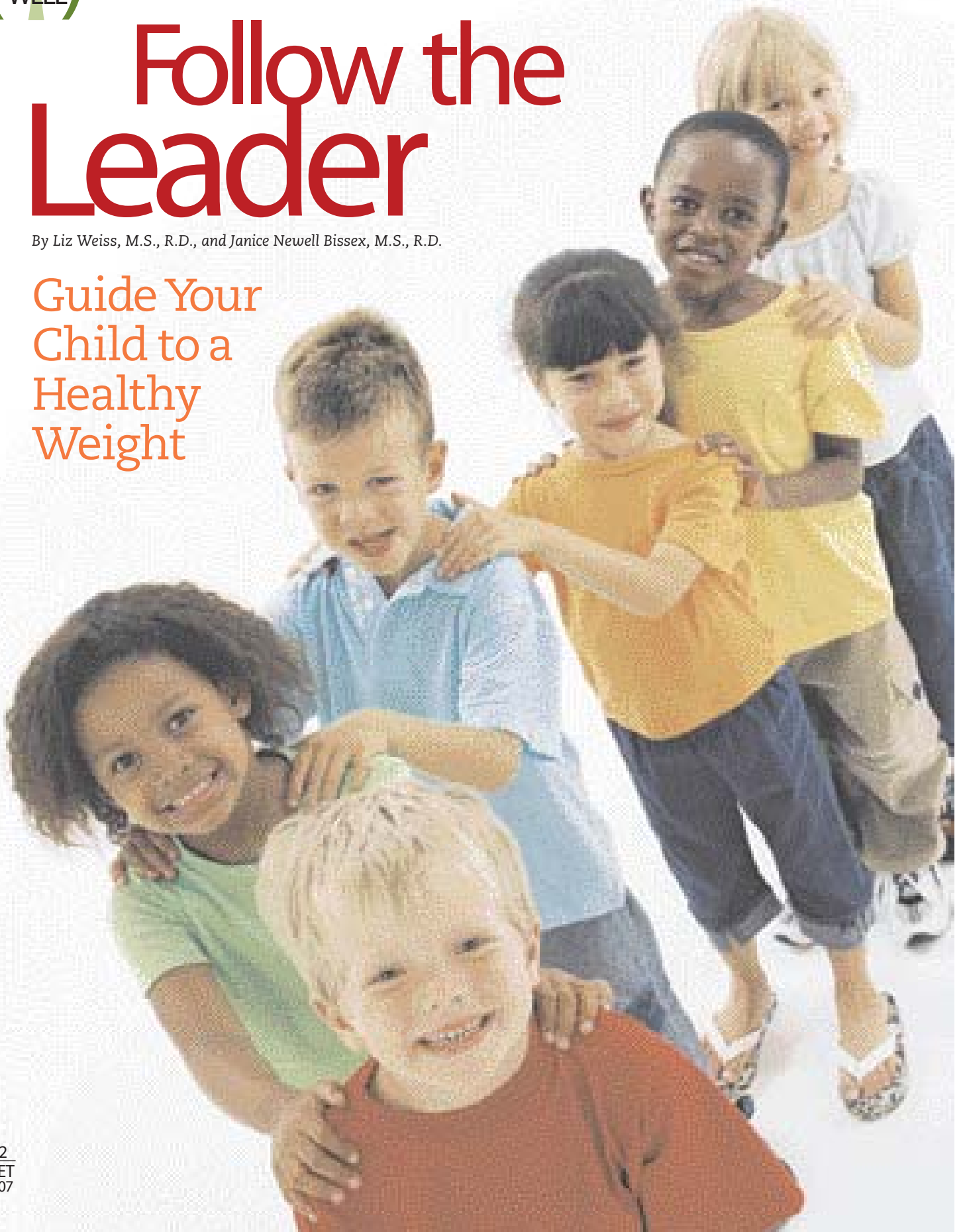




# Follow the Leader

By Liz Weiss, M.S., R.D., and Janice Newell Bissex, M.S., R.D.

## Guide Your Child to a Healthy Weight



Should your child follow a weight-loss diet? Many parents aren't sure how to help their overweight children grow up healthy. Learn from these tips given by nutrition experts.

