

ONE DAY, CAROLINE ASKED HER MOM IF SALIVA HAD CALORIES. THE 9-YEAR-OLD DIDN'T SWALLOW HER SALIVA AGAIN UNTIL A YEAR LATER.

N THE SPRING OF 2010, Caroline Meeker was your average third grader in St. Paul. She played basketball and softball, and loved learning the piano. Her favorite foods were spaghetti, pizza, chips and chocolate.

Not to say she was an easy child. Caroline was always a little high maintenance - moody, anxious, too much of a pleaser, worried about what others thought of her. Her mom, Janice, started to notice she looked a little on the thin side but brushed it off. Then Caroline started asking questions about food, calories, fat grams, reading labels. She wasn't eating her lunch at school.

On the softball field, Janice noticed her daughter's body language would change as she wrapped her arms around herself, trying to hide her body.

One day, Caroline asked her mom if saliva had calories. The 9-year-old didn't swallow her saliva again until a year later.

When she was admitted to the hospital for treatment of an eating disorder she'd gone from almost 70 pounds to a mere 55 pounds. Her heart rate was low and she had a collapsed lung. She was put on a feeding tube and immediately confined to a wheelchair because she couldn't afford to burn any more calories.

Janice didn't know until later that all of this started when a girl at school called Caroline "fat" at the lunch table. Experts say any such event - a comment from a coach, a peer or a parent - can trigger an eating disorder in a child already prone to one.

WHY SO YOUNG?

We live in a culture where children have access to the Internet and media messages at a very young age. They are exposed to the same messages about beauty, weight and society's ideas of perfection as adults. The child and adolescent brain and life experience leave them unprepared to deal with these messages. "Young kids are literal, and they see the world in black and white," says Heather Gallivan, PsyD, an eating disorders expert at Melrose Center. "When an adult tells them fat is bad or a particular food is bad, they may take this as fact and not have the experience or skill to decipher how to balance the message."

Young children are very concrete, which is why parents have to be careful about what they say and behaviors they model. Children are listening to us, so the focus needs to be on being fit, healthy and strong - not fat or thin.

"The mantra at Melrose Center is all foods can fit. We want to help individuals develop a new relationship with food and begin to listen to their bodies' hunger cues," Gallivan says. "Food is not a feeling, good or bad, it is fuel for our bodies, it is a way for us to commune and engage with family and friends, it is steeped in tradition and it is something we can't live without."

TREATING YOUNGER CHILDREN

Generally, 50 percent of people with eating disorders are completely successful in their recovery, about 30 percent improve but may continue to have some symptoms and about 20 percent remain chronically ill. Treating younger children can be less complicated than treating adolescents or young adults, simply because of the state of their development. Family-based treatment is quite effective with children and younger adolescents, who still look to their families for guidance more than they look to their peers.

"As parents, we have great influence over our children's selfesteem and body image," Gallivan says. "It's important for us to model healthy behaviors for our children – that means no extreme diets or weight-related comments about ourselves or others. Keep the focus less on weight, and more on overall health. Additionally, make sure you provide a supportive environment with lots of talking and listening, and watch out for any strange eating habits. If you notice something, consider seeking help from an eating disorders professional."

Visit parknicollet.com/melrose to learn about eating disorder signs and symptoms. If you suspect an eating disorder, the experts at Melrose Center can help. Call 952-993-6200.

10 WAYS TO BUILD A BETTER BODY IMAGE

We all have days when we feel awkward or uncomfortable in our bodies, but the key to developing positive body image is to replace negative thoughts and feelings with positive, affirming and accepting ones. Melrose Center's Be You initiative exists to spread the power of positive body image with the hopes of preventing eating disorders through education, conversation and action. Check out our tips to get you started on the path to a better body image. >>>



Need to talk to someone about eating disorders? Call **952-993-6200**

parknicollet.com/beyoumelrose

BE POSITIVE

Focus on all the amazing things your body can do, not how it looks.

BE BALANCED

Be good to your body by getting enough sleep, eating nutritious foods and being physically active.



BE DIVERSE

Recognize that people naturally come in different shapes and sizes – *embrace what makes you unique*.



BE PROUD

Make a list of your positive qualities that aren't related to your body or appearance.

BE STYLISH

Wear clothes that make you *look and feel good* – no matter what your size.



BE SAVVY

Read books and magazines with positive messages that make you feel good about yourself.



BE SPECIAL

Take time to *pamper* yourself. You deserve it!

BE KIND

Avoid bodybashing. Focus conversations on the positive traits of yourself and others.



Challenge negative thoughts about your body. Try to be less judgmental and more positive.



BE INSPIRED <<<

Think about the *people you* admire. Have they impacted you because of their looks or their accomplishments?



10



