

Encouraging Healthy Body Image in Our Youth



Self-Esteem, Body Image & Health

Body image is a critical aspect of self-esteem. The way a child views their physical appearance such as weight, height, facial features, physical maturation, race, ethnicity and even abilities can directly reflect how they value themselves as people in society. Unfortunately, North America promotes thin, fit and perfectly proportioned bodies as measures of success and happiness. As adults, with a better understanding of these unrealistic ideals, we have a responsibility to teach our youth to be happy with themselves the way they are.

Children struggle with the difference between media ideals and reality. Pressures to conform can lead to poor body image and low self-esteem. The result can lead to 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:

Children develop self-esteem early. In these formative years it is important that children learn healthy habits and activities that boost their self-esteem. You can be a role model in developing their self-esteem as your choices and actions have a big impact. Encouraging a positive body image should carry through as children grow from toddlers to adolescents.

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

Children learn by example, therefore if you diet and express dislike for your own body, your child may do the same. The first step to teaching a child to love themselves and their bodies is to have a positive body image yourself. Show them that healthy eating is enjoyable, that being physically active is fun and that all bodies are acceptable and likeable.

Encourage Physical Activity:

Becoming more physically active tends to have a positive effect on body image. For children, fun, simple activities that can be learned easily seem to have a positive impact on self-esteem. For teenage girls, co-operative fitness programs lead to greater improvements in self-esteem than competitive programs. Does your school ground invite active play?

Encourage activities that make children feel good. Find out what activities the child enjoys doing. Help them find hobbies, games and sports they are interested in.

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? Be critical when it comes to the media. 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 making small changes in healthy eating and physical activity, and will last a life-time. Eat more vegetables and fruit, less junk food and more whole grain products and get active daily!

**Natural body sizes
are the healthiest
body sizes.**



Together we can start to turn the tides on low-self esteem and body image problems that can eventually lead to harmful behaviours and disease. As adults we 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.

Build their confidence and remind them they are special.



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. Show them that valuing personality is more important than valuing appearance.
3. Question the motives of the media.
4. Stop weighing yourself!
5. Have children concentrate on the things they do well. Encourage activities that help their unique strengths flourish.
5. Get the whole family physically active for fun. Don't single out an overweight child. When all family members are involved it also helps to create 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.