



by | Matthew McNutt

Obese children suffer greater emotional burdens than children with cancer.

Talking to Kids about Weight and Health



That is the result of a study that recently hit the news and the Internet with a boom. Researchers found that young people fighting cancer receive great support and encouragement while those struggling with weight are the recipients of ridicule and isolation.

While this comparison was startling, it also shed some light on what kids with weight-related issues are going through on a daily basis.

However, I was most shocked to read that the leading contributors to this “emotional burden” are adults. Specifically parents and other significant role models involved in young people’s lives.

At first I thought that might be a bit of an overstatement. Something to grab headlines. I mean, come on, I remember high school; I was teased about my weight all the time. While not significantly overweight (yet), I was the heaviest kid, and everyone knew it. Yet, I can’t really pinpoint specific instances when kids made fun of me. I vaguely remember that it was a regular thing, but there isn’t one time that really jumps out in my memory.

On the other hand, there’s a teacher who comes to mind immediately. I have crystal-clear memories of his jokes about my weight from the front of the class and during school activities. I remember him making fun of my athletic ability, the size of my stomach, and the way I jiggled when I ran. (I’m actually getting tense just typing these words 15 years after the fact!)

The hurt and shame from his teasing far outweighed anything my peers said or did. He was the one who was supposed to guide and protect me and instead, however unintentionally, he led the assault on my self-image.

Then again, these days many of us have become so cautious about hurting teenagers’ feelings that we’re reluctant to bring up weight at all. It’s actually gotten to the point where doctors now warn parents that their children are “at risk of being overweight” when they’re actually obese! Why? Fear of potentially negative responses.

Consequently, the adults in most kids’ lives are either ignoring their weight problems or trying to shame them into thinness.

Is there a balance that youth workers can approach for the sake of the students to whom God has called us? An approach that promotes healthier lifestyles? Absolutely.

In fact, since our bodies are the temples of God, we have more at stake here—more of a responsibility to address the health of our young people than anyone from any other organization out there. So here are some ways that we can approach this topic with young people:

- *Clean up your own act!* Don’t expect teenagers to follow your advice about honoring God with their food and activity choices if all they ever see you do is eat junk food and sit around. That’s hypocrisy, and it’s obnoxious. No one wants to hear they shouldn’t be eating a king-size Snickers from the guy with Dorito stains on his fingers! It doesn’t matter what shape you’re in, either; if you want kids to make healthy choices, you have to model it.

- *Plan physical events.* We need fewer video game nights, movie nights, or pizza chow downs and many more hikes. Do basketball tournaments, paintball, biking, laser tag, rock-wall climbing, bowling, roller-skating...the list goes on and on. (And you know all about the fringe benefits; there *is* something indescribably satisfying about nailing that one mouthy seventh-grader in dodgeball. You can’t admit it to parents, but you and I both know it’s true.)
- *Cut out the jokes about your own body.* It’s a given that you shouldn’t be teasing the kids about their weight and bodies, but it’s equally important to not mock your own physical being. If we’re trying to instill in them a self-identity that views their bodies as the temples of God—and the enormous gift that status represents—then making fun of your own temple undermines that reality.
- *If you feel led to talk to certain teenagers about your concerns regarding their health or how they’re taking care of their bodies, do so carefully.* Approach it like you would any issue of concern—with love, kindness, a desire for growth, and a willingness to be a part of the process. This might mean joining a sports activity with these students or connecting them with another leader who works out regularly. Just remember that while some reject the call to action, others respond to it positively. That’s not something you can control. Either way, honor your calling and responsibility to this generation of young people.

Finally, let me make one thing clear: Kids don’t need diets; they need healthy lifestyles and habits. I regularly tell kids not to worry about the scale and instead to focus on getting four to five hours of physical activity per week and learning to eat in a way that’s good for their bodies. I can almost guarantee that just doing the latter will take care of any weight concerns within a year or two—and without getting into any dangerous diet habits or quick-fix fads. 🍓



Matthew McNutt

is the youth pastor at Boothbay Baptist Church in Boothbay, Maine. As a contestant on *The Biggest Loser* in 2006, he hopes to set a healthy spiritual and physical example for other youth workers who are, in turn, setting examples for the young people in their care. You can get in touch with Matthew at www.tjoms.com