

# 5 Ways To Model A Healthy Relationship With Food.

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# Introduction

When I'm working with clients who want heal their relationship with food, we explore some of the food rules they learned growing up. As children, we model the behaviour of our parents and we soak up information from watching how they relate to food and their own bodies.

This topic is particularly close to my heart as I can remember being around 8 years old and thinking to myself "when I'm older I really don't want to be on a diet!". I didn't know how I would avoid having to diet as it seemed that it was just part of being an adult. In particular, the women I witnessed growing up were always counting calories, eating low-fat versions of their favourite desserts and buying clothes they would hope to fit into three months later.

For as long as I can remember I was acutely aware of what would foods would make me thin and what would make me fat... or at least I thought I knew. What I did knew for sure, was that dieting looked absolutely miserable!

In client sessions I love to witness the 'lightbulb moment' where they're able to pinpoint a current eating behaviour to something they learned as a child. These realisations help make sense of long-practiced habits and enable us to replace them with new and better serving behaviours.

However these lightbulb moments are often followed by a second realisation. I see a wave of panic wash over a clients face as they say "I've been passing this on to my kids".

So before we dive in, lets not panic about previous things you may have said in front of your kids or dinner time rules you have implemented at home!

“ We do the best we can with the knowledge we have at the time. ”

If you're still panicking, please read that again! You don't need a dose of parenting guilt to go alongside years of food guilt. Besides there is still limited research and ongoing debate about the long term impact of parental behaviours on a child's eating habits. The best thing you can do is to continue improving your own relationship with food. Modelling health promoting behaviours and a healthy relationship with food will have a positive impact on your kids.



# Minimise Diet Culture References

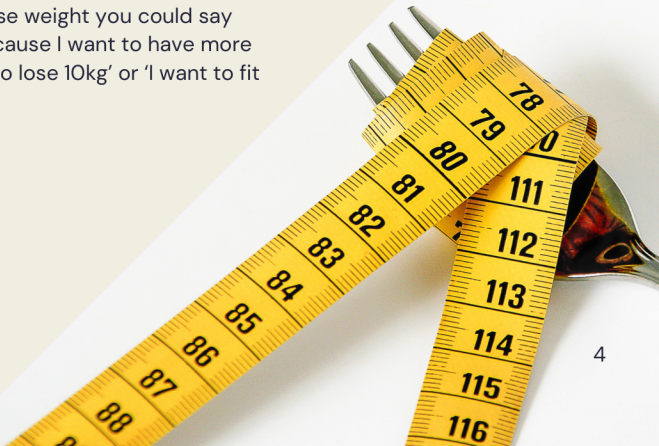
➤ Can you remove scales from the house or avoid weighing yourself in front of your kids? The aim here is to avoid showing any judgment around the number on the scale, whether it is moving up or down.

➤ Be mindful of how you refer to bodies with terms like 'fat' or 'skinny'. Using these words isn't inherently bad but try to use them as non-judgemental descriptors. By that I mean, avoid suggesting either is good or bad.

➤ Body size isn't always representative of health and much of what we see representing health in the media can be very misleading. When we see a model on a magazine cover we are sold an image of someone who lives a healthy life but in reality, we don't know the real context. Do they have energy? Do they eat a wide range of foods or struggle with restriction or orthorexia? Do they sleep well? Are their hormones balanced? Will they be able to sustain this shape healthily or did they do a quick diet just for this photoshoot?

➤ People can lose weight due to stress or illness and in some cultures gaining weight is seen as a sign of wealth! We need to start separating *healthy behaviors* from *healthy appearance*. When speaking about health with your kids, focus the conversation on health-promoting behaviors such as exercising for a healthy heart and eating nutritious food for energy rather than achieving a certain look.

➤ If you are currently trying to lose weight you could say things like 'I'm doing things because I want to have more energy' rather than 'I'm trying to lose 10kg' or 'I want to fit into my jeans'.



# Be Mindful of How You Speak About Yourself

We all have insecurities and these can easily be passed on to children who are watching how you relate to your body as they learn how to relate to their own. Be mindful of how you speak about your body in front of your kids. This is also a great opportunity to practice being kinder to yourself!

## Avoid using phrases like:

- "I don't like my arms"
- "I need to lose weight"
- "I'm too fat to wear that at the moment"
- "I want to lose a few pounds before going in the pool".



## If you catch yourself saying the above statements, try to reframe them:

- "I like that my arms are strong enough to give you a hug"
- "I like that my legs are strong enough to run around with you"

This can be tough if you're struggling with body image, I'm not a big fan of saying mantras in the mirror that you don't believe to be true. I think my brain would wonder who I'm trying to kid if I suddenly start telling it that I love a body part that I've been beating up my whole life. I find that identifying things you are truly grateful for can be a more helpful first step.



# The Division of Responsibility

## **You Provide, the child decides.**

This concept was coined by feeding expert Elynn Satter. The idea is that it's the parent's responsibility to provide the food and make the decisions such as where it is served, meal times, and the type of food provided.

