

Encouraging Healthy Body Image in Teens and Adolescents: A Guide for Parents

As they approach the teen years, it's common and natural for kids to become more interested in appearances — their own and others' — seemingly all of a sudden. Their bodies are going through some big changes as they grow and go through puberty. As preteens change physically, they become more aware of how they look.

Growing and puberty affect more than a preteen's outward appearance — body image is affected, too. Having a healthy body image means that most of your feelings, ideas, and opinions about your body and appearance are positive. It means accepting and appreciating your body and feeling mostly satisfied with your appearance. Developing a healthy body image happens over time. It can be influenced by experiences and shaped by the opinions and feedback of others and by cultural messages.

Body image can be especially vulnerable during the preteen and teen years because appearances change so much and cultural messages that fuel dissatisfaction can be very strong. Being criticized or teased about appearance can be particularly hurtful at this age. Preteens and teens often compare their looks with others' or with media images of the "right" way to look. In cultures in which looks seem to matter so much — and ideal images are so unrealistic — it's all too common to be dissatisfied with some aspect of appearance. But feeling too self-critical about appearance can interfere with body image. And poor body image can hurt a teen's overall self-image too.

It's not just girls who become focused on appearance. Boys might not be as vocal about it, but they can worry just as much about their looks. They may spend the same amount of time in front of the mirror, weighing where to part their hair, what kind of product to use, assessing acne, and deciding whether or not to shave. And when your son emerges wearing pants that sag as if he hasn't quite finished getting dressed, he may in fact have spent hours getting them to hang at that exact angle. Though they are less likely than girls to do so,

boys are also at risk of developing unhealthy eating habits and eating disorders. Body image becomes an important issue for teenage boys as they struggle with body changes and pay more attention to media images of the "ideal" muscular male.

As preteens try on different looks, parents can help by being accepting and supportive, providing positive messages, and encouraging other qualities that keep looks in perspective. Be sure to:

- **Accept and understand.** Recognize that being concerned about looks is as much a part of the teen years as a changing voice and learning to shave. You know that in the grand scheme of things your daughter's freckles don't matter, but to her they might seem paramount. As frustrating as it can be when they monopolize the bathroom, avoid criticizing kids for being concerned about appearances. As they grow, concern about their looks will stop dominating their lives.
- **Give lots of compliments.** Provide reassurance about kids' looks and about all their other important qualities. As much as they may seem not to notice or care, simple statements like "you've got the most beautiful smile" or "that shirt looks great on you" really do matter. Compliment them on other physical attributes, such as strength, speed, balance, energy, or grace. Appreciating physical qualities and capabilities helps build a healthy body image.
- **Compliment what's inside too.** Notice out loud all the personal qualities that you love about your kids — how generous your son is to share with his little sister, the determined way that your daughter studies for her tests, or how your son stood by his best friend. Compliment your child on his or her efforts, talents, accomplishments, and personal values. Reassure them when they express insecurity. When you hear "I hate my hair" or "I'm so little," provide valuable counterpoint.

- **Talk about what appearances mean.** Guide your kids to think a little more deeply about appearances and how people express themselves. Talk about the messages that certain styles might convey. One outfit may send the message “I’m ready to party!” while others might say “I’m heading to school” or “I’m too lazy to do laundry.”
- **Talk about images in the media.** It’s important to discuss the impact of media on self-image. Restrict television viewing that could be damaging or watch television with your child and discuss the media images you see. Keep an open dialogue.
- **Set reasonable boundaries.** Be patient, but also set boundaries on how much time your kids can spend on grooming and dressing. Tell them it’s not OK to inconvenience others or let chores go. Limits help kids understand how to manage time, be considerate of others’ needs, share resources, exercise a little self-discipline, and keep appearances in perspective.
- **Be a good role model.** How you talk about your own looks sets a powerful example. Constantly complaining about or fretting over your appearance teaches your kids to cast the same critical eye on themselves. Almost everyone is dissatisfied with certain elements of their appearance, but talk instead about what your body can do, not just how it looks. Instead of griping about how big your legs are, talk about how they’re strong enough to help you hike up a mountain.

The importance of modeling positive body image

Your children pay attention to what you say and do — even if it doesn’t seem like it sometimes. If you are always complaining about your weight or feel pressure to change your body shape, your children may learn that these are important concerns. If you are attracted to new “miracle” diets, they may learn that restrictive dieting is better than making healthy lifestyle choices. If you tell your daughter that she would be prettier if she lost weight, she will learn that the goals of weight loss are to be attractive and accepted by others. The same stands for a son being told he would be more handsome if he had bigger muscles. Reinforcement of these superficial ideals suggests that physical attributes are the most important features of a person.

Parents are role models and should try to follow the healthy eating and physical activity patterns that you would like your children to follow — for your health and theirs. Extreme weight concerns and eating disorders, as well as obesity, are hard to treat. Yet, you can play an important role in preventing these problems for your children.

Having a healthy and positive body image means liking your body, appreciating it, and being grateful for its qualities and capabilities. When parents care for and appreciate their own bodies, they teach their kids to do the same.

Sources: <http://www.womenshealth.gov>, <http://www.childmind.org>, <http://www.kidshealth.org>

