

"Like Mother, Like Daughter..."

"Geez, that girl is fat! She should go on a diet." I can still remember the shock I felt when one of my daughter's friends uttered that phrase about a girl walking past us in the park. Even more shocking is that my daughter and her pal were only four years old. I knew I was destined to hear such a conversation, being the mom of a girl, but I didn't think it would happen so soon.

On any given day, more than half of U.S. women are on diet. And, a recent *Teen People* magazine survey of 1,000 teens showed that 39% worry about their weight. And, while there are many factors that influence whether an adolescent will develop a positive or negative body image, research shows us that, intentionally or unintentionally, mothers are very influential. The mother-child bond is the first primary relationship we experience, and it greatly impacts what we believe about ourselves.

In her book *Outsmarting the Mother-Daughter Food Trap: How to Free Yourself From Dieting – and Pass on a Healthier Legacy to Your Daughter*, author Debra Waterhouse, MPH, RD, says mothers "unknowingly pass the torch" to their daughters. She surveyed more than 100 moms who had good and seemingly innocent food intentions toward their preadolescent daughters, yet these intentions still resulted in unhealthy eating habits for their daughters. The moms were limiting junk food, putting their girls on low-fat diets, making sure there were no sweets in the house, and not allowing for snacks between meals. Waterhouse reminds us that daughters will react in one of two ways: rebelling – and then overeating when mom isn't around, or, accepting their mother's advice and not eating at all when mom isn't looking. She explains that if a mom has disordered eating, she is more likely to try to control her daughter's eating. In return, the daughter is more likely to become a disordered eater and to be overweight. On the other hand, if mom is an intuitive eater – eating when she's hungry, stopping when she's full, and enjoying a wide variety of foods – the daughter is more likely to become an instinctive eater and maintain a comfortable weight.

Waterhouse appears to be right on target. I can't count the number of women who have come to my office for help losing weight, bringing with them their vivid memories of mom and dieting. "You're getting a little chunky aren't you?", "Are you sure you need that?", "You have such a pretty face. . ." are commonly uttered phrases. And, sadly, we haven't come a long way when it comes to today's generation of kids. Many well-meaning parents bring their children to my office for help with nutrition and weight issues, but aren't willing to step on the scale themselves or make changes in their own lives. Fortunately, we've taught many kids how to be healthier and become role models for the rest of the family!

According to *Meals Matter*, a non-commercial website developed and supported by the Dairy Council of California, children learn by example. They suggest answering the following questions to get a sense of how your attitude might influence your children.

- Do you snack all day long?
- Do you eat in front of the TV?
- Do you eat whenever you are bored or under stress?
- Do you eat dessert at every meal?
- Do you skip breakfast?
- Do you have sodas rather than milk with your meals?
- Do you diet all the time and have a fear of food?
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If you answered "yes" to more than a few of these questions, you are likely sending unhealthy messages to your child about food. If you are eating poorly or skipping meals, your child is going to pick up on it. If you're anxious and unable to manage your own eating, you may pass that on to your child. Establishing healthy habits can be very difficult for children who receive mixed messages. They won't perceive healthy eating as important if it is not something they see you doing. As is the case with many parenting issues, actions speak louder than

words. Hmm, good advice to follow as I remember sitting down to a big bowl of popcorn after an especially long day. What was it my daughter said.....?

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