

JLC Issue Corner: This is the fifth in a series of articles touching on some of the social challenges in Calgary. We'd like to give you some food for thought by showing how our JLC Healthy and Active Living initiatives fit into the bigger picture.

"Sticks and Stones" - Childhood Obesity and Low Self-Esteem

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me ..."

We all remember the playground rhyme, but did we realize as children that every criticism, unkind word or thoughtless joke at someone else's expense could be chipping away at their self-esteem and confidence?

Children (especially brothers) can be cruel and relentless with their "teasing" and it is particularly difficult for children who stand out. Remarks like "four-eyes", "science nerd", "runt", "big nose", or "fatty", whether realized at the time or not, all contribute to how a child sees himself or herself in relation to the rest of their world, how well they think they are liked by others and how they measure their self-worth.

Pressure to be perfect or accepted doesn't necessarily have to come from family members or schoolmates. Whether it's the anatomically impossible "Barbie Doll" figure of childhood or the advent of pseudo celebrities on television and in magazines, whose claim to fame seems to be nothing more than being a size "0" and partying all night at the local hotspots, body image and the pressure to be thin have become front and centre in popular culture.

In Canada, over 26% or 1.6 million children are considered overweight or obese and the rate is increasing. The situation is worse in the United States.

According to the *Childhood Obesity Foundation of Canada*, overweight or obese children:

- Are more likely to be teased and bullied
- Are more likely to bully others
- May have poor self-esteem and may feel socially isolated
- May be at increased risk for depression
- May have poor social skills
- May have high stress and anxiety
- May have behaviour and/or learning problems as a result of psychological difficulties associated with childhood obesity.

Much of the research today suggests that the connection between low self-esteem and obesity is a bit of a "chicken or the egg" debate, as obesity can be both the cause and effect of low self-esteem.

However, a recent 2009 research article by *Statistics Canada* has tied it all together: Children suffering from obesity are at an increased risk of low self-esteem – Obesity can be linked to chronic health problems - Low self-esteem can be associated with poor mental health later in life.

What are the consequences of having low self-esteem? Research cited in *Pediatrics*, the Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, revealed that having low self-esteem increased risk of anxiety, sadness, loneliness, nervousness and depression, and made children more vulnerable to drug and alcohol abuse and other "self-destructive" behaviours, including suicidal thinking. The situation is particularly critical with young girls where the association of being overweight and low self-esteem is strongest.

Obesity in children, as in adults, is easier to prevent than treat. So watching for early signs of a potential problem is key. Also, educating parents on not only healthy meal planning but on how to manage and cope with low self-esteem or depression in their child is essential.

Dr. David Fassler, Chairperson of the American Psychiatric Association's Committee on Children, Adolescents and Families, offers these suggestions:

- Help children understand that being overweight can seriously damage their health – its not just all about how they look;
- Talk to children about the possible root of the problem and why they are overweight. What feelings are they having that are perhaps causing overeating or under-exercising? How can you, together, come up with alternative strategies for dealing with these issues which are in the child's favour?
- Praise your child's strengths. Criticizing an obese child or trying to humiliate them into losing weight is counter productive and will only increase a child's emotional difficulties;
- Discuss and encourage healthy food choices and an active lifestyle with your children;
- Try not to reward or punish your child with food. Establish another system of rewards.

The best advice I know of has come from my own mother: always try to be a good role model for your children and love unconditionally.

The Junior League of Calgary, through such programs as *Kids in the Kitchen*, is trying to break the “chicken or the egg” cycle of childhood obesity and low self-esteem by educating children and young adults on a nutritional, well-balanced diet as well as the importance and enjoyment of fitness and a healthy lifestyle.

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