

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose – No. 1 parenting educator



Lose *The Biggest Loser* from kids' TV screens

There's little to gain – and a lot to be lost – when children watch shows like The Biggest Loser, writes Karen Fontaine.

Article contributed by Karen Fontaine

As brash and as hard to ignore as the militant trainers who whip its obese contestants into shape, Channel Ten's *The Biggest Loser* has pervaded Australian television screens since its debut in 2006.

With a 7pm timeslot, it's aired well before children have gone to bed, and experts say it's doing their self-esteem and body image no favours. Contestants are screamed at, tempted with fatty food and secretly filmed in their most intimate moments.

Experts say watching this is not only unsuitable for children, it contributes towards shaping damaging perceptions of a disease for which rates in Australia have doubled over the past 20 years.

What children see when they watch *The Biggest Loser*

Professor John Dixon, head of the Obesity Research Unit at Monash University, who has devoted his career to understanding and treating the "serious, relapsing disease" of obesity, says children form pejorative views against obesity from a very early age. They think children who are obese are silly, dirty and lazy, he says.

"These shows might be entertaining for some mums and dads but the message is wrong and children will carry those perceptions about obese people and their issues throughout life," he warns. "Of course if you have a weight problem as a young child, it will be doing horrendous damage to your body image and self-esteem with the whole feeling that you brought this on yourself. And nothing could be further from the truth."

Margarita Tartakovsky, associate editor at www.PsychCentral.com and writer of the body image blog *Weightless*, says the danger of shows like *The Biggest Loser* is that children learn to associate their worth with their weight.

"They learn the only way to be attractive, happy and healthy is by losing weight and conforming to society's thin ideal," she says.

From these shows, kids learn to watch their food intake like a hawk, Tartakovsky says. "They learn that you're bad if you eat junk food or other foods, and you're good if you watch your portions and count your calories. And even worse, they learn that if they're overweight, too, they're undesirable, unattractive and unworthy and they must do everything in their power, including dramatically cutting their food intake and exercising

until they're ready to collapse, to correct their supposedly wrong selves. These are very dangerous messages."

Is there anything to gain by watching?

Some TV critics have suggested that the enduring appeal of *The Biggest Loser* is because the contestants are wrestling their own demons as much as they are dealing with their obesity. "The message we are given," one reviewer wrote, "is that you don't get to be this massive just because you like cakes and pies... This allows viewers to empathise."

"Rubbish", says Professor Dixon. "You could get any group of 20 people and put them in a room and you would have a lot of demons. These people have a serious medical condition. It's not their fault; they didn't bring it upon themselves, and it's not due to a lack of willpower or compliance. Try as they might, at least 90 per cent of these people will gain all of their weight back within four to five years, most of it within 12 months. I mean, have you ever seen a follow-up show?"

For parents of children who are curious about *The Biggest Loser*, Margarita Tartakovsky suggest asking their kids the following questions to kick-start a discussion:

- ▶ Do they like these shows?
- ▶ What do they think these shows teach?
- ▶ How do they feel when they watch these shows?
- ▶ How do they feel about themselves?
- ▶ Do they agree or disagree with their messages?

It's important, she says, for parents to figure out what their children are taking away from these programs. "When talking to their kids, it's also important for parents to emphasise that people can be healthy and beautiful in all shapes and sizes," she says. "They can even use a flower analogy. There are tons of flowers; one flower isn't more beautiful than another. They're all beautiful in their own ways."

Parents can also underscore that genetics play a prominent role in how we look – that is, some of us are short, others tall, some are thin, others are bigger; it's not natural or healthy for everyone to be skinny. "And that the key to true health is engaging in healthy habits – not in losing weight," she says.

Karen Fontaine is a Sydney-based journalist.