



By Christina Baglivi Tinglof

# Weighing in on the Issue... When One Twin is Much Heavier than the other one

As parents of twins we've all gotten used to constant comparisons tossed around at our twins' expense. You know what I'm talking about. "Which twin was the easier baby?" or "Who's more athletic?" Or, my personal pet peeve, "Which one is smarter?"

Over the years we've learned to ignore these well-meaning busybodies who think they're simply making a joke. But there's one comparison that as parents even we can't ignore—what if one twin is much heavier than the other?

Childhood obesity is a national epidemic where nearly one in three American children is considered overweight or obese. It has such serious long-term health implications including an increased risk for heart disease and diabetes, that First Lady Michelle Obama has launched Let's Move, a national initiative to help fight the problem.

"With the rollout of the First Lady's campaign, we have the opportunity to shift our focus on what's wrong to what we really need," says Dr. Michelle May, a family physician and author of, *Eat What You Love, Love What You Eat: How to Break Your Eat-Repent-Repeat Cycle*. "And that's tackling the unhealthy relationship

most kids have with food, whether they are overweight or not." Dr. May believes that young children naturally tune into their personal hunger and fullness cues but with America's fondness for large food portions and parents' plea for a clean plate, kids quickly lose touch with their internal signals. Many gain too many pounds as a result. For parents of multiples, however, helping an overweight twin get on the fast track to a healthier lifestyle can be doubly tricky—how do you help your twin lose weight without it affecting his relationship with his thinner co-twin?

For Deb Greenway of Van Nuys, California, a 15-pound difference between her 13-year-old fraternal twin girls put an enormous strain on their inner-twin relationship. "Lizzy needed to adapt better eating habits and get more exercise," says Greenway. "But I think she felt she couldn't compete with her co-twin Suzanne who was thinner and really into sports, so she gave up." As a result, the girls grew distant with Lizzy's self-esteem suffering in the process. It's only been recently, Greenway says, that the girls are slowly reconnecting. "My husband and I have made a huge effort to get everyone outside together. We do a lot of hiking and bike riding as a family on the weekends." With the increase in exercise and better food choices at dinner, Lizzy is losing weight and feeling better about herself and her relationship with her twin sister. "The other day, they were hanging out together on the couch laughing. It's been awhile since I've seen that."

## THE ROLE FAMILY PLAYS IN WEIGHT GAIN

Although twins are born on the same day and raised side by side, they often receive different messages from their parents when it comes to food. Family dynamics and early childhood experiences with eating and body image shape our future relationship with what's on the table. "Even twins can receive different verbal and non-verbal messages from the same parent," says Dr. Marilyn Ann Migliore, University of Michigan Psychotherapist, Obesity Expert, and the author of, *The Hunger Within: A Twelve Week Guided Jour-*



ney from Compulsive Eating to Recovery. "If one of the twins is viewed as overweight and he receives this message by having his food more closely monitored or restricted more than the other twin, that twin can begin to feel resentful or 'less than,' and may withdraw or rebel." Furthermore, some will begin to crave and sneak food that is considered "off-limits." This pattern or "life script," Migliore says, can continue well into adulthood.

"Ideally, families should not treat their twins differently because everyone in the family benefits from healthy eating and physical activity," adds Dr. May. "On the other hand, comparing twins, restricting foods, forcing exercise, or shaming an overweight twin will backfire and may leave lasting emotional scars."

## WHEN PRAISE HAS UNEXPECTED CONSEQUENCES

Each twin is unique, both physically as well as emotionally. As a result, we parent each twin differently depending on his or her temperament. And when it comes to food, we sometimes focus too strongly on each twin's food choices or style of eating. "A parent may encourage or reward a picky eater. Ironically this can lead to even more resistance or eventually overeating to please the parent," says Dr. May. "On the other hand, a twin who enjoys food and has a more robust appetite may overhear and passively absorb these messages from the parent and begin to eat even more."

It's a dilemma that mom Delia Bechert knows firsthand.

"When my seven-year-old fraternal twin girls, Abby and Ally, were five they were both very thin," she remembers.

"Abby was a good eater and cared about pleasing people. Ally, on the other hand, was a picky

eater, more defiant and didn't care as much about pleasing people." At dinner time, when Ally turned her nose up at what was on her plate, this Carmel, Indiana mom did what any parent would do, she focused on co-twin Abby instead. "We would praise Abby for eating all her food," says Bechert. Because she enjoyed the positive attention, Abby continued to clean her plate at every meal and often asked her mom for another helping. Eventually Bechert noticed that Abby was putting on weight a bit faster than she felt was appropriate so Bechert began to rethink the messages she was sending her daughter about food. "We started to teach her about letting her stomach settle before she asked for seconds," says Bechert. Recently Abby's weight gain has slowed. Bechert is also careful not to compare her twins' weight or withhold dessert from Abby. "I don't give Ally a treat without giving one to Abby," she says. "I just make sure that their treats are in moderation."

## MAKE HEALTHY EATING A FAMILY AFFAIR

Families should work together to create a healthy lifestyle. When it comes to dinnertime, for example, let your twins have a voice in the weekly menu planning, grocery shopping, and even meal preparation. Get the kids in the kitchen with you and cook together. "This is a great opportunity to teach them about nutrition," says Dr. May. "And they're more likely to try new foods that they picked out." Make mealtime a pleasant experience where family members get together and share the events of the day, not a battleground where food becomes the enemy. Furthermore, avoid strict food rules such as insisting they clean their plates in order to get dessert. And avoid labeling food as either "good" or "bad," or using food to reward or even punish your kids. This, the experts say, could lead to rebellious eating. Instead,

lead by example by modeling healthy eating and providing your children

with a variety of good food from which to choose.

"We don't use the words 'fat' or 'heavy' in our home," says Helene Gaither. This Stockton, California mother to two sets of fraternal twins chooses her words very carefully since learning about a year ago that daughter Bella was considered obese based on her body mass index (BMI). "At her 4-year-old check-up, I was stunned to learn she weighed 45 pounds," says Gaither. "And it turned out she had high cholesterol. At four years old, her level was already 233, higher than most adults."

Gaither didn't want her daughter to feel that she was singling her out so she encouraged all her twins to eat healthier. "I bought tons of apples and encouraged them to eat at least one a day," she says. "I also started cooking less red meat and more poultry and fish." But what really made a difference, she says, was increasing their level of activity. She enrolled Bella and co-twin Cole in soccer and gymnastics. "I bought a membership to a kid gym with a jumpy house. We'd go two to three times a week where they'd burn off some serious energy."

Recently Bella has hit a growth spurt and Gaither is noticing that she's thinning. "She recently had her cholesterol and glucose levels checked and everything's back to normal," says Gaither, "but it's definitely something we need to keep an eye on."

## START TODAY

Making small, subtle changes to the family diet (forgoing soda and processed snack foods is a great start) as well as getting everyone up and off the couch for a bit of outdoor recreation will make a huge difference.

Remember to lead by example because in the end, all children look up to their parents for guidance and direction. "Teach and role model messages that revolve around eating to live," adds Dr. Migliore, "not living to eat."

And that's good advice for every family. ♥

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