
Body image – tips for parents

Summary

- You are the most influential role model in your child's life, so lead by example.
 - Give your child opportunities to appreciate their body for what it can do, rather than what it looks like.
 - If you are at all concerned about your child's body image, self-esteem or eating behaviours, consult with your doctor or dietitian for information and referral.
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There are many ways that parents can foster positive body image and strong self-esteem in their children. If you are at all concerned about your child's body image, self-esteem or eating behaviours, consult with your doctor or dietitian for information and referral.

Your body image is how you think and feel about your body, and what you imagine it looks like. This may have nothing to do with your actual appearance. Poor body image can have a range of negative effects, including disordered eating, compulsive exercise, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. Relationships, social functioning, mood and activity choices can be seriously affected by low self-esteem. Feeling embarrassed about physical appearance can cause some people to decrease social interactions. This can create feelings of loneliness and isolation, and increase fears of rejection, leading to further lowered self-image.

Be a good body image role model

The most influential role model in your child's life is you. Parents can encourage their children to feel good about themselves by showing them how it's done.

Suggestions include:

- Children learn eating behaviours from their parents, so make sure you include plenty of fresh fruits, vegetables, lean meats, low-fat dairy products and unprocessed cereals in the family's diet. Go easy on takeaway, fried foods and sugary snacks. Try to include these as 'occasional' foods, rather than labelling foods as good or bad.
- Avoid dieting and do not encourage your child to diet either. Dieting can be dangerous as it can cause symptoms such as dehydration, weakness, fatigue, nausea, headaches and constipation, and can lead to inadequate vitamin and mineral intake. It is also a key risk factor in developing an eating disorder. Studies also show that most people who diet regain the weight, or gain additional weight, within a couple of years. Talk to your children about the dangers of dieting.
- Be aware of the impact of negative body talk around your children, about your own body or other people's. Work on modelling a healthy acceptance of your own body shape. Don't complain about 'ugly' body parts or, at least, don't share your opinions with your child.
- Accept other people's body sizes and shapes. Don't put a lot of emphasis on physical appearances or your child will too. Instead, try to talk to your child about all the different aspects that make up a person, such as personality, skills and outlook on life.
- Exercise regularly, and keep the focus on health and fun. Have at least one family activity per week that involves some kind of exercise; for example, bushwalking, dancing, playing backyard cricket, going for a walk or swimming.
- Be critical of media messages and images that promote thinness or masculine ideals. Encourage your child to question and challenge Western society's narrow 'beauty ideal'.

Get children into the exercise habit

Studies show that a person who appreciates what their body can do, rather than what it looks like, feels good about their body and tends to have higher self-esteem.

Suggestions include:

- Make your family an active one. Exercise yourself and encourage your child from an early age to exercise right along with you. For example, take little ones for strolls in the pram. Once they're old enough, encourage them to walk part of the way. Use walks to encourage them to engage their whole body with the environment, using sights, smells, sounds and touch.
- Emphasise fitness, health, social interaction and enjoyment as the motivations for exercise, rather than weight loss or weight management.
- Try to find a team sport they enjoy. Team sports encourage camaraderie, teamwork, competition and mastery of physical skills. A child who feels passionate about their sport is more likely to continue playing into adulthood.
- Regular exercise naturally helps to maintain a healthy body weight.
- Investigate associations or clubs carefully and make informed decisions about sports that have a strong emphasis on thinness or muscular form, such as gymnastics and ballet. Vulnerable children may feel pressured to lose weight to participate in these activities.

Help your child feel confident about themselves

A strong sense of identity and self-worth are crucial to your child's self-esteem.

Suggestions include:

- Encourage problem solving, expression of feelings, opinions and individuality. Providing opportunities for your child to problem solve will help them to build confidence in their abilities.
- Teach your child various healthy coping strategies to help them deal with life's challenges.
- Allow them to say 'no'. Encourage them to be assertive if they feel they have been mistreated.
- Listen to their concerns about body shape and appearance. Puberty, in particular, can be a worrying time. Reassure your child that their physical changes are normal and that everyone develops at different times and rates.
- Don't tease them about their weight, body shape or looks. Even seemingly friendly nicknames can be hurtful if they focus on some aspect of the child's appearance.
- Place value on their achievements, such as talents, skills and personality characteristics.
- Make your child feel they have an important role in the family; for example, give them age-appropriate household tasks. Tell them what a valuable contribution they make to the running of the house.

Talk to your child's school about body image

Your child's school can be a positive environment that fosters healthy body image and self-esteem. Talk to your principal about any concerns you may have.

Issues may include:

- Teasing about physical appearance is a known risk factor for poor body image. Make sure your school has an effective anti-bullying policy. If your child is being teased, contact the principal immediately.
- Peer pressure can contribute to poor body image if the peer group is concerned with physical appearance and thinness. Talk to the school about their body image programs.
- If you think your child is hanging out with a 'thin is in' crowd, try to arrange opportunities for them to mix with other children. Once again, team sports could be a valuable avenue, since the emphasis is on how the person plays, not what they look like.
- Self-conscious students may shy away from school sports because of the uniforms. If necessary, consult with your school on possible changes to make the sports uniforms less revealing or figure-hugging.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your child's school principal
- Your local community health centre
- **Dietitians Association of Australia**. Tel. 1800 812 942
- Psychologist
- **Eating Disorders Victoria** (EDV) Tel. 1300 550 236

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

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