

“I’m, Like, So, Fat!” Helping Your Teen Make Healthy Choices about Eating and Exercise in a Weight-Obsessed World. Dianne Neumark-Sztainer. New York: Guilford Press (www.guilford.com), 2005, 317 pp.

In our appearance-obsessed North American culture, children and teens are presented with intense pressure to meet unrealistic physical standards of beauty and attractiveness. At the same time, the rates of obesity have reached epidemic proportions (Wadden, Brownell, & Foster, 2002) in large part due to what Brownell (1991) has termed our “toxic environment”: the abundance of readily available, high calorie foods of low nutritional content combined with a sedentary lifestyle. As a consequence, teens are increasingly struggling with problems related to eating, weight, and activity level that may translate into eating disorders, poor health, body dissatisfaction, and low self worth. What should a parent do? Neumark-Sztainer (1991) has provided parents with much needed direction and guidance for dealing with these issues in *“I’m, Like, So, Fat! Helping Your Teen Make Healthy Choices about Eating and Exercise in a Weight-Obsessed World.”*

The book provides broad coverage of the issues facing teenagers today with regard to eating, activity, and weight-related problems. The book is grounded in the empirical research literature. In addition to drawing on work from key researchers in the field, Neumark-Sztainer, distills findings from her own qualitative, epidemiological, and intervention research including her epidemiological research Project EAT (Eating Among Teens), which was designed to examine these very issues. Neumark-Sztainer translates research findings into a wealth of strategies for parents to use with their teenagers as well as with themselves with the goal of positive modeling.

The book is divided into five sections. In the first section of the book, the chapters are geared to outlining the challenges faced by teens. Chapter 1 provides a thorough overview of weight-related problems. Parents are provided with a survey to identify where their adolescent may be on the spectrum of eating, activity, and weight-related problems. Chapter 2 covers the causes and risk factors for weight-related problems.

The second section of the book focuses on how to protect your teen in the current sociocultural context. Chapter 3 highlights the important role that parents play with concrete strategies on how to be a positive role model. Chapter 4 summarizes the influence of friends and the media and provides excellent suggestions for how parents can counteract negative media messages. In Chapter 5, Neumark-Sztainer nicely covers both extremes of activity (overexercise and inactivity) within the context of achieving a healthy, balanced lifestyle. Chapter 6 reviews research on the negative impact of dieting and shifts focus to the notion of healthy weight management. In Chapter 7, four key strategies for promoting healthy weight and positive body image are reviewed: positive parental role modeling, healthy environment, health focus versus weight-focus, and providing support.

The third section of the book provides background on what teenagers should be eating. Chapter 8 covers the basic nutrition facts with numerous examples for how to make healthier food choices. Chapter 9 provides education on portion control and calories but at the same time covers when to deemphasize calorie counting in the case of a teen who may be likely to put too much emphasis on calories. Neumark-Sztainer carefully walks this fine line as she emphasizes that *“Calories Count...But Don’t Count Them”*. Chapter 10 covers vegetarianism and provides a guide for parents around what healthy vegetarianism is all about including the pros and cons as

well as when it may be a red flag for weight preoccupation and disordered eating. The fourth section of the book focuses on how parents can make a difference both at home and when eating out. Chapters 11 and 12 provides strategies for increasing family meal opportunities and how to make healthy choices when eating out, respectively. Chapter 13 provides helpful pointers for engaging in positive and open communication with your teen on challenging subjects (e.g., food, weight, etc.) and specific problem scenarios that may arise.

The final section of the book is geared to what parents can do if their teen does have a problem. Chapter 14 focuses on how parents can help their overweight teen be happy and well-adjusted in the face of challenges associated with our thin-obsessed society. Chapter 15 outlines the signs and symptoms of an eating disorder and what parents can do. The book also includes a resource section on books and online information for parents and teens.

The strong research basis of the book is impressive. Neumark-Sztainer brings the research findings and strategies to life with numerous examples and personal anecdotes from her own experience raising teenagers. The book is an interesting and easy read as the text is broken up by excerpts from researchers in the field, case examples, and text boxes containing specific strategies and tips for parents to try. The strategies are well-illustrated with examples as well as tips for implementation as Neumark-Sztainer is very attune to the emotional context of broaching these issues with a teen. The book contains many useful tools for parents in the form of surveys and worksheets. However, the size of the book leaves no space to complete them so they would need to be rewritten on a separate page. Overall, this book is an excellent resource for parents looking for strategies on how to help their teenager (male or female) cope with eating or weight-related problems. However, it is relevant for all parents as it provides beneficial information for the promotion of a healthy lifestyle and positive body image more generally. In addition, the book provides some very good answers for clinicians who are commonly asked the question “*What should I do?*” by parents of teens who are struggling with such issues.

References

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