There are many ways that parents can encourage positive body image and strong self-esteem in their children. If you’re concerned about your children’s body image, self-esteem, eating behaviours or physical activity behaviours, consult with your doctor 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, including your size, shape and weight. Having a positive body image means you can accept, appreciate and respect your body. A positive body image is associated with better self-esteem, self-acceptance and healthy lifestyle behaviours, including a balanced approach to food and physical activity.

Poor or negative body image can have negative effects on a person’s physical, psychological and social health. This can include disordered eating, compulsive exercise or overexercising, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. Relationships, social functioning, mood and activity choices can be seriously affected by body image and low self-esteem. Feeling self-conscious or distressed about physical appearance can cause some people to decrease social interactions and disengage from daily activities. This can create feelings of loneliness and isolation, and increase concerns about being accepted by others, which can further affect self-esteem.

Be a good body image role model for your children

One of the most influential role models in your children’s life is you. Parents can encourage their children to feel good about themselves by showing them how it’s done and leading by example.

Suggestions include:

- Children generally learn eating behaviours from their parents and other family members, so try to make sure you include a wide variety of foods from the five food groups in your family’s diet. This includes fruit and vegetables, grains, lean meats and dairy products. Go easy on foods that are higher in saturated fat, sugar and salt (for example, fried foods, sweetened drinks). Try to include these as occasional foods and encourage your children to eat a wide variety of foods and in moderation, as recommended in the Australian Dietary Guidelines.

- Try to avoid labelling foods as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Instead, focus on the nourishment that food provides and encourage flexibility in eating patterns. Assigning moral value to foods can create an unhealthy relationship with food and can create feelings of guilt or shame associated with eating certain foods. It can also increase the risk of dieting and disordered eating behaviours.

- Avoid dieting and don’t encourage your children to diet, regardless of body size, shape or weight. 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’s also a strong risk factor for 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. If you’re concerned about the physical health of your children, or their eating behaviours, consult with your doctor or a diettian.
Be aware of the effect of negative body talk around your children, about your own body and the bodies of other people. Work on modelling a healthy acceptance of your own body shape and size. Don’t complain about body parts you are dissatisfied or unhappy with, or at least, don’t share these thoughts or talk about them in front of your children.

Accept that bodies come in all shapes and sizes and help your children to celebrate body diversity. Avoid placing too much value on physical appearances and your children will too. Instead, try to talk to them about all the different aspects that make up a person, such as personality, skills and interests, and outlook on life.

Engage in regular physical activity and keep the focus on health, fun and enjoyment. Try to engage in at least one family activity each week that involves physical activity (for example, going for a walk or bicycle ride, dancing, gardening, playing backyard cricket, tennis or swimming).

Be critical of media messages and images that promote appearance ideals, such as thinness or muscularity. Encourage your children to be media savvy – to question and challenge Western society's narrow ideals of beauty or attractiveness. This includes helping them to be critical of the images they see in the media (including social media).

Get your children into the physical activity habit

Studies show that when a person appreciates what their body can do, rather than what it looks like, they tend to feel better about their body and have higher self-esteem. Encouraging children to be physically active and engage in activities for fun and physical health can help them to appreciate what their body can do, rather than focusing on their body’s appearance.

Suggestions include:

- Make your family an active one. Engage in physical activity yourself and encourage your children from an early age to be active right along with you. For example, take them 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 physical activity, rather than for weight loss or weight management, or to change body size or shape.
- 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.
- Investigate associations or clubs carefully and make informed decisions about sports that have a strong emphasis on a particular body size or shape, such as thinness or muscular form. Vulnerable children may feel pressured to lose weight or change their body size or shape to participate in these activities.

Help your children to feel confident about themselves

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

Suggestions include:

- Encourage problem solving, expression of feelings, opinions and individuality. Providing opportunities for your children to problem solve will help them to build confidence in their abilities.
- Teach your children a variety of healthy coping strategies to help them deal with life’s challenges. This includes getting enough rest, engaging in relaxing and soothing activities (for example, going for a walk, listening to music, cuddling a pet), talking to someone and asking for help.
- Help them to feel able to say ‘no’. Encourage them to be assertive if they feel they have been mistreated.
- Listen to their concerns about their appearance, body size and shape. Puberty can be a worrying time. Reassure them that their physical changes are normal and that everyone develops at different times and rates.
- Don’t make negative or positive comments about their weight, body shape or appearance. Even seemingly friendly nicknames can be hurtful if they focus on some aspect of their appearance.
- Place value on their personal qualities, skills, talents and interests. Help them to celebrate these aspects of themselves.
- Make them feel they have an important role in the family (for example, give them age-appropriate household

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Talk to the school about body image

Your children’s school can be a positive environment that encourages positive body image and self-esteem. Talk to the principal or wellbeing team about any concerns you may have.

Issues may include:

- Bullying or teasing about physical appearance is a known risk factor for poor body image. Make sure the school has an effective anti-bullying policy. If your child is being bullied, contact the principal or the wellbeing team immediately.
- Peer pressure can contribute to poor body image if the peer group is concerned with physical appearance and particular appearance ideals, such as thinness or muscularity. Talk to the school about their body image programs.
- If you think your child is spending time with peers who are focused on these appearance ideals, 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. Another example might be to connect to community groups or clubs that focus on your children’s interests or hobbies.
- Children who are self-conscious about their body’s appearance may shy away from school sports because of clothing requirements – for example uniforms that are figure hugging or reveal particular body parts, such as bathing suits, shorts, tank tops or leotards. If necessary, consult with the school on possible changes to make these requirements less restrictive.

Where to get help

- Your GP (doctor)
- Your child’s school welfare or wellbeing team, or the principal
- Your local community health centre
- Psychologist
  - Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942
  - Eating Disorders Victoria (EDV) Tel. 1300 550 236
  - The Butterfly Foundation Tel. 1800 33 4673

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

Eating Disorders Victoria (EDV)