

Children don't listen; They mimic you

Contributed by Nan Kathryn Fuchs, PhD

One

day, several years ago, Karen, a friend of mine, came to me with an upsetting story. Her three-year old daughter had taken her by the hand, walked with her into the bathroom, and pointed at the toilet. Then she pretended to stick her finger down her throat and made a retching sound. "Look, Mommy", she said proudly.

Karen

knew that her daughter's babysitter was bulimic, but she never expected her daughter to act like one. I wasn't surprised. As I said in my book on overeating (Overcoming the Legacy of Overeating), "All children are deaf. They don't do what you say, they do what you do."

Parents

are a child's highest authority. That's why your children watch you so carefully and mimic you. They pick up your good habits and your bad ones – no matter what you say. If your child sees you eating junk food, or eating until you're stuffed and can hardly move, then he or she will do the same thing.

You can't tell

your child that breakfast is an important meal if you're grabbing a cup of coffee and a piece of toast. The message your child gets is that breakfast is not important. If it was, mommy would eat it, too.

The

best way to get a message across to any child is by demonstrating. That's why it's important to sit down with your child and eat breakfast together, even if you feel rushed. That's an ideal time to talk about why the fruit and cereal she's eating is good for her. You strengthen this message by eating some of the same fruit and cereal.

When

you're no longer hungry, stop eating. Then explain why you're not eating any more. Combine information with action. This is what your child will remember. If you want your child to eat the right amounts of healthy foods, you need to first show her what to do. Then you can talk about it. My mother used to tell me, "Actions speak louder than words". Mother was right.

Nan Kathryn Fuchs, PhD, is editor of Women's Health Letter (www.womenshealthletter.com) and has been a nutritionist for more than 25 years.