Joelle S. of Lexington, Massachusetts, is a typical 10 year old. She loves birthday parties, softball, her siblings, and the family's dog. She shares something else in common with a growing number of her peers: She is overweight. "Joelle has been overweight most of her life," says her mother, Stacie. "In fact, as a toddler, she always stood out as the cute little girl with the big cheeks."

As Joelle grew and the pounds crept on, Stacie became increasingly concerned. But rather than put her daughter on a strict weight-loss diet as she was tempted to do, Stacie looked for a different path. Stacie's gut feeling that diets don't work, especially for her daughter, was more than mother's intuition.

"If a family has one child on a diet and everyone else is eating a different way, the child will feel stigmatized," says William Dietz, M.D., Ph.D., and director of the Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "The best approach is to establish a healthy eating pattern and regular physical activity for the whole family."

Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, Ph.D., professor of epidemiology and community health at the University of Minnesota, and author of "I'm, Like, SO Fat!," says restrictive diet plans and an obsession with the bathroom scale damage a child's self esteem. Neumark-Sztainer surveyed 2,500 high school adolescents about their dieting habits, then followed them for five years. "Our survey

found that teenagers who diet, especially those who skip meals and take diet pills, gain more weight in the long run and are at greater risk for disordered eating, such as binge eating," she says.

But for parents of an overweight child, knowing the best way to manage the situation can seem daunting. Do you walk on eggshells and hope the problem goes away, or nag your child every time she grabs a cookie or chip? Neumark-Sztainer says neither method leads to long-term success.

"Parents of overweight children often feel like failures. They believe people look at them and think 'How did you let your child gain so much weight?' We live in a society where it's surprising that not all kids are overweight,"

### Good Reads for Parents

- "I'm, Like, SO Fat!" by Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, Ph.D.; Guilford Press; 2005
- Weight Loss Confidential by Anne M. Fletcher, M.S., R.D.; Houghton Mifflin; 2007
- Your Child's Weight, Helping Without Harming by Ellyn Satter, M.S., R.D.; Kelcy Press; 2005
- The Moms' Guide to Meal Makeovers by Janice Newell Bissex, M.S., R.D., and Liz Weiss, M.S., R.D.; Broadway Books; 2003
- The Surprising Power of Family Meals by Miriam Weinstein; Steerforth Press; 2006



she says. "Realize that you are not to blame. There are things you can do." To guide your child to a healthy weight, consider these tips and strategies from experts:

### **Strive for Weight Maintenance, Not Weight Loss**

Weight loss should not be the goal for most overweight children. This may surprise you, because your first instinct is to do what it takes to help a child slim down. Part of that motivation often stems from the unfortunate fact that fat kids get teased, which hurts both the youngsters and their parents. In reality, if an overweight child simply maintains her current weight for a year or two, and does not gain any more weight, she eventually grows into that weight.

If you're concerned about your child's weight, speak with a dietitian or doctor. Learn where your child falls on the weight chart, and they can help you develop an appropriate plan of action.

### **Let Children Choose What They Eat**

Restricting what an overweight child eats often creates tension at the dinner table, makes a child feel as though he has no control, and interferes with his ability to recognize when he's hungry or full.

"Children are good at self-regulating, if given the opportunity," Dietz says. "Offer healthy foods, not a restrictive diet." He suggests starting the meal with foods that contain a lot of water, including salads (with a small amount of dressing), soups, or fruit, all low in calories yet satisfying. For the main meal, don't prepare a huge amount of food and serve it at the table. This might entice everyone to overeat. Start by placing a small portion on each person's plate. Let kids go back for seconds if they're still hungry.

### **Make Healthy Food Choices Available**

"You control what's brought into your house. If your kitchen is stocked with cut-up fruit, veggies and dip, and other nutritious nibbles,

#### **Note to Self**

I'll make sure to purchase healthy foods and snacks for my kids to eat.

# Youngsters learn how to walk, talk, and eat a varied diet by imitating what they see ...

children reach for them,” Dietz says. If soft drinks, chips, cookies, and fast food fill the shelves, kids naturally grab those handy calorie-dense foods.

“Having a healthy food environment is critical. The majority of foods in the home should be the kinds of things that are consistent with the U.S. Dietary Guidelines, which stress fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy,” says Anne Fletcher, M.S., R.D., and author of *Weight Loss Confidential*. Sure, you can provide occasional treats, but make them the exception rather than the rule to foster healthier eating habits for everyone.

