

# A heavy topic: how to change the way your family speaks about weight

Glenn Mackintosh, The Guardian, Wed 15 Jan 2020

5 Weight bias is as prevalent in today's society as diet plans. And detox teas. And the celebrities who promote diet plans and detox teas.

When we experience weight stigma – and I'm not talking about being fat, I'm talking about feeling as if you're too fat – it puts us at risk of disordered eating, makes us avoid exercise (especially in public), worsens our physical and mental health, and even limits our future employment opportunities.

10 While the mainstream media, the beauty industry, social media and health professionals' weight bias all play their role in the macrocosm of body negativity, sometimes the most powerful influences are from those closest to us.

15 In particular, parents have an impact not only on their children's body image but also that of their children's children. A healthy attitude to one's body is a struggle to achieve even without the family baggage of body image issues.

Throw snide remarks from relatives into the mix and you have a situation that can not only be difficult for children, but also trigger parents' weight concerns as they relive diet trauma from their own childhoods.

20 So for parents who are struggling with this all-too-common challenge, here are some ideas for filtering out the body negativity that can sometimes go along with free babysitting.

## Have a heart-to-heart

25 Your parents are so used to telling you what to do, and can become so fixed in their ways, that it can be really hard to get through to them. Without trying, they can see your comments through the lens of their (probably weight-biased) belief system, and also their judgments of your belief system (let's face it, counter-diet-culture ideas are still pretty new to people and far from widely embraced).

30 The way to cut through this is to go really deep. Be vulnerable and show them the real feelings going on underneath any anger or frustration. As they love you and (presumably) want what's best for you, this can be surprisingly powerful. If you feel they are safe to be vulnerable with, have the deep and meaningful conversation. Don't make them out to be the bad guy and try to shift your focus from the transgressions of the past to the possibilities of the future.

## Set rules

Sometimes (for a million reasons) the big sit-down chat won't (or doesn't) work. In this case, set up some clear rules for your house and kids. Your parents probably set rules with you, so

35 they know how rules work. And if your parents don't understand (or agree with) the underlying principles, sometimes you need to be extra clear about the actions themselves.

Rules may sound something like, "We don't talk about weight in our house," or, "In our family, the parents provide the food and the kids decide what they'll eat." Rules may require constant reminders ("Mum, Anna's fine to eat some of that. Anna, you enjoy it, darling!") or have  
40 reasonable consequences, such as, "When you mention my child's weight, either you leave or we do."

## **Buffer and educate**

Despite your heart-to-hearts and rules, some parents just won't play ball. If you perceive your parents' actions are really damaging, you may choose to limit contact with them for this reason.  
45 The contact that remains can provide a good real-time learning opportunity to educate kids about society's corrosive messages, and how to deal with them. "That's just Grandpa – when he grew up there wasn't a lot of food around, so he gets really upset when people leave food on their plate. In our time we have too much food, so it's OK to leave it if you've had enough."

It can also be a great opportunity to build resilience: "I know Grandma said you're getting a  
50 little tummy, and that made you feel upset, but Grandma is a bit old and she sometimes says silly things – it doesn't mean it's true or we have to worry too much about it."

However you approach these sometimes challenging conversations, be sure to do it with kindness, empathy and understanding. No one's ever open to accepting feedback when they're being hammered, and modelling good communication is the best way to encourage someone  
55 else to play ball.

Social change happens because people need it to, and elevated conversations really do have the power to create a better society. These conversations may not only help you and your children, but their children and the children of generations to come. After all, racism, homophobia and sexism are all – to varying degrees – dying slow intergenerational deaths ... why not fat phobia  
60 too?