**PROMOTING HEALTHY LIFESTYLES**

**FOR CHILDREN**

**What you do is more important**

**than what you say.**

Children learn more by example than by

instruction during the early years. When

parents and caregivers model healthful

exercise, eating and stress-management

habits, these habits trickle down to the

children under their care.

Most important of all are caregivers’ attitudes

toward exercise, food, and weight.

Children seem to have a sixth sense in this

regard. If they hear you evaluating people

based upon how they look, especially how

thin they are, children learn that looking

good is important. This endangers their

self-esteem because the standards for

looking good, depicted by the media, are

unreachable for most of us.

Overweight children often have parents

who are struggling with weight problems

themselves. These struggles can spill over

into the child’s life; parents want children

to succeed where they themselves have

failed. Weight-control issues take on a

larger, more emotional meaning as children

try desperately to meet the expectations of

the parents they love. It is unfortunate that

in our culture thinness symbolizes goodness,

so children who are not thin likewise

think they are not good. Many children,

especially girls, begin dieting and worrying

about their weight at 8 or 10 years old. We

adults must fight this powerful cultural

message that can be so harmful to a child’s

fragile self-esteem. Goodness must not be

dependent on body size.

**Set appropriate limits that are**

**consistently enforced.**

During the early years, parents and

caregivers have a lot of power over the

eating and activity levels of the children

under their care, since it is the adults who

buy the food and set the rules. They can

take advantage of their position to lovingly

promote healthier lifestyles—“I’m the

mommy, that’s why.” Simple rules can

have a significant impact on behavior. For

example, a rule that eating is done while

seated at the table cuts down on recreational

eating, such as mindless snacking

in front of the television. Portions should

be given on plates, so that food is not

eaten directly from the box or bag; this

helps prevent the whole bag of chips

from being consumed in one sitting.

Many families limit television time, and

encourage more active pursuits instead.

**Provide delicious, healthful meals**

**and snacks.**

The whole family benefits from good

eating habits. Mealtimes should be

enjoyable, and food should be delicious

and nutritious. Many people in North

America have problems with food and

spend too much time worrying about

what they are eating. They must learn to

make good choices, but without

becoming obsessed with food.

**Don’t make food or exercise**

**an issue.**

The words “diet” and “exercise” should

not be part of the vocabulary. Adults in

charge should never make an issue of

limiting fats and sugars even as they are

doing so. Obviously, occasional treats are

appropriate and should be enjoyed,

especially in social situations. If everyone

else is eating birthday cake and ice cream,

go for it.

Similarly, children shouldn’t engage in

physical activity that is boring or that has

no enjoyment of fun. They shouldn’t

exercise just for the sake of working out.

If exercise is a chore, they will figure out

ways to avoid it.

**Encourage physical activities that**

**children find enjoyable.**

The formal exercise programs that appeal

to many adults hold little appeal for

children, at least until they are old

enough to perceive some benefit from

such programs. Most young children are

inherently active off and on throughout

the day. Play opportunities are generally

all they need- a visit to the play ground,

pool, river, or park. Encourage schools to

provide physical education programs that

are active and fun.