



‘BUT IF I EAT THIS, WILL I FIT INTO MY JEANS?’

Fear of obesity is driving a generation of parents to obsess about what their children are eating. But what will a lifetime of weight-watching that can start at the age of 7 mean for the youngsters themselves?

REPORT Louise Carpenter **PHOTOGRAPHS** Romas Foord

7 YEARS • M
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COUPE SUPER SKINNY

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Every evening, returning home from work to relieve the nanny of her two small children, Amanda – I’m calling her that because she is too embarrassed to be identified – would feel anxious. The nanny, kind, cuddly and chubby, was, Amanda admits, wonderful with the children, except when it came to food. The nanny liked to cook the children, a boy of 3 and girl of 5, vast meals, home-made chips and semolinas with butter and cheese. She was what Amanda calls “a total feeder who wanted them to be round”.

“In the end, I told her they could only have food like that only once a week,” she remembers. Eventually, the nanny left for other reasons and the children are now in the charge of a younger, more “health-aware” woman who cooks with pulses and grains, which Amanda’s daughter won’t eat. The semolinas might be off the menu, but Amanda’s anxiety has not dissipated. As her five-year-old girl grows bigger, totally in proportion with her height, Amanda admits she is worried her daughter is going to get fat. “Already I’m looking at her and thinking, ‘Would she be happier if she were skinnier?’ I’d like her to be thinner than I was as a child, but clearly that’s not going to be achieved. I see the light of greed in her eyes when it comes to biscuits and cakes and I recognise it as my own.”

In addition to all the other so-called middle-class concerns about food, especially our children’s food – excessive salt, sugar, trans fats, omega-3, five-a-day ratios, fibre, red meat, empty carbs and sugar-laden breakfast cereals and fruit juices – there is another anxiety looming large: fear of fat. Nobody wants a fat child and understandably so. The statistics are terrifying. One in three children in the UK has been identified as being overweight or obese, predicted to rise to two thirds of all children by 2050. According to research by MEND (a healthy lifestyle programme for children aged 2 and up), 60 per cent of children overweight between the ages of 2 and 4 are still overweight at 12 (dispelling the myth, it states, of “healthy” puppy fat). Seventy per cent of overweight 11-year-olds go on to be obese young adults; and a slimmer sibling of an overweight child could, if they don’t eat a healthy diet, be equally unhealthy on the inside, MEND argues. Quite apart from the obvious detrimental health risks, overweight children may be subjected to bullying and are more at risk of social exclusion.

Fat is a taboo, a moral issue as well as a health one, and no more so than when it concerns little people. As one middle-class mother tells me, “When you see young children waddling down the road, I feel that it is as neglectful as not brushing their teeth, not getting them vaccinated, etc. They are obviously

ALMOST ONE QUARTER OF CHILDREN UNDER 10 CONSIDER THEMSELVES TO BE OVERWEIGHT

not being properly cared for.” Another adds: “I worry madly when I see a mother at a supermarket cash till with a basket full of Ribena and a scraggy, pale-faced child too old to be in a pushchair. The snobby side of me thinks they should get off the high street and start running around the park with a banana.”

Society may have the perception that it is lower socioeconomic groups who are breeding a new generation of children who are too fat, but should we be exploring a very different area? Is anxiety and neurosis about keeping a child’s weight down breeding a new generation of children who are too thin?

A recent online poll of 1,500 children aged between 7 and 18, carried out by Onepoll and Youngpoll, revealed that almost one quarter of children under 10 consider themselves overweight. Twenty-six per cent of the children had skipped a meal in the hope of losing weight; 40 per cent of under-10s admitted they worried about their weight, while nearly a quarter of them had already been on a diet in the past year. Two thirds of children aged 7 to 10 admitted to weighing themselves and more than half of all the girls said they wanted to be a size 10 or smaller when they grew up. A fat child might be a worrying prospect, but a dieting ten-year-old?

Amanda admits that, over Christmas, when her son brought home some biscuits he’d made, she put them in the fridge until he forgot about them and then threw them in the bin. Amanda, who never lets her children see her eating rubbish or so much as a spoonful of mashed potato, is not unaware of her anxiety around her children’s food – not helped, she says, because, like many mothers, she is holding down a high-powered job which means that for five out of seven days, she feels

unable to “police” what goes on the table. She does not want to set her daughter on a path to lifetime dieting, but she wants her to be thin (and yes, she admits the focus for her neurosis is always her daughter). “Only the other day, my daughter said to me, ‘Mummy, cakes make me queasy,’ when the reverse is true. She must have been wanting to please me by saying that. It’s building up this hideous conflict in her and it’s all to do with me.” Amanda pauses. “Clearly, they are better off with me not being there at mealtimes.”

