

Talking With Children and Teens About Body Image

More and more children and teens are unsatisfied with the way they look, and it is an important issue for both boys and girls.

- ▶ Studies show that approximately 90% of women and girls are dissatisfied with their looks. Between 40% and 60% of men and boys feel this way.
- ▶ “Body dissatisfaction” has been seen in children as young as 5 years old.

The following considerations may be useful for helping your child develop and maintain a healthy body image and positive self-esteem.

Today’s children and teens face a lot of pressure to meet unrealistic and even harmful stereotypes of beauty, body shape, and weight.

What is Body Image?

Body image is how you think or feel about your appearance and your body. It is about how you see yourself, and how you think others see you.

- ▶ Children who have a healthy body image feel good about how they look, how their body moves and grows, and what their body can do.
- ▶ A healthy body image grows over time. It starts in babyhood. It builds as kids grow. It changes when kids go through puberty. It is shaped by what we hear, what we see, and what others say.
- ▶ At every stage of their children’s lives, parents can do things to help support their children develop a healthy body image.

Body image in growing kids

Children usually feel good about their bodies when they are young. They are often proud of what they can do with their growing bodies.

As they get older, some kids begin comparing themselves with others. They want to be able to do what other kids can do.

If children receive negative messages during this time, they can begin to feel bad about themselves. But if they are encouraged to feel good about their abilities and their unique shape and size, they begin to build a positive body image.

To help kids build a healthy body image, you can:

- ▶ teach your children about their bodies and say nice things about how they look.
- ▶ be positive about the fact that everyone has different looks and abilities.
- ▶ let your children show you what they can do and tell them you're proud of their efforts.
- ▶ be active with them, and encourage them to be active every day.

Body image in teenagers

Maintaining a healthy body image during the teen years, a time of physical and emotional changes, can be difficult.

- ▶ Some kids are excited to look older.
- ▶ Other teens feel shy about their changing body, especially because teenagers' bodies develop at different times.
- ▶ It can take time to get used to looking and feeling different.

Factors that might harm a teenager's body image include the following.

- ▶ Natural or expected weight gain, skin blemishes, and other changes brought on by puberty.
- ▶ Peer pressure to look a certain way.
- ▶ Social media and other media images that promote one right way to look, which for many people is unattainable.
- ▶ Being around other people who are overly concerned about their own weight or appearance.
- ▶ Being told by others that they should bulk up, lose weight ...
- ▶ Being teased or picked on because of their appearance.
- ▶ Seeing materials that depict teens as objects, rather than independent, thinking people who are worthwhile no matter what they look like.

Consequences of a negative body image

Children and teenagers who have negative thoughts about their bodies are at increased risk of:

- ▶ Low self-esteem
- ▶ Depression
- ▶ Nutrition and growth issues
- ▶ Eating disorders and other dangerous behaviours to control weight
- ▶ Having a body mass index of 30 or higher (obesity)

In addition, some teenagers try to control their weight by smoking, taking diet pills, or using other unhealthy products.

Spending time worrying about their bodies and how they measure up also takes time away from positive thoughts and activities.

Helping to address body image

Talking about body image with your children can help them become more comfortable in their own skin. Parents might also consider the following tips.

Be a role model.

- ▶ How you accept your body and talk about how other people look will have a major impact on your teen.
- ▶ Be aware of your own talk about weight. Hearing adults talk about losing or putting on weight can affect how children and teens feel about themselves.
- ▶ The best way to teach your children to be happy with their body is to show that you are satisfied and accept your own size and shape.
- ▶ Focus on health, not appearance. Talk about exercising and eating a balanced diet for health reasons, not to look “better”. Reinforce that wellness is possible and the best goal for people of any size and shape.
- ▶ Think about the things you read and watch and the messages they send.

Use positive language and celebrate all people.

- ▶ If you are talking about how people look, say nice things.
- ▶ Communicate respect for diverse bodies, sizes, appearances and abilities.
- ▶ Remind your children that a person's worth is never determined by how they look.
- ▶ Try not to point out negative things about anyone's appearance – including your own. Don't allow hurtful comments or jokes based on physical characteristics, weight, or body shape.
- ▶ Rather than focusing on physical attributes of your child or others, praise personal characteristics such as strength, persistence and kindness.

Explain the effects of puberty.

- ▶ Make sure your child understands that weight gain is a healthy and normal part of development, especially during puberty.
- ▶ Remind your child that teenagers often have skin blemishes and sometimes acne during puberty; this stage passes.

Praise your child's efforts, skills and achievements. Build their self-esteem and resilience.

