

## *What Parents Can Do to Promote Positive Body Image in Children*



*There are concrete actions parents can take to help foster positive body image in family members.*

- Show zero tolerance for body and weight-based teasing in your home.
- Instead, emphasize the complex beauty and natural diversity of body shapes, types, and sizes.
- Parents can learn to accept, affirm, and love their own bodies. Show appreciation for your body's strength, dependability, and health.
- Notice and compliment your child's body not for its decorative attributes but for the body's functionality and power, such as its strength, coordination, flexibility, endurance, & energy.
- Think of yourself and your actions as teaching about body image. Model respect and self-care of your body by eating nutritious food and minimal junk food, getting enough sleep, getting regular check-ups, and exercising.
- Treat exercise and sports as something we do for enjoyment, increased energy, and strength, not to stay thin or lose weight. Remember that pleasure is always more compelling than punishment in the long run!
- Expand your definition of beauty to include an array of features, qualities, shapes, sizes, skin tones, and textures. Comment on natural beauty and inner beauty that you notice in others rather than superficial gloss.
- Value and reinforce enduring qualities of character, such as honesty, patience, tolerance, moral courage, loyalty, and effort toward meaningful goals, particularly over appearance and superficial attributes.
- Recognize that children grow unevenly in height and weight. Don't be alarmed if they may have periods of plumpness as they grow.
- If you are concerned about your child's weight, focus on increasing your activity level as a family and offering healthy food choices at home rather than dieting or nagging. If concerns about weight persist, talk to the pediatrician.
- Enjoy regular family time, such as meals, recreation, and hobbies that build skills, self-confidence, and knowledge together.
- High self-esteem is protective against poor body image, and is a by-product of competence. Encourage your child to develop an area of expertise or skill that is somewhat unique among his/her peers, and gives your child age-appropriate responsibilities and chores that contribute to the common good of the household.
- Critique and discuss commercials, movies and other media for messages that objectify, demean, and sexualize women and men in ways that restrict their full expression as human beings.
- Model and teach acceptance and appropriate expression of anger and conflict, and how to channel anger into specific requests and constructive action.
- Engage in advocacy for positive social change, particularly around oppressive, disrespectful, or sexist representations of groups in the media, modeling the ability to be an active agent in the larger community.

### **Healthy Lifestyle Tip Sheets - Families and Body Image**

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### ***Encourage self-esteem***

A strong sense of identity and self worth is important to help children cope with life pressures. You can:

- Help children to develop effective coping strategies.
- Encourage children to express their needs and wants, to make decisions (and cope with the consequences) and to pursue things they are good at.
- Allow children to say 'no'. Encourage them to be assertive if they feel they have been mistreated.
- Help children to develop a critical awareness of the images and messages they receive from television and magazines.

### ***Foster a healthy relationship with food***

You can encourage children to develop a healthy relationship with food if you:

- Try not to label foods as 'good' or 'bad' – this sets up cravings and feelings of guilt when the 'bad' foods are eaten.
- Avoid using food as bribes or punishment.
- Accept that children are likely to have different eating habits from adults – for instance, they may require more food more frequently during the day or may go through periods of liking or disliking particular foods.
- Do not crash diet and don't try to put your child on a crash diet.
- Allow your child to eat when they are hungry and stop when they are full. Don't force your child to eat everything on their plate.

## **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.

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.

Be critical of media messages and images that promote thinness. Encourage your child to question and challenge Western society's narrow 'beauty ideal'.



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