It is the child's responsibility to decide if they want to eat the food, and how much of it they want to eat. The child decides what to try and what to leave. The theory is that children can self-regulate their eating if the right environment is provided.

Think of how babies will let you know when they're hungry and pull their heads away when they're done feeding. We are born with innate hunger and fullness cues. Continue to encourage children to listen to their intuition and internal feedback.

- 1) Do you currently add pressure to eat or not eat something?
- 2) Do you try to restrict the amount of food or type of foods consumed in one sitting?
- 3) Do you model the behaviors you want your child to adopt? For example, if you want them to eat a variety of fruits and veg, let them see you do the same.

## ARE THERE ANY MEAL POLICIES YOU MIGHT WANT TO LOOSEN?

### Common household policies:

**"You have to clean your plate".**

**"You have to eat all your vegetables".**

**"You have to try every food on the plate".**

**"There will be no dessert if you don't eat all of your dinner".**

Practice trusting your child's judgment. As you can probably relate, some days, some foods are less appealing than others. This is about giving a bit of freedom for kids to listen to their body's cues and to maintain trust in what it tells them.

# Remove Desserts From Their Pedestal

Were you ever told you would only get dessert as a reward for eating a whole meal or threatened that there would be no dessert if you didn't tidy your bedroom? Using desserts as treats or rewards can put sugar on a pedestal and ultimately make it way more desirable!

Some experts suggest giving dessert at the same time as the main meal as this can help create a more 'neutral' belief about sugar.

**“But if I allow my kids to eat sugar they will not stop!”**

I hear you and this a valid concern! One study found that around 80% of children said yes when they were offered a hyper-palatable snack even if they had just eaten a meal. There is a good chance that if you start making sugar more available, they will want to eat more of it than you would like them to at first. Again, this is about trusting a child's ability self-regulate the amount they consume and encouraging them to listen to their body.

Have a think in advance about how you might want to implement this in a way that feels comfortable to you. For example, you probably won't want to start experimenting with sugar close to bed time.

If you're concerned they may be going overboard, try asking questions like “how does your tummy feel?” “Are you still hungry?” “Sometimes you might get a sore tummy if you eat too much of that at once” or “it might keep you awake if you eat it now”.

Where possible, shift the discussion away from foods being 'good' or 'bad' and encourage kids to notice how those foods make them feel instead.



# Ditch Food Morality, Encourage Neutrality

Phrases to avoid  
in order to ditch food  
morality:

Try these instead  
to encourage food  
neutrality:

I shouldn't eat that.

I enjoy fast food but I feel tired  
or get hungry quickly after I  
eat it.

I'm trying to be good.

I've been so bad today.

I love sweets but I don't sleep  
well if I eat them before bed.

Cheat day.

This type of food makes me  
feel full of energy.

Good food.

Bad food.

This type of food makes me  
feel tired if I eat too much of it.

Fattening food.

Some foods give you lots of  
energy so you can run around  
for a long time. Others give  
you energy quickly but don't  
keep you full for long.

Reward.

Treat day.

## Take these as gentle suggestions only.

You decide which of these will work for you, your home, and your family. As I mentioned at the beginning, further research is needed on the impact that parental pressure to eat or control food has on children's long-term eating habits. Having a healthy relationship with food yourself is the best way to pass it on to your kids.

If you have any concerns about your child's eating habits or body weight always reach out to your doctor or nutritionist for advice.



# The Eating Freely™ Program

Eating Freely™ is an evidence backed program that helps you to **stop emotional eating and feel free around food, forever!**

- › Are you fed up with always being on a diet?
- › Do you feel emotionally dependent on food?
- › Do you wonder why some people have such an easy relationship with food but for you, it's a struggle?
- › Are your eating behaviors getting in the way of your goals and affecting your confidence?

## What does the program do?

- › Gets you out of the Yo–Yo diet cycle.
- › Reduces episodes of Emotional Eating and Binge Eating.
- › Helps you reset your gut for improved mood and energy levels.
- › Re–wires your relationship with food so you never need to diet again.
- › Help you to feel balanced and free around food, forever!

## How does it work?

**Cognitive Behavioural Therapy** to change your behavior.

**Nutritional Rehabilitation** to balance your energy levels without restriction.

**Neuroscience** to identify and replace unhelpful habits.

**Mindfulness Techniques & Coaching** to create a transformation that lasts.

## Ready to change your relationship with food?

Book a free consultation call at: <https://kirstymcintyre.as.me>

or check out the website: [www.kirstymcintyre.com](http://www.kirstymcintyre.com)

## ABOUT KIRSTY

Kirsty is a UK–trained Emotional Eating & Binge Eating Disorder Specialist and a Licensed Eating Freely™ Practitioner. She helps adults break free from the cycle of yo–yo dieting and emotional eating and to finally feel free around food, forever!



## REFERENCES

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