

Body Image – Tips for Parents

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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 that 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, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem.

Relationships and activity choices can be seriously affected by low self-esteem. Feeling embarrassed about physical appearance can cause some people to stop exercising, because they don't want other people to see their bodies. A sedentary lifestyle leads to a host of health problems including an increased risk of obesity.

Be a good 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. For example:

- Children learn eating behaviours from their parents, so make sure you include plenty of fresh fruits, vegetables, protein foods, low-fat dairy products and unprocessed cereals in the family's diet. Go easy on takeaway, fried foods and sugary snacks.
- Don't crash diet. Don't encourage your child to crash diet either. Studies show that many young people mistakenly think that crash dieting is a harmless and effective way to lose weight. Talk to your child about the dangers of crash dieting.
- Accept your own body size and 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. Have at least one family activity per week that involves some kind of exercise; for example, bushwalking, gardening, playing backyard cricket, going for a walk or swimming.
- Be critical of media messages and images that promote thinness. Encourage your child to question and challenge Western society's narrow 'beauty ideal'.

Get them into the activity 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.
- Emphasise fitness, health and enjoyment as the motivations for exercise, rather than weight loss or weight management. Talk about "activity" rather than "exercise".
- Try to find a team sport they enjoy. Team sports encourage camaraderie, teamwork, mild competition and mastery of physical skills. A child who feels passionate about their sport is more likely to continue playing into adulthood.
- Regular exercise helps to maintain a healthy body weight.

- Be cautious of sports that are strongly competitive or have a strong emphasis on thinness – for example, gymnastics and ballet.
- Vulnerable children may feel pressured to lose weight to participate in these activities.

Help them 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 opinions and individuality.
- 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. (See www.lrhartley.com/seminars/assert.htm for the difference between aggression and assertiveness.)
- 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 school

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
- Psychologist
- Other Health Care Professional

Things to remember

- 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.