

## PROMOTING A HEALTHY BODY IMAGE

### **Self-Esteem, Body Image & Health**

Poor health practices and poor self-esteem often go hand in hand. Self-worth or body image is a critical aspect of self-esteem. Our culture values physical appearance: a very thin body for women and a muscular, fit body for men are seen as measures of success and happiness. At the same time, weight prejudice flourishes.

The difference between these ideals and reality, in addition to pressures to conform, have contributed greatly to body image difficulties. The result has been in the adoption of many harmful, and some potentially fatal, behaviours. It can be helpful to think of body image problems on a continuum ranging from body satisfaction to weight preoccupation to the more severe problems of eating disorders and steroid use. All of us fit somewhere on this continuum.

### **What Can Be Done To Promote Healthy Body Image In Our Young People?**

Parents, relatives, caregivers, teachers, coaches, youth leaders and health professionals can all play a role in enhancing the body image and self-esteem of children. Our reactions to children and their bodies, as well as the behaviour and attitudes we model have an impact on our youth.



### **Start Early And Don't Let Up:**

Self-esteem is formed at an early age, but efforts to enhance body image

should carry through as children grow from toddlers to adolescents.

### **Model Healthy Eating, An Active Lifestyle & Self-Acceptance:**

Are we dieting and teaching children through daily weigh-ins we don't like our own bodies? Let's teach our children by example that healthy eating is enjoyable, that being active is fun, and that all bodies are acceptable and likeable.

**Fight Fat Prejudice:** Helping a child to accept his or her body is extremely important. But an overweight child who accepts his body still has to live in a world that hates it. The fight against fat prejudice must begin by looking at our own attitudes towards weight. Do we harbour any prejudice? Are we judging people on the basis of appearance?

### **Encourage Physical Activity:**

Becoming more physically active tends to have a positive effect on body image. In children, fun, simple activities that can be learned easily seem to have a positive impact on self-esteem. For teenage girls, cooperative fitness programs lead to greater improvements in self-esteem than competitive programs. Does your school ground invite active play? Are there active alternatives to computer or video games at home?

### **Adopt A Non-Comparative/Non-Competitive Philosophy:**

Self-esteem is also shaped as children compare their own characteristics and abilities to those of others. At school and at home we should emphasize personal progress instead of comparisons with others. Reward participation, effort and enthusiasm.

### **Question The Media:**

Children, like adults, compare themselves to the media images they are bombarded with daily. Who can feel good if the ideals measured against are unattainable? Help children to understand how advertisers use these images to sell. How realistic are these ideals? What is really being sold? How are our insecurities being used for profit?

### **Focus On Healthy Living:**

Many of the health problems associated with obesity may be, at least in part, a result of repeated cycles of weight loss and gain; failed attempts at weight loss take an incredible toll on self-esteem. Those interested in improving health and reducing risk of disease will get better results by retiring the scales. Eat more vegetables and fruit, less fat and more whole grain products - and get active daily.

### **8 Things You Can Do Now:**

1. Stop talking about your weight (especially in front of young people)
2. Have your child make a list of people they admire and why they admire them. Have them remember that people are made of a personality, mind and a body.
3. Question the motives of the fashion industry.
4. Stop weighing yourself!
5. Have children concentrate on the things they do well. Encourage activities that help their unique strengths flourish.
6. Get physical for fun, especially with the whole family, don't single out an overweight child. When all family members are involved it also helps to become a closer, healthier family.
7. Be a positive role model with your attitudes, eating habits and physical activity behaviours.
8. Break the barriers- emphasize fun, not skill.



Body image problems contribute to a variety of harmful behaviours in youth. Poor body image is also painful. Caring adults have a responsibility, individually and collectively, to challenge current beauty ideals and take action. We can act within our own families, within our schools, within our communities and within our health care services.

**The important thing is to act, for the sake of our children.**