

FACT SHEET

Positive Body Image: How Parents & Guardians Can Help

What is Body Image?

Body image is how a person thinks and feels about his/her body's appearance, shape and size. Body image also refers to what a person believes *others* think about his/her body and appearance. A person with a positive body image accepts the way his/her body is.

With a poor body image a person may focus too much on how they look, and believe that changing ones' body will be the key to being happy. He/she may have a fear of failure and might avoid trying new things, meeting new people, being involved in social/other activities, or developing talents.

Body Changes

Our bodies go through many changes during our lives. As children grow, their height and weight don't always change at the same time. Some children may grow 'out' and then 'up' and some may grow 'up' and then 'out'. Children will grow at different rates and their growth patterns will be unique to them.

Many body changes occur during puberty and adolescence. Hormone levels and appearance will change and bodies will grow and develop faster than they did before. During this time it is typical for youth to pay more attention to their appearance. It is normal for youth at this stage to:

- ... be moody and withdrawn one moment and outspoken the next;

- ... behave in ways you don't expect;
- ... be critical of how they look, which includes the shape and size of their body;
- ... compare their body to others;
- ... be embarrassed when their body seems less coordinated than it used to be; and
- ... worry when their body is not developing at the same rate as their friends (e.g., developing more quickly or not developing as fast).

As youth mature through this stage, they typically start to accept and feel better about the way they look.

How is Body Image Formed?

Body image starts to form at a very young age in children. Family, friends, society and media influence body image and continue to do so as children grow into adulthood.

Family

Children and youth learn by watching and listening to others. As a parent, you may be sending messages to your children about body image without even realizing it. Children listen to what you comment on, how you view yourself and what you think of others. Children see you as a role model and copy behaviours, attitudes and beliefs. You can influence the values your children develop about their bodies by talking positively about what it means to be healthy, and by living a healthy lifestyle.

Friends

The values and opinions of friends can affect how we feel about ourselves. Children and youth are influenced by others' opinions as they want to be accepted by



Positive Body Image: How Parents & Guardians Can Help

their peers. Peer opinions become important, especially during adolescence as youth begin defining their self image as they grow up and apart from their parents.

Society & Media

Media pictures, advertisements and messages suggest to us that being young, beautiful, thin and underweight is how we *should* look. This gives the message that these traits make us happy, popular, successful, and important and that having these traits is the way to get the things we want in life. We are often unaware or forget that many images of models are manipulated (e.g., airbrushed, touched-up, camera images altered, and hours are put into professional grooming with several make up artists). People sometimes spend a lot of time and money on their appearance and their body. We must remember however that excessively focusing on how we look is not the key to happiness.

How can I help my child have a positive body image?

Parents have a powerful influence over their children.

Here are some ideas to help your child develop a positive body image:

Be aware of the messages you are giving

- ✓ Consider what your own thoughts and biases are toward body weight, shape and size. Think about what has shaped your values (e.g., how you were parented, messages you got as a child, opinions of others that are important to you).
- ✓ Show that you accept the way you look. Avoid negative comments about your own weight or shape. Don't let your concerns about your body or weight stop you from doing things you enjoy. Show that it is important to take care of yourself. This means

eating well, having a good work-family-life balance, being active and getting enough rest.

- ✓ Help your child understand that gaining weight is normal and healthy, especially in the adolescent years during puberty. Let him/her know that puberty doesn't last forever!

Help build self esteem by how you communicate

- ✓ Take focus away from appearance. Avoid telling or suggesting that your child (or others) would be better, more liked, or would have more friends if he/she looked different, lost/gained weight, had a different body build, appeared stronger (etc.). Criticisms fuel feelings of "never being as good" or "not good enough".
- ✓ Teach how to deal with bullying and teasing, and be available to talk and give support during difficult times.
- ✓ Encourage your child to try new things, meet new people, figure out his/her interests and develop skills, abilities and talents.
- ✓ Praise your child often; be specific. Encourage your child to always do his/her best- but do not expect your child to be perfect. Let your child know you will love him/her no matter what.

Emphasize an Overall Healthy Lifestyle

Eat nutritious foods

- ✓ Have a variety of healthy foods available. Include fruits, vegetables, dairy, meats or meat substitutes and whole wheat grains. Limit high calorie, low nutrient foods, for instance chips, candy, sweets and bakery items. (For additional information, see Canada's Food Guide at www.hc-sc.gc.ca).

Positive Body Image: How Parents & Guardians Can Help

- ✓ Involve your child in planning and making meals. For example, young children can help wash lettuce and set the table. Talk about where food comes from and why we need to eat different foods. Your child is more likely to eat well if they have been involved in preparing the meal.
- ✓ Eat regular meals and healthy snacks. This sets a good example for children, as they look to parents/guardians for guidance. Try to avoid dieting or skipping meals.
- ✓ Encourage your child to listen to his/her body cues, for instance eat when hungry and stop eating when full.
- ✓ Avoid using food or treats to reward or encourage behaviour.
- ✓ Avoid comforting your child with food. For instance, try not to give a piece of cake because your child has had a bad day or a cookie because your child has fallen off his/her bike.
- ✓ Eat meals together as a family as often as possible. Make meal time a priority. This helps build and strengthen family relationships and encourages proper nutrition from an early age.

Be involved in regular physical activity

- ✓ Emphasize that a main reason for exercising is for fun and to be healthy.
- ✓ Be active yourself, and as a family. This is a great way to show how you value physical activity. Include activities that are not competitive and that value everyone's involvement, regardless of size or ability.
- ✓ Encourage your child to be involved in recreational activities and/or sports.
- ✓ Be a good role model and make sure you are also active.

Counteract messages from the media

- ✓ Help your child understand how media shapes our views about appearance and body image. Talk about images you see in the media.
- ✓ Provide limits to how long and how often your child is exposed to media (e.g., TV, online activities, magazines).
- ✓ Avoid buying magazines and other print materials that give an unbalanced view of what people look like.
- ✓ Help your child respect and appreciate others' differences. Let them know that we are all important, regardless of body shape and size.

Be an active voice in your community

- ✓ Find out what is in your school's vending machines, canteens, and cafeteria. Ask about what is offered for special lunches. If there is not a balance of healthy food, talk to your local school board office or school community council about nutrition policies.
- ✓ Be aware of your school's physical activity policies, and talk to your principal, local school board office or school community council if you have concerns.
- ✓ Be a part of groups that involve youth in developing healthy life options (e.g., recreation, nutrition, physical activity, creative projects).
- ✓ Raise your own voice and stand up when others are being teased, talked about or treated unfairly because of their appearance, shape or body size.

Positive Body Image: How Parents & Guardians Can Help

If you are concerned that your child may have a poor body image and want more information, what can you do?

Please contact your local mental health counsellor, doctor, dietitian or other health care provider.

To locate a health care provider, you have many options:

- check the green pages of the phone book for your local health region's services;

- contact the Ministry of Health's HealthLine at 1-877-800-0002 and ask to speak to a mental health counsellor; or
- visit HealthLine Online at www.healthlineonline.ca.

NOTE: This material is for information only and should not replace advice from a mental health counsellor, dietitian, doctor or other health care provider.

Sources and Helpful Websites

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