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Emotional Eating

by Summer Stanley

As adults, many of us have joked about “eating our feelings.” But in all seriousness, emotional eating can be a real problem – not just for adults, but for children as well.

Often, we eat not because we’re actually hungry but because we’re bored, stressed out, depressed, lonely, frustrated, angry, or resentful. Even positive emotions can lead to emotional eating.

According to internationally recognized expert on emotional eating, Edward Abramson, Ph.D., “Eating emotionally can presumably be traced back to infancy. It’s thought that mothers will frequently misinterpret a child’s cry or distress as hunger, when in actuality, the child may be frightened, need a diaper change, or feel too cold, for example.”



As children get older, they may turn to food to cope with school stress, like test anxiety or bullying. If you suspect your child may be eating for the wrong reasons, ask yourself:



- Do they eat at times other than regular mealtimes and snacks?
- Are they munching at every opportunity?
- What factors might be contributing to their overeating that call for you to intervene?

Signs of emotional eating in children, as well as adults, include:



- Eating in response to emotions or situations, not to satisfy hunger.
- Feeling an urgent need to eat.
- Craving a specific food or type of food.



- Eating a larger amount of food than usual.
- Eating at unusual times of day (for example, late at night).
- Gaining excess weight.



- Feeling embarrassed or guilty about eating.
- “Sneaking” food during high-stress times.
- Hiding empty containers of food.

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(cont.)



HealthyChildren.org recommends parents avoid rewarding children with food. Instead, give your child stickers, take them on a shopping trip for a new toy, or simply offer genuine verbal praise. Your words of approval can have a big impact on their self-esteem. Offer continual support and avoid “nagging” when they backslide.

Remember, positive reinforcement goes a long way. Being critical or even making comments with the intent to embarrass them into losing weight can actually have the opposite effect. Even if they succeed in their goals in that type of environment, the results are unlikely to last.

Abramson offers more tips for working together as a family to curtail emotional eating patterns:



- Limit TV time – there is a direct link between watching TV and overeating.



- Put food in a designated area – having clearly defined eating areas and offering less visual stimulation can lessen snacking opportunities.



- Be careful as to how you “use” feeding – as mentioned above, avoid rewarding children with food. Instead, try a family activity or a mini-vacation.



- Avoid putting your child on a diet – the key, rather than dieting, is for parents to model good eating behaviors.



- Be mindful of environmental contributors – school lunches, for instance, may not be nutritionally ideal, so consider sending a healthy lunch from home.



- Have your child keep a food journal – keeping track of the food they eat may help them realize when and why they eat.
- Get out of the house – staying active, even if it’s just a walk around the neighborhood, can help increase endorphins and keep children energized. As a bonus, you get to squeeze in some bonding time!

Resources:

“Speech Sound Disorders-Articulation and Phonology,” American Speech and Hearing Association, accessed July 20, 2020, <https://www.asha.org/PRPSpecificTopic.aspx?folderid=8589935321§ion=Overview>

Elaine R. Hitchcock et al., “Efficacy of Electropalatography for Treating Misarticulation of /r/,” American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology 26, no. 4 (November 2017): 1141-1158. http://doi.org/10.1044/2017_AJSLP-16-0122

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