

The New 'National Crisis': Diet-Crazed Kids

Trend to be thin causes many to shed more than pounds

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It was just the other day that Miami social worker Lisa Hieblum invited her 7-year-old niece Micki Bloom out for frozen yogurt.

"She said, 'No, I'm too fat,' Hieblum recalls. "She already thinks she's too fat and she's only in second grade!"

That's when Hieblum — who herself became bulimic in college — realized that without help Micki might be down the same road and on an even earlier timetable. So, she sat down with the girl and had a long talk.

Children like Hieblum's niece are at the forefront of a disturbing new trend affecting the health of American children: dieting by kids.

Around the country, children as young as 6 are shedding pounds, afraid of being fat and increasingly being treated for eating disorders that threaten their health and growth, health researchers and specialists report.

In trying to correct one problem — one in five children is overweight, according to fed-

eral estimates — doctors, parents, schools and the media have unwittingly caused another.

"This whole pressure to be thin has backfired on children," says Joanne Ikeda, a dietitian at the University of California at Berkeley who counsels parents and health professionals about children and weight issues.

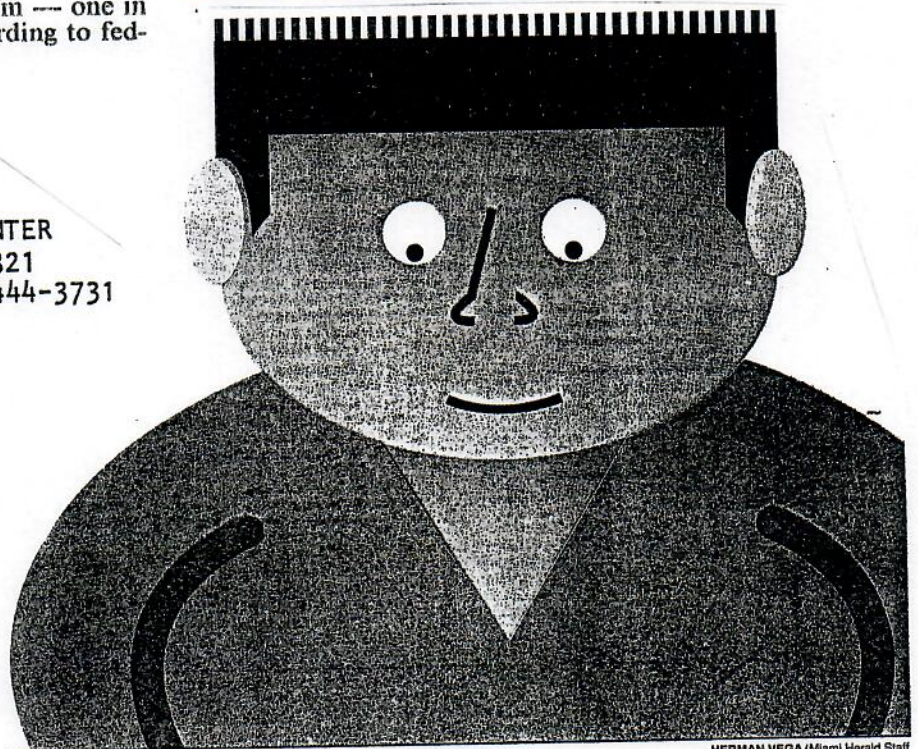
"It's a national crisis," says Frances M. Berg, editor of *Obesity and Health*, a North Dakota journal that reports the latest scientific research on obesity.

Paula Levine, a Miami psychologist who is president of a national education group called Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention, said her group originally thought it would focus on youths in high school and college — then realized that is too late.

"We have to get to younger and younger children because we see the signs of eating disorders already in pre-adolescents, in kids who haven't even approached puberty," Levine said. "If we're seeing symptoms already at ages 9 and 10, then we know we've got to try to get

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Diet-crazed kids lose more than pounds

to these kids at ages 4, 5 and 6."

So Levine, director of the Anorexia and Bulimia Resource Center in Coral Gables, has done eating-disorders presentations for parents of preschoolers and even as part of prenatal classes at South Miami Hospital.

