

Seven Things Parents Say That Can Cause Eating Issues

By Michelle May, M.D.

As parents, we sometimes forget that we are raising *adults*, not *children*. Our goal is to provide them with the skills and increasing responsibility for managing their lives without our constant vigilance. One key life skill is the ability to navigate our abundant food environment while maintaining optimal health.

Here are seven things that well-meaning parents commonly say that may have unintended consequences—and what to say instead:

1. *You are such a good eater!*

Children want nothing more than to please their parents. While mealtime should be a pleasant time to connect with your children, eating should remain intrinsically driven to meet the child's fuel needs, *not* to earn your praise.

What you could say instead: *You must have been really hungry today!* Or, *I love spending time with you while we have dinner.*

2. *You are such a picky eater!*

All children (and adults) have some foods they just don't like. Some children are highly taste and/or texture sensitive. Selective eating may become more entrenched when we berate, beg, bribe, or threaten.

What you could say instead: *I know you didn't like it last time; tell me what you think about it today after you test one bite.* Or, *Did you know your taste buds grow up just like you do? I wonder if you like this big kid food yet?*

3. *Clean your plate; there are starving children in _____ (third world country).*

Avoid teaching children scarcity eating behaviors in our abundant food environment.

What you could say instead: *It is important not to be wasteful so please only take as much as you think you need.* Or, *If you're full, we can save the rest for later.*



4. *You have to eat all your vegetables or there's no dessert.*

Kids are smart. When you bribe them for eating certain foods, they quickly realize those foods must be yucky and that dessert is the reward. They also learn to hold out until a reward is offered.

What you could say instead: *I love all kinds of different foods—some that make me healthy and strong and some that are just for fun. What kinds of foods do you like?* Or, *Enjoy your dinner. We'll be having dessert in a couple of hours.*

5. *Eat all your dinner or you don't get dessert.*

This variation on the threat above translates to “you must overeat so I will reward you by giving you more to eat!” Children naturally love sweet foods so they can learn to override their fullness signals. As an adult they'll order dinner to

earn a piece of cheesecake—what they really wanted in the first place.

What you could say instead: *Save room for dessert tonight!*

6. *I was so bad at lunch today! Now I have to spend an extra hour on the treadmill.*

Children are born to move. They naturally love playing actively, exploring their environment, and challenging themselves. Unfortunately, the messages they get from adults teaches them that exercise is punishment for eating.

What you could say instead: *I ate more than I needed and now I feel too full and uncomfortable. I think a walk would help me feel better. Want to join me? Or, Anybody for a bike ride?!*

7. *I am so gross and fat! (Or, I can't believe _____ has let herself go!)*

Kids learn from us even when we think they aren't listening. Statements like this teach kids that it's OK to put yourself and others down and judge people for their weight or other physical attributes. Perhaps they also secretly wonder what you really think about *them*.

What you could say instead: *I'm not perfect but I do my best to make healthy choices.*

And whatever else you say, remember to say often...*I love you just the way you are!*

Michelle May, M.D. is a recovered yoyo dieter and the award-winning author of *Eat What You Love, Love What You Eat: How to Break Your Eat-Repent-Repeat Cycle*. Download chapter one at <http://amihungry.com/chapter1>.