There’s little doubt that children are now influenced by social media and the usual suspects (underweight models, clothes designed for matchsticks, slim celebrities) at an ever younger age. But as our own anxieties intensify, can we middle-class parents deny that – like 38 per cent of the children aged 7 to 10 in that online poll – we too are influenced by a “diet-obsessed society”? Are we passing on the wrong message to our children?

We legitimately call it a health concern – and of course, it is – but is there not something aesthetic going on here, too? As Lucie Russell, director of campaigns, policy and participation at a children’s mental health and wellbeing charity, YoungMinds, put it in the immediate aftermath of the release of these statistics, what woman out there isn’t on the spectrum of weight-worry herself? Our children are growing up in a world in which there are increasing numbers of fat people to criticise and blame for society’s wrongs, and where six-year-olds are now wearing skinny jeans rather than smocked dresses. Terrified by the idea of being fat – and of having a fat child who’ll be bullied and reviled – we contribute to the pressure on our children.

“I want my son to be skinny,” one mother tells me. “I feel dreadful saying it, but it’s true. He kept saying to me, ‘Mummy, do these jeans make me look fat?’ And I said, ‘No, no,’ but I had to have a quick check.” She pauses and then sighs. “Luckily, he’s absolutely fine and that pleases me, although I’m not proud of it. I guess he hears me saying it, or hears

60 PER CENT OF CHILDREN OVERWEIGHT BETWEEN 2 AND 4 ARE STILL OVERWEIGHT AT 12



his father asking if he's put on weight, or he might hear us discussing what low-fat dish we are going to cook for supper that'll help us lose weight."

"The anxiety levels that exist around food are a huge problem these days," says Dr Linda Bacon, associate nutritionist at the University of California, Davis, and author of *Health at Every Size: the Surprising Truth about Your Weight*. "With all these health experts and professionals telling us all to lose weight, of course it just makes people bigger. Fat or thin, we are scared of fat and feel bad about it – and when people feel bad about themselves, they make bad choices. Parents have the mistaken idea that they can control the food intake and the weight of their children, but sooner or later they are out in the world and they have to learn for themselves how to make those healthy choices."

According to Kitty Hagenbach, a child and family therapist at London parenting-course specialists Babiesknow, there are deep psychological components to anxieties about fat. "First, a mother's weight is an important issue," she explains. "But also, we tend to see our children as a reflection of our own self-esteem. So many parents are driven by what other parents think, too."

In other words, whether they admit it or not, a child's waist size is, for some parents, an indicator of their own parental success or failure. Their kids become a vehicle through which to demonstrate to the world they are getting it right. This is hardly surprising when even my randomly selected bunch of otherwise sane, intelligent mothers admitted that they pitied fat children, and adopt a self-righteous, "not one of us" attitude towards their parents.

"But you must have the strength to think independently," argues Hagenbach. "What's the endgame here? To have an independent, healthy child who knows who they are and is happy."

With three daughters and a son of my own, as well as a back story of being taken to Weight Watchers when I was teenager – 16 at most – where I learnt that food restriction equalled superskinny, I have vowed never to make food an issue in my home. I spend a small fortune on fruit and vegetables, but biscuits are not banned and I often fry bacon for a big, noisy Saturday morning family breakfast – a meal mitigated, I should add, by swimming and drama and a robust, 45-minute family walk. (You see, I'm already justifying "the sin".) However, at 41, post-childbirth, if I were to eat anything I wanted, free from any concern about my shape, I'd be the size of a bus. Unlike Amanda, I force myself to eat the chocolate cornflake cakes that come back from the Year 1 baking session to support my daughter's efforts and

NEARLY 25 PER CENT OF CHILDREN BETWEEN 7 AND 10 HAVE BEEN ON A DIET IN THE PAST YEAR

protect her feelings. But I really don't want to consume the calories.

Two things happened around Christmas. First, my eldest daughter, almost 8, came home from school and reported that her friends had been comparing waist size and she had been deemed "fatter" as a result. All normal playground stuff (ghastly as it is), but my need to protect her led to an overreaction on my part – it was the first time weight had ever been raised as an issue – which I now see as its own problem. We got over that one with me telling her how beautiful she was, but I confess I did a quick mental check that she was the same as the others. Why did I do that? I hated myself for it.

Second, over the new year, spotting mince pies in our hostess's kitchen, the same daughter told her, "My mummy hasn't eaten a single mince pie all Christmas," parroting exactly a pitiful moment of self-congratulation I'd had with my husband a week earlier (I'd thought out of earshot). Two things, not the end of the world, but how many more unconscious influences have there been as I struggle to reclaim the distant prize of being a size 10?

