



Healthy dialogue

Childhood obesity is a hot topic in schools, but it's tricky to discuss with your kids. Consider these six conversation starters to kick the discussion—and a healthier lifestyle—into gear.

BY JOANNE VAN ZUIDAM

The numbers can't be ignored: Roughly a third of children in the United States are now overweight or obese. In response, a growing number of schools are rolling out initiatives aimed at reversing the trend. Some have begun including children's body mass indexes on report cards; others are holding classroom fitness challenges. The downside of such programs is that they can cause kids of all sizes to feel judged, says child-development expert Michele Borba, Ed.D., author of *The Big Book of Parenting Solutions* (Jossey-Bass). Take a tactful approach with these encouraging openers.

"Should we go for a hike or shoot hoops this afternoon?" In addition to helping your child build muscle strength and torch calories, physical activity boosts self-esteem and academic performance. But for kids, the greatest motivator is fun. So instead of making exercise seem like, well, *exercise*, have them choose a physical activity they'll enjoy—and get in on the action yourself. "Despite their reputation for crankiness, teens and tweens do want to spend time with their families," Borba says. "Turning exercise into a group activity is a great way to get them on board."

"Help me map out your lunches." Older kids are a lot like toddlers when it comes to food: They're more likely to eat something they've had a hand in preparing. Tap your teen's desire for independence by going one step further and teaching her grown-up skills such as meal planning and grocery shopping, Borba says. First, discuss what goes into a balanced lunch—lean protein, whole grains, fresh produce, and low-fat dairy—then shop for food together.

"What nights will you be home for dinner this week?" Kids who regularly eat meals with their families tend to have healthier diets and better grades than those who often eat on their own. Try using a central calendar to track everyone's schedules and pinpoint times to get together. If dinners aren't doable, breakfasts and snacks can work, too. When your child sees how much you enjoy fruits and veggies, she'll be inspired to make better choices, Borba says.

"Let's open a savings account for you." Does your child squander his allowance on candy and sodas? Try portioning out his pay in bigger bills (think fives instead of ones). The larger denominations kids carry, the less likely they are to make unhealthy impulse purchases, according to a University of California study. While you're at it, set up a savings account for him. When he sees his balance grow toward a bigger goal—such as that video game he's been bugging you for—he'll have even more reason to skip the vending machine.

"What TV shows should we watch this week?" In a survey from the Kaiser Family Foundation, 45 percent of young people said the television is left on most of the time in their homes. All that idle viewing can chip away at sleep, schoolwork, and staying active. Instead, turn TV watching into a planned event your child can look forward to, Borba suggests. Have her pick a few favorite shows, and keep the tube turned off the rest of the time.

"I'm glad I went for a walk today. I feel great!" What you say about *your* health and body has a powerful trickle-down effect, Borba says. When you meet a healthy goal, stick to positive statements about how you feel, not how you look. And if you experience a setback, don't beat yourself up. "Your kids will pick up on the message—even if it's subtle," Borba says, "and follow your good example." ■