

FitFUTURE

Strategies for
Better Living.

Help Your Child Develop a Healthy Body Image



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CHILDREN ARE INUNDATED WITH IMAGES THAT PORTRAY THINNESS AS A STANDARD OF BEAUTY. Repeated viewing of these images may lead a child to feel as if his or her own body is imperfect. These negative feelings can diminish self-esteem and set the stage for eating disorders like anorexia, bulimia and other unhealthy attitudes towards food and physical activity.

Self-criticism that is constant or excessive and causes lasting distress may signal a body image problem called *body dysmorphic disorder*. This involves obsessions about insignificant or imagined imperfections in physical appearance. If you notice any of these signs, talk to your child's doctor. Knowing the warning signs helps to identify problems early.

Watch for:

- Signals that a child views herself/himself only in terms of her physical appearance
- The language your child uses to describe physical development and attractiveness
- Talk of dieting
- Frequent comments about the weight of other children
- Worries about attractiveness

- Depression and low self-esteem

What can a parent do? It is never too early to start building a healthy body image.

As a parent, you can help your child by:

- Discussing the fact that his or her body will change over the years
- Helping your child understand that there is no "ideal" body shape
- Watching what you say about your own body
- Watching what you say about the bodies of others. Avoid prejudices, stereotypes and words like ugly and fat
- Focusing on your child's abilities and personality and not physical appearance
- Keeping nutrition messages positive by focusing on eating well, instead of dieting and weight loss
- Encouraging participation in physical activity, sports and active play
- Limiting your child's exposure to media by restricting time spent watching TV and surfing the web
- Restricting the type of magazines they

read to those with positive child-friendly content

- Using the media to your advantage. Media will provide opportunities for you to begin communication about body image. Discuss what you see and read in the media with your children; let them know when you disagree with what is being portrayed and encourage them to do the same.
- Discouraging children from weighing themselves.

Remember, taking steps early on can help prevent the self-esteem issues that may lead to eating disorders and other unhealthy attitudes towards food and physical activity.

Sources:

Center for Media Literacy
<http://www.medialit.org>
 U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services
<http://www.womenshealth.gov/bodyimage/kids/>
<http://www.girlshealth.gov/emotions/bodyimage/index.cfm>
 Kidshealth.org for Parents
http://kidshealth.org/parent/food/weight/body_image.html