

HIGH SCHOOL NUTRITION

ATTITUDES by Ann Gerhardt, MD

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It's amazing how the same talk given to two different groups of middle and high school kids can yield extremely diverse responses. At Christian Brothers High School two weeks ago I started each class by discussing some general nutrition and body image concepts, but then allowed most of the time for questions.

The class of thirteen year-old girls actively engaged in an open discourse about diet and weight. Questions tumbled out of their mouths, apparently unafraid of sounding simple or silly. Here was an opportunity to confirm, explain or refute the profusion of right, wrong or who-knows nutrition information that bombards them in magazines and media every day. Only a few, very quiet, almost sullen-looking, young women remained aloof. When they did answer, their answers were a little too perfect. (I worry about their risk of an eating disorder.)

At the opposite end of the class-participation spectrum, a mixed class of juniors and seniors required a virtual crow-bar to elicit any response. The girls, especially, seemed mute. Questions from four boys, the only ones who felt like talking, ended up moving the discussion to sports nutrition. I could see their teacher, who seemed to be on a rampage against Jamba juice, grimacing. She wanted me to focus on nutrition quality and quantity, not what to eat before and after sports practice.

The 13-year-olds wanted to know about ideal body weight, what to say to a friend with an eating disorder, dietary causes of acne and how many calories it takes to metabolize protein. The older class - well, I just rambled on, because they really weren't asking questions.

I tried to engage both classes with questions requiring answers by a show of hands. Their responses to questions about why they eat what they eat, and their response to hunger and fullness, were ominous predictors of future weight problems. Almost everyone affirmed that they always eat if they are hungry. Very few, though, stop eating when the hunger abates, preferring to finish it because it's there, or to keep eating because it tastes good.

They also eat when feeling sad, bored, angry, social or tired. One very candid girl admitted that she eats *less* when angry, because "why would I want to sit and eat with my parents, when I'm mad at them?" As teens, they accepted without question that emotions are valid reasons to eat. Their life IS emotion, and our society teaches that any feeling is fair game for caloric soothing. Most get away with it now by being high energy teens, involved in sports and talking with their arms.

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HEALTHY CHOICES FOR MIND AND BODY

Written by Ann Gerhardt, MD

I worry about these habits being translated into over- or under-eating throughout adulthood, so I hammered away at the concept of eating when physically hungry and stopping when no longer hungry. A few got it, including the teacher.