

Words with weight

Raising healthy, happy children with nurturing words

By Janette Andrews

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me"

Remember this familiar playground chant? It may be a popular saying, but how true is it?

Words play an essential part in the development of children, particularly in how they view their bodies and self-worth.

As parents, the words we use to describe our children – at *any given moment* – have the power to shape their thoughts, habits and, ultimately, health. Even seemingly meaningless comments parents say to their children or to others in the presence of their children can have a lasting effect.

Your words can equip your child with self-confidence and self-value or adversely affect their self-image and health.

Are you aware of the weight of *your* words?

Please pass the butter

As a young child, I can recall few moments of closeness with my grandfather. He wasn't a bad guy – he was a hard worker, a joker, and the head of a very large family. But bonding wasn't his thing. He didn't take me out for ice cream on sunny, summer days; he didn't teach me the handy world of his toolbox. In fact, there were very few times when the two of us were alone together, and even fewer times when I felt I had his undivided attention.

While I do have fond memories of my grandpa, unfortunately, not all of them are positive.

Growing up with an older sister, I was the "chubby" member of the sibling duo. My sister was naturally skinny, and ate whatever she wanted without leaving any trace of what my mother called "baby fat."

One day, as we were all sitting in my grandparents' dining room eating lunch, my sister reached for the tub of butter and spread a knife-full

over a piece of bread. My grandpa laughed and said, "She can afford the butter." Then, nudging his head in my direction, "She can't."

His words stung. I remember wondering, "Why did he say that? *I* wasn't even using the butter." As I reflect on it now, I see how, over the years, his comment subconsciously caused me to feel as if I didn't deserve to eat or enjoy food the same way my sister could.

Lasting words

It seems silly to become so upset over a trite comment made so many years ago – one that I'm sure meant nothing to my grandpa. But even now, it brings up issues of guilt, self-worth and resentment. It turns out, I'm not alone.

A 2009 survey done by Pat Altvater, author and creator of the Women Outsmarting Weight™ system, found that many women who were overweight as children remember one random derogatory statement made to them in regards to their weight or body image. "That comment and its negative effects on self-esteem may subconsciously influence their behavior forever," says Altvater. Her upcoming book, *Mamas, Don't Let Your Children Grow Up to Be Dieters*, teaches families how to nurture their children physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually so they grow into adults that know how to be healthy and live balanced lives. Altvater says "Every word you speak as a parent plays an important role in how you nurture your child."

Susie, one of the women in Altvater's study, was ten years old when, on a family trip, her father drove past a truck weigh station and said, "Maybe we should stop and weigh Susie here." While in therapy, in her twenties, Susie confronted her dad about it and he didn't even remember saying it. Yet, thirty years after the incident, Susie still cried when recalling the comment.

Why did this one statement have such an effect on Susie? Altvater explains, "That one statement affected her self-esteem deeply and continues to do so because her father was emotionally unavailable to her as a child. She didn't feel a nurturing or loving connection between the two of them. Today, she is a very beautiful, average size 14 adult, but perceives herself as unacceptable looking."

A nurturing home, a safe haven

Parents play an important role in our children's lives. We are responsible for nurturing our children and providing a loving and safe environment. When children feel their parents don't accept them for who they are, their feelings of self-worth are diminished.

In her book *Underage and Overweight*, Frances M. Berg, M.S., L.N, says, "For some children, fat oppression, teasing and ridicule comes from inside the family circle, so there is no escape from tormentors."

What happens when a child – especially one who is overweight – has no safe haven, even in their own home?

Altvater says "Parents or grandparents judgmental comments, even when made in jest, deeply affect children unless there is also plenty of love and nurturing given to the child from that same person, which is typically not the case. The belief that they are being judged by how their body looks leads to thought patterns and behaviors that, in most cases, adversely affect their weight as an adult."

As a parent, you have the power to equip your child with the tools of self-confidence and self-value. "When children have a strong family support system built on unconditional love and nurturing, they are more likely to value themselves," explains Altvater. "Issues, such as body weight, can be addressed head on as a challenge to be faced and overcome, with no judgment attached to it. When this is done, children are more likely to incorporate self-empowering traditions, such as healthy eating and regular exercise."

Positive word power

In *Rescuing the Emotional Lives of Overweight Children*, Sylvia Rimm, Ph.D. teaches parents that their emotional support must be strong enough to compete with the criticisms of the outside world. She explains, "Overweight children may already be bombarded by...nasty talk from others. [Parents'] positive descriptions have to be convincing enough so they can let others' negative comments deflect off them."

Here are just a few ways to show your unconditional love for your child through your words:

1. *Emphasize your child's positive traits.*

"Because children who don't have control over their eating often feel like failures in many ways, it's good to begin an empowering conversation by pointing out a child's strengths. Qualities such as kindness and consideration...may encourage children to realize their capabilities," explains Rimm.

2. Focus on health at every size.

"The goal of healthy children of all sizes is supported when they receive consistent messages of encouragement to live actively, eat well, and feel good about themselves and others," says Berg. "When these positive messages come from those important to them...then weight and eating problems diminish or are prevented."

3. Openly discuss the importance of health to your family.

Altwater says, "If a pediatrician suggests your child is heavy, addressing it directly in an open and loving manner is a positive approach. First, let your child know that your concern is for their health and that your love for them is not based on their appearance. Then, present the issue as just a challenge for the child to overcome. Allowing them to make choices among strategies to implement ultimately helps the child develop self-discipline and enhances their self-esteem."

Your words have the ability to build a strong sense of self-confidence and self-love within your children. By being conscious of words, parents can instill in their children the belief that they deserve and are capable of creating a life of health and happiness.