



## Parents often play key role in shaping kids' body image

This column is a request for all present and future parents to help their children strive for a healthy body, but not at the expense of their self-esteem. An increasing number of young adults are dissatisfied with their bodies, not just because of the images they see on infomercials or in celebrity magazines or TV shows, but what they learned from a parent while growing up.

This year one of our students at the University of Hawaii shared the following excerpts from an unsent letter to her mother. Her childhood memories of her mother's contradictory relationship with food and body weight now dictate her own food choices and daily actions. Although unintentional, the actions and words of many parents are burned onto childhood memories as if they happened yesterday.

### Message to Mom:

I didn't know you were unhappy when you looked in the mirror until I was about 12. Then I heard you mumbling to yourself, "I am so fat today, I hate it. I don't know what to wear. Nothing fits or looks good! I hate this part of my body. I wish I could just get rid of it. Why did I eat that?"

I learned from watching you go through outfit after outfit, more

disgusted with each change, somehow feeling that the fat was your own fault. Not feeling fat was simply seeing a smaller number when stepping on the scale. Happiness was a small number. Anything else was unacceptable and sad.

Daily, you cooked homemade meals from scratch, with natural and wholesome ingredients. I felt your love for cooking and food as a means to bring our family together over a meal. But then I watched you get dressed to go somewhere right after this meal, and you couldn't find anything in your closet that gave you happiness when you put it on. You blamed that very same beautiful meal for your discontent.

The relationship you have with your body and food is now the relationship I have with my body and food. It makes me sad and angry. I have had a long and habitual obsession with scrutinizing my reflection in the mirror after every single meal and even between meals, just to be sure no extra pounds have crept on without my knowledge. Throughout middle school, high school and college, I have been obsessed with things like vegetarianism, extreme diets, fear of unhealthy food, and obsessive exercise. What lasts is the

mentality that when I look in the mirror (which is so often it is vain), the quality of my life is dictated by my weight.

Life is so much bigger and more beautiful than that reflection in the mirror. It has love, acceptance, joy and hope to offer. Mom, I wish you could have experienced these without your body image getting in the way.

### Our message to all caring people:

Tell your daughters, sisters and friends that they are beautiful people. For this reason, they owe it to themselves to eat healthy, wholesome food and stay active because they love their body and want it to work well into old age. Prepare today's youth with a healthy self-image and confidence in their minds and hearts. As they face a world that tends to value image over substance, they can maintain self-esteem and live a full rich life regardless of others' twisted perspectives.

This column focused on females, but this also holds true for males of all ages. Because adequate calories and essential nutrients are needed both for normal physical and mental health, the goal should be to aim for a healthy, fit body whatever the weight or size.

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