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# CHILDHOOD OBESITY AND THE SCHOOLS: Shame hurts more than helps

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For the Journal-Constitution  
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The health of Georgia's children hangs in the balance. As obesity rates soar, so too do the numbers of young children and teens suffering from life-threatening cases of anorexia and bulimia.

The Georgia Legislature is attempting to address the childhood obesity problem by weighing and measuring our kids, labeling schools as healthy or unhealthy zones based on aggregate numbers. While this is a well-intentioned start, something about this measure feels sorely inadequate.

Issues surrounding food and weight are complex. There is a natural desire to simplify and reduce the problem to numbers that we can grasp. But our actions must take into account crucial psycho-social factors. The physical and mental well-being of Georgia's children will be impacted by the decisions we make now.

We seem to be operating from outdated paradigms:

- > physical health is separate from mental health;
- > we can shame ourselves into being healthy.

Singapore has had "success" in its fight against childhood obesity. In the past 15 years, the proportion of obese children has dropped from 14 percent to 9 percent. Their approach has been to single out overweight children, mandate participation in daily strenuous exercise and provide them with fewer "calorie coupons" to spend at lunch than their trimmer peers. Participants are insulted and socially ostracized, which likely has helped the program to "succeed" in its weight-loss goals. Former "Trim and Fit" club members say the act of segregating and labeling them motivated them to change.

But at what price? Singapore psychologist David Kan says that past members of these clubs are "deeply scarred." The shaming and social ostracism caused palpable harm. A prominent academic study blamed the program for a sharp increase in rates of eating disorders and depression.

The August issue of the Journal of Adolescent Health highlighted a Minnesota study that tracked 2,500 high school students over five years. Researchers found that students with negative body image were more likely to engage in unhealthy and ineffective weight-loss practices like fasting, diet pills and bulimia and less likely to engage in health-promoting behaviors such as physical activity. Their conclusion? "Parents, educators and health care providers should resist utilizing messages aimed at motivating adolescents toward behavioral change via decreasing their comfort with their bodies. Instead, encourage positive change via messages that enhance body satisfaction and a desire to care for one's body."

The Eating Disorders Information Network has developed a "Love Your Body" program for schools, aimed at promoting a healthy relationship with food. Some of the key ideas:

- > Parents and teachers must create a "Sane Zone" around our kids to buffer them from the toxic messages from the multibillion-dollar food, fashion and diet industries and Hollywood.
- > We must address the harm caused by negative judgments about body size. Children as young as 4 already associate the word "fat" with "dirty," "lazy" and "stupid." These words can form the basis for a lifelong shame-based sense of self. Such shame is at the core of addiction, depression, anxiety and a host of eating disorders.
- > Base positive body image on an appreciation for what our bodies do, not how they look. This is as important as it is difficult in today's image-based society.
- > Teach respect for the body's hunger and satiety signals. Trust the subtle whispers of the gut. Our bodies work if we only let them.
- > Learn healthy coping skills. Find words for feelings and learn healthy ways to cope with them so you (and your kids) do not turn to overeating or food restriction for emotional anesthesia.
- > Eat healthy overall, but don't ban sugar and fat from your life. Rigidity and perfectionism set us up for binge-

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eating, anorexia or a pleasureless life.

> Shaming will inevitably fail. We can be kind to ourselves without becoming complacent.

One recent morning, a mother handed me a letter that her 8-year-old daughter had written to her teacher after her school hosted "Love Your Body Week." She wrote: "Listen to Your Body. Don't eat less but don't overload. Eat vegetables and fruit. Fast food and candy on special occasions. Sports help you get energy. Never sneak food. You want to be medium."

From the mouths of babes. ...

> Dina Zeckhausen, an Atlanta psychologist, is author of "Full Mouse, Empty Mouse" and founder of the Eating Disorders Information Network.

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