- ▶ Help your child value what they do, rather than what they look like.
- ▶ Support your teen's talents and skills that have nothing to do with how they look -- like music, sports, arts, and volunteer activities.
- ▶ Show an interest in their passions and pursuits.
- ▶ Praise the things you love about your child, like how they can make you laugh, how hard they work in school, how they show respect for their grandparents, how kind they are to others, or the way they look out for their siblings or cousins.

If your child is being teased, bullied, or shamed about their looks, do something.

- ▶ Teasing and bullying can make kids feel deeply hurt and can harm their self-esteem. This is a serious issue.
- ▶ If this is happening at school, make sure school staff are aware and taking action.
- ▶ If needed, ask for help to get counselling for your child.

Talk about media messages.

- ▶ Social media, movies, television shows, and magazines often send the message that only a certain body type or skin colour is acceptable and that maintaining an attractive appearance is the most important goal.
- ▶ Too often, false messages are sent that connect “thinness” as successful and “fatness” as a failure. These types of biased communications can have negative mental health impacts on the majority of people who don’t fit an unrealistic mold. For example, studies show that only about 5% of people have the type of body often portrayed in the media. What we see in the media really doesn’t represent most of us.
- ▶ Talk to your child about how social media and magazine images are commonly altered using special photographic techniques and airbrushing; the people in the images often don’t look that way in real life. Teenagers might be trying to meet ideals that don’t even exist in the real world.
- ▶ Remind your children that images in the media are created to sell products. Often the goal is to make people feel dissatisfied with their own lives so they will buy something.
- ▶ Check out what your children are reading, scrolling through online, or watching on TV, and discuss it with them. Studies suggest that the more reality TV girls watch, the more they worry about appearance. Encourage your children to question what they see and hear.

Monitor social media use.

- ▶ Teens use social media to share pictures and they often get feedback. If comments about their posts are not positive, it can make them feel bad.
- ▶ Research suggests that frequent social media use by teens might be linked with poor mental health and well-being. Set rules for social media use and talk about what your children are posting and viewing.
- ▶ It is also important to talk with your children about taking and sending selfies. For example, filters give users the chance to make themselves look the way they want, sometimes giving them the chance to change their appearance in unrealistic ways. Studies show that filters and selfies can contribute to the development of an unhealthy focus on imagined flaws in a person’s own appearance. Many times, the flaws can be so minor that other people can’t see them. It can lead to extreme anxiety, feelings of shame, and harmful behaviours. It’s important for children and teens to understand that the image they see on their phone does not always reflect reality. For example, a 2018 study showed that a person’s nose can look 30% bigger in a selfie.

Other strategies to promote a healthy body image

- ▶ Ask the doctor to help your child set realistic goals for body mass index (BMI) and weight based on their personal growth history and overall health.
- ▶ Teach your children about healthy eating. Offer a wide range of foods. Talk about the harms of fad diets. And try to eat together. Family meals lead to teens who are better adjusted and less likely to engage in risky behaviours.
- ▶ Talk about people you admire because of their achievements — not their appearance. Read books or watch movies about inspiring people who have persevered to overcome challenges. Talk about people being more than numbers on a scale or measuring stick; every person is a unique individual with admirable talents, skills, and abilities.
- ▶ Help your child find activities and groups where they feel a sense of belonging. That might be community groups, sports teams, or volunteering. These groups teach children about values that are more important than appearance.
- ▶ Promote physical activity. Participating in sports, traditional dance, and other physical activities — especially those that don't emphasize a particular weight or body shape — can help promote good self-esteem and a positive body image. Studies show active teens have a better body image regardless of their weight.
- ▶ Encourage positive friendships. Friends who accept and support your teen and who are comfortable with their own bodies can be a healthy influence.

Get help if you need it

- ▶ Ask your family members to help send positive messages about different body types.
- ▶ If other parents you know are worried about body image issues, talk to the school about whether they can offer lessons to address the issue.
- ▶ If your child is struggling with negative body image, consider talking to your teen's doctor or a mental health professional. Additional support is sometimes needed to give children and teens the tools they need to counter social pressure and feel good about themselves because of the great people they are.
- ▶ Even in happy, supportive families, outside pressures can lead teens to eating disorders. Watch for warning signs like rapid weight loss, extreme changes in eating habits, an obsession with calories, unusual concern about weight, continued comments about "feeling fat," withdrawing from social activities, regularly going to the bathroom right after meals, using medicines or fad diets to lose weight, or excessive exercise. If you are concerned, get medical advice.

And remember the good news ... as a parent, you have more influence than you think to help your teen create a positive self-image, no matter their size or shape.

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