

WHY LANGUAGE AROUND FOOD MATTERS

Language around food is something most people do not think twice about. It is something so ingrained in our culture and everyday talk you probably don't even realize you're doing it. However, the truth is, what we say and do around food may be influencing ourselves and others around us.

What do we mean by language around food?
Ask yourself, have I ever said or heard the following phrases:

"Sugar is so bad for you."
"Gluten is evil, don't touch that stuff."
"Saturated fats will kill you."
"Eating clean is so good for you."
"Oh, I can't eat dessert; it goes straight to my thighs?"
"We only get the bad stuff on weekends."
"Stop eating so much junk!"

Sound familiar?

On the surface, this type of thinking and food labeling may not seem like a big deal. For many people, this way of thinking might seem like a helpful way to narrow down overwhelming food decisions during the day. It requires less thinking on our part and more minimal decision making, but what happens when we start to attach an intrinsic value to food? When a "bad" food is eaten, there is usually a tremendous amount of negativity that follows, usually in the form of guilt, shame, or embarrassment. This may lead to more detrimental eating habits that ultimately sabotage our relationship with food and our bodies.

This type of talk also impacts how young people in our lives think and feel about food and their bodies. The following scenario illustrates this point so well:

A teacher notices a 5-year-old student coming to school everyday with a sandwich for lunch. Each day at the start of lunch the student unpacks their sandwich and proceeds to throw away the bread and only eat the inner meat and cheese. The teacher then asks the child, "is something wrong with your sandwich?". To which the child replies, "Mom said we don't eat carbs". The teacher, taken aback and puzzled, decides to call home to gather more information. After explaining what happened, the child's mother connects the dots and realizes that her child was in the room the previous week and overheard a phone conversation centered around the mother's new 'low carb diet' in which she listed all the foods she was no longer eating (including items like bread, pasta, etc).

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What happened in this scenario was that this child (at a very impressionable age) heard the parent categorize foods (in this case carbohydrates) to be bad and made the conclusion that if mom can't have them than I can't either.

So how do you begin to establish a more neutral approach to food labeling?

Start to listen to your body and make food decisions based on the things you like, want, and crave, not what you think you should eat based on rules or arbitrary labels that diet culture has slapped on food. After all, it is not what or how we eat that truly defines our character or worth as a human being.

Adopt terms like "everyday foods" to describe foods you would find on Canada's food guide. Replace the words "junk food" or "bad food" with words like "treats", "fun foods", and "other foods". You could also label food as being "satisfying", "pleasurable" or better yet, use the actual name of the food (e.g. ice cream, chips, etc).

During family mealtimes take time to talk about how certain foods have lots of vitamins and minerals which helps us grow and give us energy.

Use mealtimes as an opportunity to create a neutral food and body mentality. Model how to listen to your body when it tells you that you are hungry or thirsty and respond to those cues.

Ultimately, this brings us back to the foundational truth about food: it is simply meant to be both nourishing and pleasurable. It's not something that should torment our will to live or prevent us from enjoying family meals or dessert with our little ones. Nourish your body and mind by eating a variety of foods from all the food groups and by enjoying pleasurable foods. Moderation is easier without guilt.

References:

<https://www.edcatalogue.com/using-family-dinner-model-food-neutral-mentality/>
<https://wellseek.co/2017/11/30/need-stop-labeling-food-good-bad/>

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