating past fullness because they don't know when their next meal will come
- Distrust of their hunger and fullness cues

- Feeling deep shame around food, even when there's plenty available

When kids grow up in environments where their basic needs aren't consistently met, these survival patterns stay with them. Even when life becomes more stable, these patterns continue to shape how they approach food and their bodies for years to come.

And if *you* grew up in these circumstances, it's common to feel torn: stuck between old food-scarcity beliefs and the desire to give your kids a calmer, more peaceful relationship with eating.

Two Common (but Opposite) Patterns We've Seen

We often think about how diet culture shows up in homes where parents have strict opinions about “healthy” eating and avoiding weight gain.

But there's another pattern we don't talk about enough. Some parents, overwhelmed by financial stress, mental health struggles, or just trying to get by, don't have the bandwidth to support kids with positive food leadership. It's not that they don't care; it's just that fast food and packaged snacks are a lifeline when a family is just trying to get by.

In both highly controlled and unstructured homes (what we'll explore in Chapter 12 as authoritarian versus permissive/neglectful parenting), kids don't grow up with the supportive structures they need. Some may feel guilty about their food choices or bounce between restriction and binging while others blame the convenience foods of their childhood for their food struggles as adults. But in both cases, the real issue is missing out on the support they needed to nourish themselves well from the start.

We're not blaming parents here—in both cases, parents do their best with the tools and resources they have. Many are carrying their own food and body struggles, often passed down from the generations before them. And some families don't fall into either extreme, but diet culture still crept in later through friends, media, or healthcare.

However it showed up, most of us are navigating some version of a world where we didn't have the support we needed.

Parent Reflection

Pause for a moment and notice how you feel after reading this chapter. Diet culture, systemic barriers, trauma, and food access can feel heavy—and that's okay.

You might feel sadness, anger, or even guilt as you think about your own childhood or your parenting journey so far. Every one of these feelings is valid. And you don't have to have it all figured out today to start changing the story.

Bringing It Home

So if you've ever thought, *There has got to be a better way*, you're absolutely right. The messages many of us grew up with about food, bodies, and health weren't neutral—and they often weren't grounded in science either. They were shaped by diet culture and systems that left us anxious and confused, not healthier.

This isn't about blaming the past; it's about noticing where those unhelpful patterns came from so you can choose how to rewrite these messages for *your* family.

And the good news is, you've already started. Just pausing to notice is a huge step. Every time you offer food without pressure, respect your child's hunger and fullness cues, or speak about bodies with curiosity instead of criticism, you're supporting your kids' whole well-being and helping them develop the skills they need to thrive.

While you can't erase weight stigma, fix food deserts, or stop every harmful comment your child hears on the playground—you *can* create a home that feels safe, predictable, and shame-free. Over time, these small choices become a protective shield your child carries with them, helping them sort through all the mixed messages about health, food, and their bodies.

One Simple Step

Notice when the word “healthy” comes up this week in your thoughts, in conversation, or in something your child hears.

Pause and ask yourself:

“What do I really mean by healthy here?”

You don't need to change anything yet. Just start noticing. That awareness alone is a powerful step toward rewriting what health means in *your* family.

Your Food Positivity Practice

Redefining Health: *Making Sense of What I Learned Growing Up*