American clinical psychologist Dr Terese Weinstein Katz, the woman behind online resource EatSanely.com, offers this advice: "It's absolutely OK to say to your child, 'Darling, you know Mummy has to watch it because she's getting older, but you've got nothing to worry about.' That's much more understandable to a child than odd, anxious behaviour in their mother. There is so much nervousness these days."

I agree – it's part of the problem. As a society, we don't even know how to behave normally around food any more – it has taken on an almost fetishised status. The

70 PER CENT OF OVERWEIGHT 11-YEAR-OLDS GO ON TO BE OBESE YOUNG ADULTS

perfect diet for our slim, mobile children, free of too much fat and sugar and toxins, is considered almost as a way of preventing life's future problems. Add to that, my generation of thirtysomething/fortysomething women have been called the "anorexic generation", women who grew up with dieting mothers, to a lesser or greater extent, with all the knock-on effects that had. (It will come as no surprise that Amanda's mother wanted her to be thinner as a child.) As a result, we're carrying around all that baggage, terrified of party bags full of sweets or that our own comments about cutting down after Christmas will provoke long-term damage in our own children, when in fact straightforward honesty, with no hidden, anxious subtext, is fine.

The problem is not restricted to girls, either. "I am appalled at how major the issue of size is for my 14-year-old boy," the travel writer Sara Wheeler tells me. "He often talks about looking fat in this or that garment, whereas in fact he is verging on the underweight. Where did he get this from? I have been careful not to express any of my own "Am I huge?" anxieties in front of him, so I don't think he has got it from me."

"Children are really tuned into their parents' limbic brain," says Kitty Hagenbach, offering one potential answer. "What you are thinking and feeling is picked up energetically in the atmosphere. A child knows what's going on even if you don't vocalise it. If there is any anxiety, it is very confusing for them."

So, not only might your son or daughter overhear the odd comment as you pour over Nigella's *How to Eat* wondering whether to substitute cream with 0 per cent yoghurt, but they can also pick up on your anxious energy?

"It's so much more subtle than just saying to your child, 'You're getting fat,'" says Lucie Russell. "They pick up on everything out there, and there is this immense pressure on mothers these days. And, of course, we mothers are subjected to all the same influences as our children."

A friend who has never worried about her own weight – and who was the only mother I spoke to who said with absolute honesty that she wouldn't stress too much if her

'I look at old photos and wonder how a normal toddler has become an overweight nine-year-old'

Lucy Cavendish cooks low-fat everything and her family do lots of exercise. So why is son Leonard obese?

I'm not sure when it happened but, somewhere over the past nine years, my son Leonard has gone from being a normal-looking, healthy child to one who is now clinically obese. And I do mean clinically obese. He has a huge round belly, big chubby hands, large tree-trunk thighs. I look back at photos of him as a two-year-old, three-year-old, and wonder how a perfectly normal toddler has turned in to an overweight nine-year-old. To put it in perspective: he wears trousers that are meant for 13-year-olds and even then, they are plus size. His weight affects his health. He finds it hard to run, breathes very heavily when he does. To lose weight, he needs to move more, yet he finds most forms of exercise difficult.

How can I explain the difficulties, the pain of having a child who is overweight? I lie awake at night wondering what to do about it. I have tried just about everything – endless courses, trips to the doctor, clinics at my local hospital and yet... Leonard just gets bigger and bigger and I'm not actually sure why. My antennae are always up. I have to bite my tongue not to tell him, "That's enough," "No seconds for you," "No, you can't have chocolate." I monitor what he eats constantly. I cook food from scratch. We eat very healthily – low-fat everything, nothing fried, lots of fresh veggies and fruit, no crisps, no sugary things. But nothing has worked so far. I even took him to a MEND course – an extremely good programme run by local councils to help families who have an overweight child. The course looks at many things – nutrition, exercise and so on – and is designed for the child. I found it fascinating and helpful but, at the end of the day, Leonard's problem is not about bad habits or a bad diet.

The most disconcerting thing is that we are not a fat family. Often, when you see a big child, the mother, father and siblings are also large, generally due to poor nutrition and a dependence on takeaway food and sugary snacks. But we are not that family. Everyone else in my family – me, Leonard's father, his two brothers and his sister – is normal-sized and has the appropriate BMI. Leonard is the only one whose waistbands don't fit. We all eat the same food, do the same amount of exercise but Leonard is a round roly-poly pudding and the rest of us are not. His brother, Jerry, who is 16 months younger than Leonard, is as thin as a rake and eats just the same things as his older brother, if not more. But

Jerry is like a child attached to a spring. As a character, Jerry is highly strung and slightly neurotic, whereas Leonard is a lovely stoic sort of a boy. He has the kindest heart I have ever known in a child. Yet he is also a child who craves things in general. Jerry hasn't spent a penny of his Christmas money; Leonard has spent all of his on plastic tat. The two brothers have, on a basic level, an entirely different view of life. Leonard is a true consumer.

