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Video Short

Teens Surf Sites That Promote Destructive Dieting By CWK Network Producer

“So when I saw these girls that were skinnier than me I was really upset. I thought, ‘okay, this is it; if I want to be thin I’ve got to stop eating - so I can get this under control, so I can look like that.’”

-- Hillary, 14 years old

Healthy eating is making the national news. As First Lady Michelle Obama spearheads the Let’s Move campaign to fight childhood obesity, the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity has just released its action plan for solving the problem of childhood obesity in a generation.

Included in the plan is a recommendation that parents, when talking about food choices, be “sensitive to the risk of eating disorders among young people.”

With technology and online access so much a part of teen life, parents should also be aware of the sites teens may be visiting that encourage – and sometimes offer instruction – about destructive dieting and eating behaviors.

Hillary was 14-year-olds when she started a strict diet.

“I thought, I wonder if since I’m not eating, I wonder if that means something,” says Hillary, “if that means that I’ve got a problem - or if it’s normal that people skip meals and don’t eat all day.”

She went online and found websites that promoted anorexia - and taught her how to hide her eating disorder.

“If you want to throw up your food after you eat it, just say that you’re gonna go take a shower and turn the water on and you can throw up your food so no one will hear,” says Hillary.

And the websites had pictures called *thinspiration*.

“So when I saw these girls that were skinnier than me I was really upset,” she says. “I thought, ‘okay, this is it; if I want to be thin I’ve got to stop eating - so I can get this under control so I can look like that.’”

When Hillary got down to 95 pounds, her doctor admitted her to the hospital.

“I never thought anything like [these websites] would have pulled her in,” says Hillary’s mom, Juna Griffith. “It changed her life! “

Psychologists say online communities like the ones Hillary visited can make self-destructive behavior seem normal.

“So to discover that there are a lot of other people means I can’t be that crazy,” says psychologist Dr. Paul Schenk.

“So I just considered it normal - and thought, ‘okay, I don’t really have a problem!’” says Hillary. “It’s just something everyone does.”

Experts says parents should monitor where their kids go on the Internet.

And if they believe their child is *threatened* by some websites, “I’d turn off the computer,” says eating disorder specialist Bryna Livingstone, “I’d get it out of the house. She’ll scream and holler and say ‘don’t you dare do that. I’ll never speak to you again’ - and then you’ll know you’re doing the right thing.”

Hillary is now out of the hospital, but her mom is still worried.

“It’s like a death sentence for my daughter,” says Juna, “because if she doesn’t get her act together, she’s not going to have a very productive life.”

What Parents Need to Know

The change and development of their adolescent bodies can be particularly stressful for some teens. Many teens spend a lot of time worrying about what others think and they desperately try to conform to society's unattainable "ideal" body image. They are lead to believe that if they are thin, they will be accepted. The images of emaciated models appearing in magazines, television programs and online reinforces the belief that in order to be happy, successful and accepted, they must be thin.

Eating disorders are complex and devastating conditions that can have serious consequences for health, productivity, and relationships. They are not a fad, phase or lifestyle choice. Eating disorders are serious, potentially life-threatening conditions that affect a person's emotional and physical health.

Being a teenager is not easy and there are many pressures that they face daily. Eating disorders can be very much about control, so if they feel like everything around them is out of control, they may develop one to gain a sense of control. It is important for families to raise the teen to be proud of who they are and not place undo importance on appearance. Assure them that they can come to you with problems and that you will listen to them and not judge them or put them down.

The National Eating Disorders Association offers these tips for kids on eating well and feeling good about themselves:

- Eat when you are hungry. Stop eating when you are full.
- All foods can be part of healthy eating. There are no "good" or "bad" foods, so try to eat lots of different foods, including fruits, vegetables, and even sweets sometimes.
- When having a snack try to eat different types.
- If you are sad or mad or have nothing to do—and you are not really hungry find something to do other than eating.
- Remember: kids and adults who exercise and stay active are healthier and better able to do what they want to do, no matter what they weigh or how they look.
- Try to find a sport or an activity that you like and do it! Join a team, join the YMCA, join in with a friend or even practice by yourself.

Kids should be encouraged to do their best, but they should not be expected to be perfect. They need to be encouraged to be themselves and to be proud of who they are, so that they will not give into the pressures from their peers to try and fit in. If they are happy with themselves and love who they are, they will be less likely to try and attain society's unattainable "ideal" body image, because they will accept their bodies just the way they are.

Parents should also be aware of what their kids may be exposed to online – and the websites that promote dangerous and destructive dieting. The best Internet filter is the one that runs in teens' heads – not any filter a parent may install on a home computer. Talk with your children about dangerous and inappropriate sites and keep the lines of communication open so that they might come to you when they encounter destructive information and images online.

Resources

[Internet Guidelines for Parents of Teens](#)

[National Eating Disorders Association](#)

[Let's Move – America's Move to Raise a Healthier Generation](#)

[Mirror Mirror – Information about Eating Disorders](#)

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