

Teri Bourdeau, PhD — Clinical Psychologist

A RECIPE FOR HEALTHIER KIDS

You can lead young people to healthier eating habits, but you can't force them to change. That is why clinical psychologist Teri Bourdeau, PhD, is taking a different approach to combating childhood obesity.

"Kids do not want to be told what to do; they want to feel invited to change," she says. "As a provider, I extend that invitation and make it so appealing they can't wait to do it."

By asking young people to reconsider their eating habits, not ordering them to do so, she is able to explore the factors at the heart of behavior change. She listens to what children and families have to say before she offers any recommendations, essentially putting them in the driver's seat.

"Physicians do not always have the time or training to communicate in ways that are effective enough to create change," she adds. That's where her work is able to shine. Psychologists — who are trained experts in human behavior — have the skills to coach families and children on motivation, problem-solving and good decision-making. Reframing the ways that patients understand food and eating helps them feel empowered to re-think their choices.

And her hands-on approach works.

"I've got families who walk into the clinic and say, 'We're here because of you; we come back week after week because my child feels you really understand the challenges he is facing,'" she says, adding that depression is another factor to treat along with obesity.

A GROWING ISSUE

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, obesity has more than doubled in children and tripled in adolescents in the past 30 years, putting young people at higher risk for pre-diabetes, bone and joint problems, sleep apnea, poor self-esteem, and social and psychological problems. But convincing people of any age to change how and what they eat is a personal matter.

"I try to emphasize the positive aspects of eating well and increasing movement without the family feeling deprived," Bourdeau says. "It is important for families to feel they can gain control and work collaboratively to guide the process."

Her approach includes talking with children and families about topics that go far beyond eating. That way, Bourdeau is able to broaden the context for healthier eating. For example, the same strategies that contribute to positive results in other areas, such as strong academic performance, can be built upon and applied to health and behavior.

"I have people say, 'I have seen a child shut down with other providers, but that kid just shared with you that he eats when he's bored or emotional,'" she says. These breakthroughs are what Bourdeau works for every day.

Bourdeau is director of behavioral health clinics and a clinical associate professor of behavioral sciences at the Center for Health Sciences at Oklahoma State University.



"I try to emphasize the positive aspects of eating well and increasing movement without the family feeling deprived."

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Psychologists who provide clinical or counseling services assess and treat mental, emotional and behavioral disorders. They use the science of psychology to treat complex human problems and promote change. They also promote resilience and help people discover their strengths.

Find out where psychology can take you at WWW.PSYCHSCIENCEACTION.ORG.