No one denies that many American children, like adults, have a problem with weight. American children are fatter than ever before, experts agree. Among kids 6 to 11, obesity increased 54 percent in the last two decades, according to a 1987 review of four national nutrition and health surveys. The number of obese youths rose 39 percent among 12- to 17-year-olds.

Although it is not clear how many fat children stay that way into adulthood, those who do face serious health risks. The condition is linked with high blood pressure and future problems with diabetes, heart disease and colon and breast cancer, says Dr. Gilman Grave of the National Institute of Child Health and Development.

New warning

In recent years, public health officials, doctors and schools have preached the importance of reduced fat and cholesterol and more exercise for children.

But now many health professionals are sounding a new warning: Children should never diet.

Dieting can lead to anorexia nervosa, bulimia and other eating disorders that cause death, serious illness and stunted growth at a vulnerable stage when extra protein is needed for a child's development. It also can affect a child's learning, ability to concentrate and performance in school.

"Even with fat children you can stunt their growth so that instead of ending up with a slender child you end up with a short fat child," says dietitian Ikeda. Children go through stages when they are heavier, especially during puberty, and often grow into their weight, dietitians say.

Kids, whatever their size, need a healthy diet low in fats and sugars and high in fiber, health professionals say. Exercise is the key to preventing and controlling obesity, they agree.

But that message apparently has not reached many children.

In a study published last summer, the Medical University of South Carolina reported dramatic evidence about the problem of pre-teen dieting. They surveyed 3,175 boys and girls between 10 and 13 years old, in the largest study of middle-school children to date. More than half the girls in fifth to eighth grades felt that they looked fat and wanted to lose weight. One-fourth of the boys had similar attitudes. Among all the students, one out of three had dieted and almost 5 percent said they had vomited to lose weight.

"Even normal weight kids were dieting," says Elizabeth Hodges, one of the study's authors.

Widespread problem

Unhealthy dieting is even more widespread among teenagers. More than two-thirds of high school girls are dieting, one in five has taken diet pills and many girls as well as boys are using laxatives, diuretics, fasting and vomiting in a desperate effort to become slim, according to a 1992 study of students in 10 Cleveland high schools.

"If you want to look pretty, if you want to be popular, if you want to stand out, you have to be thin," says Katie, 13, who lives in a Chicago suburb and asked that her last name not be used.

Katie's ordeal began at age 7 when she looked at the girl sitting next to her on the school bus. "I just thought my thighs were a lot bigger than hers. I was shocked." Her parents were dieting, and Katie says she was "afraid I was going to be like my mom."

What followed was a typical pattern, experts say. The 75-pound third-grader began refusing food. She spent hours exercising, often waking at 4:30 a.m. to jog in place in her bedroom.

By 11, when she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital for treatment of anorexia nervosa, she weighed 42 pounds.

Today's children face a cruel dilemma. They are growing up in a society that condones eating too much of the wrong foods and exercising too little, while at the same time clinging to unreasonable ideals of thinness and beauty. Fat children are often taunted by classmates, who reflect society's prejudice against obesity.

Reflecting adults' obsession

Children today are merely reflecting a national obsession about diet and weight among adults, says Hodges of USC. They are, in effect, the post-Weight Watcher generation.

"These children have always been exposed to the diet culture," says Hodges. "It's a fact of life. Everyone's running and exercising and doing Nordic Track and step machines and watching their weight and what they eat. Kids get the message that to be thin is what's most important."

That message is so overpowering, doctors say, that even children of normal size are driven to lose weight.

Therapist Ellyn Satter, author of *How to Get Your Kid to Eat . . . But Not Too Much*, says, "Parents are responsible for what, where and when [the child eats]; the child is responsible for how much and whether."

She advises against allowing

children to "panhandle" for food between times, and recommends drinking water, rather than juice or soda, between meals.

Besides fostering good eating and exercising habits, what's needed most is acceptance of a child's weight, experts say.

"The question should not be how do we make fat kids thin. It

should be how do we make fat kids healthy?" says Sally Smith, executive director of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance in Sacramento, Calif.

Herald Medical Writer Linda Roach Monroe contributed to this report.