But none of this makes any difference to how Leonard is perceived. In a society that values thinness, Leonard is carrying around a terrible burden. It's one I try to keep from him. I try to gloss over it, tell him it's fine to be who he is (which it is, because he is so lovely). Like every overweight child though, he knows he is too big. Sometimes he gets unhappy about it. Sometimes he feels embarrassed. When he is feeling low, he calls himself "Lennie the Lump" and it makes me want to cry. Fortunately, he is a very likeable and therefore popular boy. He is, thank goodness, not socially excluded.

Whose fault is it he has become so large? I suppose, in all honesty, it's mine. I am his mother, his primary carer. I should have monitored him more closely, shouldn't I? But I have. I am stuck in a very hard place. I know about good nutrition. I don't feed my children takeaways. But he doesn't seem to be losing weight.

Sometimes I find it embarrassing. I know I shouldn't. I know it's not personal but that's not how it feels. I live in a resolutely middle-class area near Henley-on-Thames. Children in this part of the country aren't fat. They wear Jack Wills and dash about on rugby pitches and play cricket and football. It is an almost criminal act to be fat where I live. Wandering round the supermarket – Waitrose, of course – piling up the trolley with veggies and mounds of fruit, I see people looking at us, at Leonard. I start getting defensive and almost

awash with guilt. As soon as he puts anything remotely fattening into the shopping trolley – crumpets, for example – I whip them out with a flourish. "Oh, we don't need them," I'll say loudly, as if trying to show the other shoppers that it's not my fault he is overweight.

I spend night after night, day after day, wondering why Leonard is so much bigger than the rest of us. I have some random thoughts on this: put simply, he eats too much, moves too little. But it's more than that. In a family of six, everyone needs to find their role. My eldest son, Raymond, 15, has little interest in food. He uses it only to remain alive. He has never really taken joy in eating and so he remains slim. My third son, Jerry, spends his life jiggling around. He could eat steak frites and ice cream every day and never put on weight. That's how he's made.

Leonard is made differently. He is made to put on and carry weight. There is an obesity gene in our family on his father's side. Both his maternal great-grandmother and great-aunt died of obesity-related illnesses. But it's more than that. As a baby and then a toddler, Leonard loved food. We all marvelled at the way he smacked his lips with excitement as soon as he saw a yoghurt. At six months old he was eating baby versions of curry; by eight months, gnawing on chicken legs. At 2, it was Camembert, risotto, fondues.

He was also born at a time when I was going through a domestic goddess phase. I cooked constantly, dishes laden with cream, butter – rich, fatty, calorie-busting, delicious food. Of course Leonard became tubby. Back then, he was "bonny". Now it's a problem. But if children are applauded every time they clear their plates, they will associate eating well with praise. Leonard's role in our family has, to a certain extent, been to be the "good eater". That was put in place many years ago and it hasn't changed.

But it's become a problem, and one with an emotional dimension. Now, when we sit down to eat,



Leonard is already worrying about whether or not he can have seconds before he's even had one bite.

I have talked to specialists about Leonard's weight. The advice starts at, "Don't make food an issue," and ends with, "You need to put him on a diet." I tend towards the former tactic. The more food becomes an issue, the more Leonard will worry and, aged 9, that's not a good thing. Instead, I try little tricks. I serve him smaller portions on smaller plates. I get him to drink water before he eats and then after his main meal, so he can really tell if he is hungry or not. I try not to cook delicious food. I use low-fat everything. I only have cereals with no added sugar. I don't have biscuits or crisps in the house. I do have rice cakes and pretzels. I have replaced all white grains with wholemeal grains. I don't use butter. I don't use cream. On and on it all goes...

But food certainly still is an issue for Leonard and that hasn't been a good thing. As family therapist Kitty Hagenbach pointed out to me, his desire to fill himself up with food could also be his desire for more love/attention/time. I try to find space for him and me to do an activity together, just the two of us, each week. At the moment, we are madly in to trampolining.

Yet still I worry. I worry that I have made food an issue, that Leonard is plagued by insecurities about it. Hagenbach believes that although courses such as the MEND ones are a good thing, it is, generally, not a great idea to make something an issue. "It then becomes a negative," she says. What she suggests is to work out why the issue is happening. "It's generally about something more than just food." He may well grow out of his weight. He may well just get taller and slimmer.

