Why our kids' fitness section never mentions weight

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Peabody's Gym never talks about weight, shape, size or calories, and our code refuses about sixty words to make sure. The research behind that, and what we say instead.

Peabody's Gym is a fitness section for children aged about four to fourteen, and nowhere in it, in anything a child reads or hears, is there a word about weight, shape, size, calories or eating less. That is not a style choice. About sixty words and phrases are refused by our code, so a page that used one would fail before it could reach a child. The reason is a body of research suggesting that talk about weight does children harm, while talk about healthy habits does not. This post explains the decision, because it is the one parents ask us about most.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is a free learning site, free through the end of 2026: stories in the library, games, and a Gym of real exercises a child can do at home.

What the research found

The clearest study we know of is Parent conversations about healthful eating and weight, published in JAMA Pediatrics in 2013 by researchers at the University of Minnesota. It surveyed 2,793 adolescents, average age 14, from a diverse group of schools, and 3,709 parents.

Its findings, in the paper's own terms: mothers and fathers who had weight-related conversations had adolescents who were more likely to diet, use unhealthy weight-control behaviours and binge eat. Conversations focused only on healthy eating went the other way, including for adolescents with higher weights. Its conclusion was that conversations focused on weight or size are associated with increased risk of disordered eating, while conversations focused on healthy eating are protective.

It is a cross-sectional study, so it shows an association rather than proving cause. But the direction is consistent, and the cost of being wrong is not symmetrical. Leaving weight out of a children's exercise page costs nothing. Putting it in may cost a great deal.

Why it matters more in a fitness section

The National Institute of Mental Health describes eating disorders as serious illnesses, and says they can affect people of all ages, body weights and sexes, and that someone who appears healthy can be extremely ill. You cannot tell by looking which child on the carpet is vulnerable.

A fitness section is the place on a children's site most likely to say the wrong thing. Fitness

writing for adults is soaked in the language of burning, losing, toning and earning food, and it is easy for that language to leak into a page written for an eight-year-old without anyone meaning it to. The program our Gym borrows its framework from lists childhood obesity among its own goals, which is a reasonable public-health aim and the wrong thing to say to a child about her own body.

So we decided early that the rule could not depend on whoever happened to be writing that day.

How the rule works

Every movement, workout, game, lesson, question and spoken line in the Gym is checked by an automated test before it can be published. It refuses:

- Body and food words: calories, diet, burning fat, losing weight, slimming, and the rest of the vocabulary of shrinking.
- Effort slogans that teach a child to ignore their body: "no pain, no gain", "feel the burn", "to failure", "until you drop".
- Comparison: "beat your friend", "loser", "you're out", "who's fastest". Peabody has no leaderboard, and a child's score is only ever compared with their own last one.
- Medical claims: "cures", "prevents", "treats your".

The test does allow the safety advice that contains a dangerous phrase, so "never hold your breath" is fine where "hold your breath" is not.

What we say instead

There is a great deal to say about exercise to a child without mentioning their body's size.

- What it does. The CDC lists the benefits of activity for children: it strengthens bones, builds strong muscles and endurance, improves blood pressure and aerobic fitness, improves attention and memory, and reduces the risk of depression. A child can understand every one of those.
- What they can do. Strong, fast, springy, steady, bendy. The Gym's progress picture is a wheel of ten skills, from strength and speed to balance and aim, and it fills with what a child has practised, not with a number about them.
- That everybody's body is different. One of the fourteen lessons in Fitness School is about exactly that, and that nobody's workout is a comparison.
- That food is fuel. One lesson, one line, and a link to the Kitchen, where food is something you make and eat and enjoy. The Gym prescribes no eating at all.

What this means at home

You do not need a website to do this. The same research points to the same habits:

- Talk about what bodies can do, not what they look like.
- Talk about healthy eating as a family habit, not as a fix for one child.
- Notice how you talk about your own body in front of them; children listen to that too.
- Keep exercise about play, skill and feeling good afterwards.

If you are worried about your child's eating, their weight or how they feel about their body, the right person to talk to is their doctor. Peabody is not medical advice, and this post is not either; it is an explanation of a rule we built and why.

The grown-up version of the Gym's other rules, including the safety ones, is on the Gym's page for grown-ups.

Sources

- Berge JM, MacLehose R, Loth KA, Eisenberg M, Bucchianeri MM, Neumark-Sztainer D. Parent conversations about healthful eating and weight: associations with adolescent disordered eating behaviors. JAMA Pediatrics 167(8): 746–753, 2013 (PubMed 23797808) — the sample, the findings and the conclusion. Abstract read through the National Library of Medicine's PubMed, 31 October 2026.
- National Institute of Mental Health, Eating Disorders: What You Need to Know (revised 2024) — serious illnesses; all ages, body weights and sexes; people who appear healthy can be extremely ill. Read at nimh.nih.gov, 31 October 2026.
- CDC, Health Benefits of Physical Activity for Children — bones, muscles and endurance, blood pressure and aerobic fitness, attention and memory, depression. Read at cdc.gov, 31 October 2026.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/why-our-kids-fitness-section-never-mentions-weight