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Is It Ever Too Early to Talk About Disordered Eating?

Mimi Hudson, MA, RCC, and Dawn Livera, BSc

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Last winter, a parent commented to us that her daughter refused to wear a warm coat. She said it made her look fat. The mom laughed and said, “Appearance is so important to kids this age.” Her daughter is six.

From a very early age, children are exposed to messages that emphasize the importance of being thin and looking fit. There is a growing body of literature to suggest that children as young as three are not only aware of weight and body size, but commonly express a desire to be thinner regardless of body mass index.1 Children learn more in their first five years of life than at any other time. This is when they form the attitudes and behaviours that shape the rest of their lives. It was with this in mind that the Jessie’s Legacy eating disorders prevention program developed Family FUNdamentals for families with children aged two to four.

Family FUNdamentals is an early childhood development program that helps families foster a joyful (FUN!) and competent parent–child relationship around food and activity. The program is intended to promote healthy eating, healthy weights and positive body image, and to prevent disordered eating, including eating disorders and obesity. It aims to enhance connectedness to family and community, as well as parental support and acceptance of body size diversity. These are protective factors in the development of disordered eating.

This six-session program helps parents/caregivers give their children a strong start in life. The program covers parenting topics that help build confidence and self-esteem, promote positive eating and feeding relationships, and engage families in fun and mastery of physical activities. In Family FUNdamentals a key message is that that meals and activity should be fun and enjoyed by the whole family. Power struggles over food, “bribing” with food or denying food (if parents think their children are too “chubby”) are strategies to be avoided.

Parents are their children’s first teachers. Young children learn by watching and copying the people around them. Family FUNdamentals is a family-centred program, as parents/caregivers and their children attend together. Through songs, stories, games, healthy snacks and lots of positive role modelling, parents/caregivers learn how they can support the healthy growth and development of their children—and have fun together in the process!

The Family FUNdamentals key messages can be summed up nicely in the program song that is sung each week (to the tune of “Frère Jacques” [Brother John]):

*I am special, I am special
You are too, you are too
All of us are special, all of us are special
Yes it’s true, yes, it’s true*

FUNdamental questions to think about

* Do you enjoy spending time with your children?
* Are you able to help your children cope with day-to-day routines or the unexpected?
* How many times a week do you eat together as a family?
* What physical activities does your family like to do together?
* Is it okay to make mistakes, or is it important to be perfect?
* Do you accept yourself as you are, or are there things you would like to change?
* Do your children hear you making comments about your own or other people’s weight, shape or size?

To find out why these questions are important, look for a Family FUNdamentals program near you. The program has already been piloted in nine communities around the province. Visit [www.jessieslegacy.com](http://www.jessieslegacy.com/) or email fundamentals@familyservices.bc.ca.

**About the authors**

Mimi is the Director of Community & Provincial Programs at Family Services of the North Shore. She supervises a number of early childhood development programs and the provincial Jessie’s Legacy eating disorders prevention program

Dawn Livera is the Family FUNdamentals Program Coordinator at Jessie’s Legacy and a writer. She has published a story, “Lessons in Parenting,” about how she and her husband learned to be parents from a stray cat they took in before they had children of their own

**Footnotes:**

1. Harriger, J.A., Calogero, R.M., Witherington, D.C. et al. (2010). Body size stereotyping and internalization of the thin ideal in preschool girls. *Sex Roles*, *63*, 609-620.