At the moment, though, I have no idea how this will end. Statistics worry me – obese children turn into obese adults mainly because they haven't grasped what food actually is. Food is fuel, but for Leonard, for most of us, it is more than that. I don't want him to grow up thinking that eating delicious food is something to be denied, avoided. I am trying to strike a happy balance. I am hoping that I can subtly guide Leonard, encourage him to enjoy the taste of good food without having to eat plateloads of it. This, I think, will be his path to happiness. ■

children became overweight – says of her nine-year-old boy, "He is always telling me his calves are too fat and he's as skinny as a bean. I honestly don't know where he gets it from. We never talk about weight at home and I can't believe he's influenced by the girls at school, whom I think he avoids as much as possible."

Ian Campbell, a Nottingham GP and medical director of the UK charity Weight Concern, says we must look elsewhere – to visual images – when laying blame. "Ten-year-olds are now aware about portion sizes and they learn from their parents and teachers, and that is a good thing. Ten or fifteen years ago children didn't have a clue about what they ate. When our charity began working with the government, the last thing we wanted was to create a situation where children became fixated or disturbed. But the media continues to portray weight as voyeuristic, and I think this is where the pressure comes from."

Also, as Sara Wheeler points out, we have a polarised society, which doesn't make it easy for poorer families to buy proper, fresh food, thus perpetuating the social phobia. "In the current economic climate," she argues, "trash food is the cheapest way to feed a family – by miles. C**p food makes you fat."

Which brings us back to class prejudice again. One mother tells me that her ten-year-old daughter has just started prodding herself in the ribs and peering at herself in the mirror, worried that she is becoming fat (she isn't). Her daughter, she admits, has learnt the message from her that thin equals classy. But she's also waking up to bigger issues, pressurising herself to succeed academically and feeling at sea with her changing body. Weight, at the moment, seems the vehicle through which my friend's daughter can channel her fears. Her mother is handling the situation with what she calls "watchful neglect", trying to keep her daughter talking about her feelings, but doing so with a light touch. However, she tells me, "I do admit to being a snob about fast food, and possibly indoctrinating my kids with the idea that McDonald's is fattening and for people who end up obese. I probably mentioned 'muffin tops' rather too much a couple of years back, so that now she often points out to me the fat bottoms that are stuffed into leggings and waddling around Westfield. Her reaction is one of moral prurience rather than amusement, and I'm sure this is directly received from me. Has my prejudice rubbed off on my daughter to the extent where she is now so worried about it? And if so, there's probably a whole load more 'damage' I've done to my kids through my own strong opinions."

It suits us to blame unsophisticated people for weight problems, but one mother I'll call

Mary – not her real name – points to her mother-in-law's upper-class idea of thinness as profoundly damaging to Mary's own children's growing ideas of themselves, not to mention to her own self-esteem. "She actively prefers my children's cousins because they are thinner than my children," Mary tells me. "Last summer, we were on holiday with my mother-in-law and my daughter brought a friend, tall and slim with long slender limbs. My mother-in-law barely spoke to my own daughter all holiday, preferring the friend instead."

The most recent data available from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey reveals that white bread, fizzy drinks and biscuits are among the foodstuffs which contribute most calories to the diets of 11 to 18-year-olds (at Nos 2, 4 and 5 respectively). It suits society to stick to its belief that children are eating and growing in tribes: middle-class children are getting thinner and healthier, while working-class ones are getting fatter. But talk to any nutritionist or paediatric dietician and they will say that children are overweight for many reasons. Right up there with white bread and fizzy drinks are genes and emotions.

**ONE IN THREE
CHILDREN IN THE
UK IS EITHER
OVERWEIGHT OR OBESE**

The fight starts young these days, with those anti-obesity courses for two-year-olds. But emotions are a different issue entirely. I can still recall the shock I felt when Nessie Owen, the mother of one of my daughter's friends (a woman free of any obvious neurosis about food), revealed in passing that she had been anorexic at 10, even hospitalised when she dropped to 3½st. "I was at boarding school and my mother was having an operation," she explains. "I felt frightened and I didn't understand what was happening. It definitely didn't start from being worried about weight, but it became about that. Having got through that – it took a few years before I was back to normal – I now know that a happy home is more important than anything else. A happy home and for children to know they can talk to you about their problems. The smallest crack can appear and unless they feel supported and strong, it can easily turn into a problem around food. What it came down to for me was lack of communication. If you are doing your best to make your child feel loved, safe and happy, then that's pretty good going." ■