

WEIGHT LOSS



# Mummy, do I look fat in this?

Has the media's obsession with diet and exercise produced a generation of fat-fearing 10 year olds? Psychologists **Dr Peta Stapleton** and **Terri Sheldon** investigate.

It is becoming common knowledge that 25 per cent of Australian children are overweight or obese (approximately 26 per cent of boys and 23 per cent of girls aged four to 14) – more than at any other time in our recorded history, and it has been predicted that this figure will increase to 50 per cent by the year 2020.

Recent reports reveal that more than 60 Queensland teenagers some as heavy as 180kg, have resorted to stomach banding surgery, while overweight teenage boys are resorting to having their breasts reduced to avoid embarrassment and to improve their self-esteem.

Recent media attention highlighting the state of our nation's childhood obesity crisis has led to a range of 'fix-it' approaches. These have included fitness and training programs for children, school canteens colour-coding food and drink items into 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' and food franchises introducing lower calorie options in their children's meals. But is this sudden over-emphasis on 'healthy' food having a negative impact on our children and teenagers?

The growing obesity crisis is leading to unrealistic fears of being overweight, and experts suggest people of normal weight are now very aware and concerned about their body shape — one in 10 to an

extreme degree. The warning signs are being reflected in the four-fold increase in admissions for eating disorders in the past three years, with children as young as 10 now being treated for bulimia and anorexia.

Children who are overly focused on their weight and body image

professional) and making exercise and activity a normal, frequent and fun event will assist children to create lifelong patterns that are not about restriction and limit but about self efficacy and resilience.

Finally, always keep in mind that psychological issues can underlie

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may need to have this challenged – especially if their beliefs are not accurate. If your child seems overly focused on their weight and body image it's important that you ask them why they believe they might be fat, unhealthy or otherwise. Hoping that they will 'grow out of it' or ignoring their comments with the same intention could prove to be disastrous in later years. You will not subconsciously reinforce anything by tackling this head on, although some parents worry they might. If your child truly needs help with their weight, engage the experts rather than tackling this with a 'diet' at home.

Providing abundant food options that are approved energy sources (ideally from a specialised

body image concerns and weight gain. Wanting to lose weight is not always a physical state. The most widespread consequence of being overweight and obesity in children is psychological. Social and psychological consequences can include stigmatization, discrimination and prejudice and be very difficult for a child to manage so it's important that you get help from a professional.

*Dr Peta Stapleton and Terri Sheldon are psychologists with 35 years of combined clinical experience. They have developed the SlimMinds Program that teaches the latest effective psychological techniques to weight loss. See [www.slimminds.com](http://www.slimminds.com) \**

## Little helpers

Teaching children to have a healthy attitude towards body image begins at home. Try the following tips:

- Focus on food options that make children strong, fit and healthy, rather than foods that will make them thin, thinner, or skinny.
- Avoid labelling foods and drinks as 'bad' versus 'good'. This sets up a range of concepts many eating disorder sufferers believe and can adversely affect your child's future relationship with food.
- Model good food choices in the home and be careful of offering food to children to alleviate unhappy feelings (e.g. when they are sad or hurt)
- Make physical activity a normal family fun option not a chore that has to be done. Get out and have fun with your kids - dance around the house together, play outdoor games or spend an afternoon at the local swimming pool.
- Be aware of the influence that television advertisements have on children's attitudes to food. If you are watching the programs with your children turn down the volume in the ad breaks.