



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

## Should Fat Kids be Called Fat?

During a discussion in one of my Psychology classes when I was a student, I spoke about what it was like growing up with a mentally retarded relative. My aunt Mary lived with her older sister who provided supervision and support. I enjoyed visits to their home, and would play games, do puzzles, or just hang around the yard with my aunt and her dog. As I got older, I became more acutely aware of the severity of her retardation, but I still remember endless conversations and good times with a very caring and loving person.

At the end of class, the teacher gently reprimanded me. "You shouldn't refer to your aunt as mentally retarded," advised my professor. "It's more appropriate to describe her as "exceptionally abled."

While usually a docile student, I was upset at the instructor. "You never lived with a retarded person, have you?" I asked rhetorically. "Aunt Mary couldn't read, write, or care for herself. She never held a job or functioned independently. She was a wonderful person who happened to be seriously mentally retarded, and calling her anything else just seems like a denial of who she was!"

Words are powerful, and can be used to communicate or conceal what a person is really like. Is it really honest to pretend that mental retardation is something it isn't?

I thought about this conversation after reading comments about an article in which I referred to overweight children as “fat.” “We need to build up the self-concept of overweight children, and referring to them as fat is insensitive and hurtful” advised one reader. A parent of a seriously obese child remarked that “my child gets that all day from kids at school. I tell her she is not fat, but a beautiful and gifted youngster!”

We have become a very language sensitive society, afraid of using words that may be offensive to some groups. This excessive concern about hurting children’s self image has caused parents to focus their attention on their children’s feelings rather than on their behaviors. This leaves kids ill equipped to deal with a world that cares primarily about how people perform and not about how they feel.

All parents have to deal with kids who have traits that have negative societal or personal implications. Kids may have mental limitations, big ears, chronic medical problems, or any number of other issues. Here are the three key messages parents should communicate to their kids.

1. **Be honest.** Whether your child is fat, mentally limited, diabetic, stutters, etc., be honest with your child. Your children know of their limitations, and you lack credibility if you pretend otherwise.

2. **Your trait is not an excuse for nonperformance.**

There’s no doubt that some traits place limitations on what kids can do. An overweight child will have problems playing many sports. However, don’t allow your child to use their limitation as an excuse for their failure to perform. Keep the focus more on your child’s behavior and less on their feelings about themselves. Their self-concept will improve after they start achieving success in other areas.

3. **Your disability or trait doesn’t diminish you as a person.** Help kids understand that whatever limiting characteristic they have is but one part of who they are. Being retarded didn’t diminish my aunt’s humanity. She was a very loving person who had a wonderful impact on the many people in her life. She wasn’t a wonderful person because of her retardation, but because of the way she acted.

Ultimately, the world judges us by what we do. Let’s not pretend that a disability or trait won’t make life harder for some kids. You’ll help your kids more by maintaining a balanced but honest approach to their condition.

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