

Live Light Live Right Blog article response to Aubry Gordon's opinion article "Leave Fat Kids Alone" (New York Times, 2020) <https://nyti.ms/38lhoUZ>

by

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Aubry Gordon's opinion article "Leave Fat Kids Alone" (New York Times, 2020) <https://nyti.ms/38lhoUZ> presents the impact of words on a child's body image and mental health when it comes to weight. The overarching theme of the article is that while it is important to help children maintain a healthy weight that does not mean saying whatever comes to mind without thought of how it will impact the child. This blog article will respond to and expand on the points raised by Gordon, with the ideas reflecting those of Dr. Sarita Dhuper here at Live Light Live Right.

Gordon starts off with an anecdote of herself at the doctor's office learning for the first time that she was overweight. We wish to point out that how a child is approached in a pediatrician's office is important. Blaming a child for being fat is not correct; instead, be empathetic, take care of them, and hold back on personal opinions. This is not to say that the topic of weight should be brushed under the carpet. The first step is to gain permission from the parents or guardian and child to discuss concerns about height, weight, and BMI, the way we receive consent for other issues. Weight should be discussed from a scientific perspective instead of personal opinions, and a plan can be created with the parents or guardian and child.

"You're not beautiful. You're indulging too much. Your body is wrong." These three sentences from Gordon stand out in her article. Even if someone does not explicitly say this, they are how children can perceive other comments about their weight and physical appearance. Children (and adults) are sensitive when it comes to external appearances and a common first thought is that others do not like them. Even if the point is made that you intend to help the child and it is for their good, it may not be perceived this way by the child.

However, pediatricians are not completely to blame for this. Sometimes, children may hear similar comments at home from parents or relatives-- before it starts at the doctor's office, it starts at home. Children may not feel so shattered at the doctor's office if these comments did not float around at home either. Furthermore, parents with multiple children may treat them differently if one is of healthy weight and one is heavier. While parents and siblings are having desert or second helpings, overweight or obese children may be left watching on the sidelines. We encourage parents to have the same standards for health across their children. Children of healthy weight may become overweight one day or develop diet-related diseases even if they are of a healthy weight. Parents are responsible for promoting healthy diets at home and they should do so via role modeling and ensuring the same standards for all family members.

This may raise the question of what is considered a healthy diet. This may encompass a plant-based diet with enough protein and avoidance of processed foods and sweetened beverages. However, there is no purely good or purely bad food. It all depends on quantity, frequency of consumption, and who is consuming it. Commonly labeled “bad” foods, such as junk food or sugary beverages, can be enjoyed too, just in moderation. With the Live Light Live Right’s Nutritional Handbook, you can gain more information about healthy eating and portion sizes. The Nutritional Handbook can be found at this link: https://www.livelight.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/nutritional_handbook1.pdf. Child-friendly recipes can also be found on our blog at <https://www.livelight.org/category/blog/kid-friendly-recipes/>.

Obesity is stigmatized in our society and depression is associated with obesity. It is crucial to be careful of how campaigns against childhood obesity are promoted. While obesity is definitely a problem that we should focus on, there is a scientific *and* empathetic way to treat this, like any other disease. Overweight and obese children are not fun gimmicks for billboards and campaigns should depict healthy food options, water, and exercise instead. To be clear, we are not against campaigns in general-- we are against showing children’s figures. Our campaigns are based on our vision, which is to provide integrative, personalized, and effective care for children and families struggling with obesity that transform lives and inspire communities. Campaigns and posters should be positive and show children having fun instead of focusing on their physical appearances.

Gordon wraps up her piece by mentioning that as of 2017, about half of the states in the U.S send “BMI report cards” home to parents to track their child’s body mass index. It seems that this kind of tracking is similar to the way vaccinations are tracked. Is this the correct way to go about children’s health and weight? Should weight status be left to schools or to doctors?

It may be better to leave this to doctors as schools may not be able to do much to help the children even if they identify a high BMI. Although there is a good intention behind schools distributing such “report cards,” it may not convey the proper message to families. We need to raise awareness about obesity in families regardless of whether their children are obese or not. This way, before children become overweight, they are already used to having these conversations with their family and doctors. If they do become overweight, speaking about weight and physical appearance may be an easier conversation to have and children may feel more comfortable discussing such topics.

Preventive care starts from infancy. Parents should be aware that children with healthy weights may not always stay that way forever. Similarly, many pediatricians wait until children are obese to start conversations about weight. We encourage and push for early intervention for all children, from both parents and pediatricians.

Please contact the Live Light Live Right program for more information on our programs to achieve fitness and improve metabolic health. Call 718-221-1598 or visit our website livelight.org for more details.

