

Helping Young People Develop a Positive Body Image

Puberty is a time when growth spurts and a developing body can make boys and girls question whether their weight and body shape are normal. At some point, most young people will struggle with the way their body looks. The size of the body does not always reflect the health of the body. Every shape can be healthy if physical activity and healthy eating are part of a daily routine. Be aware of stereotypes and prejudices. Societal attitudes will take time to change in order for people to recognize that unhealthy eating or exercising behaviours should not be adopted in order to be thin. As a parent, teacher or a coach, you can help boys and girls grow up with a healthy body image by promoting healthy eating, physical activity and a healthy self-esteem by using the following strategies:

Help usher in the change.

Talk to young people about how their body is changing and growing. Changes will begin to occur during the preteen years. It's natural for girls to accumulate fat and boys to gain more muscle as they move through puberty. The timing of the physical changes during puberty is different for everyone. If the boy or girl is not aware that this is completely normal, it can have social and emotional effects.

**For More Information,
Call the Health ACTION Line 1-800-660-5853 or 613-345-5685
or visit our website at www.healthunit.org**

Be a positive role model.

Your actions and words can influence a young person's self-image. Start by examining your own feelings about your body. Be aware of the messages you send about your body and the comments you make about the appearance of others. Constant dieting and comments like 'you'll get fat if you eat that' send a strong message to young people that appearance is very important. Boys and girls may become more critical of their own appearance and the appearance of others as a result of your actions and words.



Banish teasing.

Let boys and girls know that judging people by their weight or the way they look is unacceptable. Teach them to treat others with respect and not to comment about people's weight, shape or size.



Encourage young people to advocate for themselves.

Teach them strategies to deal with put-downs and negative comments. Boys and girls may not have the skills or the self-esteem to deal with teasing. Role-play and help them find ways of ignoring comments or responding to comments in a way that doesn't put the other person down.

Show boys and girls that your regard for them is unconditional.

Let them know that you like and respect them no matter what they weigh. Help boys and girls by discussing what qualities make up a good friend, neighbour or student. Weight and appearance shouldn't come up as an issue.



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Talk about their insides, not their outsides.

Making comments about childrens' and adolescents' clothes, hairstyle, body shape or features can affect how they feel about themselves. Avoid using words such as 'big,' 'small,' 'short,' 'fat,' 'skinny,' 'clumsy' or 'hippy.' Even when mentioned with the best intentions, these words can hurt. Encourage young people to focus on their abilities rather than on their appearance. Help them identify things they are good at and things they like about themselves. Emphasize the qualities of intellect, creativity, physical capabilities, character and personality.

Read between the lines.

If a boy or girl says, 'I feel fat,' stop and listen. Telling them that they aren't fat will get you nowhere. Many children and adolescents find it hard to express their true feelings directly, so they encode these feelings in the language of fat. Sometimes these comments are a signal that they have had a bad day or are worried about something. Encourage young people to express their feelings and talk about what they have to deal with in school (eg, teasing). Listen to what they say about themselves and others, and use these opportunities to talk about their feelings.

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Watch the pitch.

Teach young people to be critical of the media and advertising. Help them to challenge misleading media messages and understand the power of advertising. The media and societal views influence body image development when one 'ideal' body is used as an example for how all people should look. Make a commitment to help young people appreciate and resist the ways in which television, magazines and other media distort body images.

Make mealtimes pleasant and encourage healthy eating.

Making food fun will ensure boys and girls grow up with positive feelings about eating. Encourage them to trust their bodies to tell them when they should eat and to stop when they are full. Encourage boys and girls to make healthy food choices by eating vegetables, fruit, whole grain breads, cereals, pasta and rice more often and a variety of lower-fat milk products and meat and meat alternatives. There are no good or bad foods and no one food or food group will make you fat. All foods, including treats, can be part of a healthy diet. Balance and moderation is the key to healthy eating.

Discourage children and adolescents from weighing themselves.

Scales measure gravity's pull on your body, not your health.

Resist the temptation to put boys and girls on a diet.

The urge to do something about a young person's weight can be overwhelming. Instead, encourage boys and girls to follow *Canada's Food Guide* and eat a variety from all food groups. Encourage physical activity. If you are concerned about a young person's weight, contact your doctor or a registered dietitian for information.

Explore different types of physical activities.

Children and adolescents don't have to be part of a sports team to enjoy the benefits of active living. Find out what kind of physical activity they enjoy and be physically active yourself. Encourage boys and girls to try different activities such as hiking, biking, cross-country skiing, yoga and dancing. Recognize the signs of a poor body image or an eating disorder by educating yourself, and know when you need to ask for help.

Adapted from a resource produced by York Region Health Services, 2007