

“OUR SON’S STORY”

- A PARENTS PERSPECTIVE BY, D. MURPHY

Our son is a typical 7 year old boy, he is energetic, funny, kind, caring and never stops talking. He, like most 7 year olds, doesn't have many worries in his life, except the usual things like how does he get more screen time and when can he hang out with his friends again. Unlike most 7 year olds he is living with obesity, but he does not realise this yet. As his parents we are very conscious what we feed him and we are trying to educate him about healthy eating, while allowing him to enjoy himself and eat what other kids are eating when he is out. Thankfully he has always been a great eater. He will eat fruit, veg, meat, fish, rice, pasta etc. So getting a balanced diet is not difficult.

We started noticing his weight when he was a toddler, while other toddlers were stretching and losing their baby weight, he wasn't. We assumed he would eventually as he was eating healthy and never stopped moving. When he started school it was noticeable that he was bigger than most kids in the class. At this point we mentioned it to our GP that we were concerned about his weight and her reply was that he will grow out of it

and to stop worrying.

Well meaning family started commenting on his weight and were asking what we were doing about it. They questioned what he was eating and was he sitting in front of the TV all day. People assumed that he must have been eating too much and didn't move enough. This was not the case, we watched his diet and kept junk food to a minimum and he never stopped moving. I think he was around 4 years old before he really took any interest in the TV. He was too busy running, climbing and playing to sit down for long. Yet we felt no one believed us. People looked at him with pity, he had two parents who were suffering from obesity and we felt people blamed us.

He asked for a Fitbit for his 7th birthday and this coincided with lockdown. We were delighted because we were starting to question was he moving as much as we thought or were we making excuses. He was so motivated by it that he would run around the house doing laps of the sitting room and kitchen to get his steps up. He set up challenges between us and every

night we had to see who won the daily challenge. We started walking more and more as a way to fill the day. So we would walk down to visit the grandparents for a socially distance visit. They were shocked that he could walk the 5km round trip and still run around the garden the entire time we were there. What hit me was they assumed due to his weight that he wouldn't be able for a 5km walk. We knew he was well able for it because he never sits down, he is always on the move. He never once complained that he was tired or that he didn't want to walk. And to our surprise some weeks he hit over 100,000 steps.

As lockdown continued we were delighted with how much he was moving, yet to our surprise his weight went up. This is when well meaning family again stepped in. This time they could see how much he was moving, they saw his Fitbit stats and they saw him jumping around the house on our family zoom calls. So they immediately assumed we were over feeding him.

At this stage both of us have had gastric bypass so our eating habits have changed completely, we eat healthy meals and we

don't eat takeaway. Our families know this yet they still assume we would give our child things we don't eat. We started thinking we must be doing something wrong, so we started writing down everything he ate and worked out how many calories he was eating. We had ourselves so worked up thinking we were doing something wrong, It must be our fault. And guess what showed up in those calculations? The days he went over

the recommended calorie intake for his age were the days we visited family.

His class in school are all obsessed with who is the oldest, youngest, tallest etc. at the moment. He came home delighted with himself because he thinks he is the youngest in the class yet he is not the smallest in the class. His best friend who is 9 months older than him is the smallest and he is proud as punch that

he is taller than him. This led to him mentioning that he is heavier than his friends. We asked him did it bother him that he was heavier. He laughed and said "no it's ok because if someone tries to kidnap us they won't get very far trying to carry me". We laughed along with him because we didn't know how to respond. But our hearts broke wondering how he came up with that reply. Did he discuss this with his friends? Has he been teased about his weight? Did someone say it to him?

It's left us wondering if he is treated different by the other kids or by the teachers due to his weight. How will this impact him as he grows up? Will other people's bias shape his future in a negative way? As his parents this is very hard to accept.

So what are we to do with this wonderful little boy who is full of life? Well for now we have decided this burden is something we will carry for him. He has the rest of his life to carry it so for now it belongs with us. We can control to a certain extent what he eats and how much he moves. We can steer him in the right direction to live as healthy as he can. We have sought advice from dieticians and doctors and they all agree we are on the right path. As for well meaning family, I know they mean no harm however I feel an honest conversation about stigma and weight bias is in their future.