## Be a Good Role Model

If the old saying “Do as I say, not as I do” applies to mealtimes at your house, your children will quickly catch on. If you grimace at the sight of broccoli or dash out the door without eating breakfast, it’s hard to expect your children to

eat their vegetables or take time for a morning meal. Remember that youngsters learn to eat a varied diet by imitating what they see, so you need to set a good example by making healthy food choices. Let your kids see you being active, too.

“It’s important to be physically active in front of your children,” Fletcher says. “If you normally work out during the day, when your kids are at school, be sure to do something active when they get home. No matter how fit you may be, if your children only see you on the computer or watching TV, they’ll copy those behaviors.”

## Eat Together as a Family

The ideal time to model healthy eating habits is at the dinner table. Research shows that when families eat dinner together on a regular basis, children consume

## Get a Move On

Looking for creative ways to get everyone in your family to move a little more? Check out some of these new and not-so-new ideas.

- **Dance Dance Revolution:** With this interactive game (available at [www.ddrgame.com](http://www.ddrgame.com)), couch potatoes get up and moving in no time. Players dance on top of a sensor pad and are challenged to match their dance steps with flashing arrows on the TV screen. It takes a lot of energy to keep up with the beat of the music.
- **Walk to School Programs:** Safe Routes to School and Kids Walk to School are two community-based programs that encourage groups of children to walk, ride their bikes, or scooter to and from school, accompanied by adults. (Visit [www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk](http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk) and [www.saferoutesinfo.org](http://www.saferoutesinfo.org).)
- **Fitness for One:** Encourage your child to jump rope, use a hula hoop, shoot baskets, in-line skate, or ride a bike.





## Plan weekly menus so other family members can help put the meal together, use a slow cooker, or freeze meals to reheat on busy nights.

more fruits and vegetables, eat fewer fried foods, drink fewer soft drinks, experience fewer eating disorders, and are less likely to display unhealthy weight-control behaviors. Bringing the family together for a meal can be a challenge with today's busy schedules. To make mealtimes more manageable, be flexible and creative: Perhaps a family breakfast or a picnic at your daughter's softball game offers a more realistic option.

A little planning can put dinner on the table when family members are running in so many different directions. Create weekly menus so other family members can help put the meal together, use a slow cooker, or freeze meals to reheat on busy nights.

### **Be Supportive and Realistic**

"Listen to your child's concerns," says Fletcher, who surveyed 100 teens about their weight-loss success. Don't tiptoe around the issue of body weight. Instead, communicate honestly with your child. You may feel you need to fix something for your child when sometimes your child just wants to talk.

But talking about the wrong things often backfires, such as when you make negative comments about your weight or your child's weight. Above all, let your child know he is loved no matter what his size. "Be realistic about what an overweight child may end up weighing," Fletcher says. "It may not necessarily fit society's standards of thin."

### Limit Screen Time and Get Moving

Kids used to come home from school and run outside to play. Now an increasing number come home and watch TV or play on a computer. That's a problem. Research shows children who sit for three or more hours per day glued to a screen have five times the rate of obesity compared to kids who spend less than one hour in front of a screen.

"Play, exercise, and have fun is the key," says Stacie, who has a no-TV rule during the school week and encourages Joelle and her siblings to be active, whether it's playing organized sports or tossing a ball in the backyard. Dietz supports that approach.

"You don't have to prescribe play," he says. "Just give your children an opportunity to be active. You can go to a park, join the local Y, or simply take more family walks." Being physically active improves overall fitness and makes everyone feel better. )i



### Did You Know ...

- For every can or glass of soda consumed per day, a child's risk of obesity increases by more than 50 percent.
- Approximately 34 percent of U.S. children are currently overweight or obese. It's predicted that half of all children will be overweight by 2010.
- The United States has the highest rate of childhood obesity in the world.
- Sixty percent of overweight 5- to 10 year-old children possess at least one cardiovascular risk factor, such as high cholesterol.
- Type 2 diabetes in children and adolescents has increased dramatically in a short period of time. The increase of obesity in children and adolescents is reported to be the most significant reason for the increase.

Liz Weiss, M.S., R.D., and Janice Newell Bissex, M.S., R.D., are the authors of *The Moms' Guide to Meal Makeovers*.