



“BODY IMAGE”

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Body image. What a strange idea. Like fingerprints and personality, everyone has a body image that only they know about. Regardless of how they look to others, only they know how they look to themselves.

Jason and Johnathan are adolescent brothers. Jason is very tall—around six feet, seven inches—and very thin. Probably, those who see him likely respond with a thought about how very thin he is. However, when asked about himself, including how he looks to himself, he convincingly discusses how he is healthy and likes being tall. He refers to how he nurtures his body, by eating well and exercising. Without gloating, he seems secure in how he looks at himself. While he is concerned about his body and his looks, almost everything about his view of himself or his behavior indicates that he holds a healthy body image.

In contrast, Johnathan appears to be an extraordinarily handsome, well-built adolescent. Along with others in the family, Johnathan acknowledges that he is “a clothes hog.” Conspicuously, Johnathan craves clothing. He says, “I’ve got to do all I can to get this body to look good.” He adds, “It takes a lot of money to look good.” While others see Johnathan as a handsome young man, his view of himself seems to be almost the opposite of looking good.

Body image matters. Just as all of us measure our feet so that we can buy shoes that fit well, we “measure” our bodies so that we “fit well” within them. Body image is not usually consistent and permanent, although some individuals lean into a negative body image and others lean into a positive body image, often leaning in only one direction most of their lives.

If you are a parent of an adolescent or young adult, you have already lived through many changes in your body image. You may not remember what your body image was like, say, when you were six years of age, but you very likely remember feeling deeply uncertain about your body when you were thirteen years of age. The plain fact of growing up is that our bodies change. And, as our bodies change, our view of them changes, too.

From a parent's view, most of us understand that many changes happen to our children as they grow and develop. And, we understand that these changes must be managed with plenty of support and sensitivity. Probably, more than any other time, puberty and its huge changes in personality and social development have visible and long-term impacts on children's thoughts and attitudes toward their physical selves, including their body size, shape, and weight, particularly when they compare themselves with others. These changes shape their mental health, too.

Being able to understand your children's process of growth is a most essential aid as your children's understanding depends on your knowledge of and sensitivity to their thoughts, feelings, and concerns. Usually, this challenge is truly an uphill struggle, as you sincerely wish to be involved with your children's sometimes anguished changes at a time—puberty and most of the other teen years—when they are appropriately growing toward adulthood. Such growth means that they are typically developing a social circle of which you are not a member. They are beginning to turn toward or to get involved with romantic relationships. Again, much to your chagrin, these relationships usually do not involve you, their parent.

Adding to this view, your children will experience emotional and social changes in regard to their peer environment as well as aspirations for developing relationships and intimacy, understanding their sexuality, tendencies toward formulating autonomy and independence, establishment of moral obligations and situations, and other dynamics that will play a huge role in how they feel about themselves. It is important to remember that the simplest of things such as positive and consistent communication on hard topics that your child will developmentally encounter is the most effective tool in your arsenal along with providing a culture that fosters high level engagement. This is important: The often confusing reality is that, as your children pull away from you and may appear to reject you, they almost always crave a relationship with you. Mostly, though, they are unclear about what relating with you as an adult could be like. After all, trying to relate with you as an adolescent who is quickly becoming an adult is as new to them as it is to you.

Long before puberty, you have numerous options for preparing your children to experience puberty with relatively little pain. In terms of body image, behavioral patterns related to your children began early in life and are often shaped by the family environment in the form of their perceptions of established norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors related to food, body, and weight. As a result of such socialization factors, parents tend to impact children's eating habits and body image during periods of childhood and adolescence in ways that usually extend into adulthood (Carbonneau, Hamilton, & Musher-Eizenman, 2021). Thus, it is essential for parents to find the right balance in teaching their children appropriate eating behaviors that can affect a positive image of themselves and lead to sufficient awareness of their well-being. Being proactive, as opposed to reactive, seems to be the most progressive response for families in managing such complex issues. You can teach your children to respect and appreciate who they are and who they desire to be and to be responsible for themselves and their process of growth. In doing so, you can help them acknowledge the positives within their unique selves and that their unique features are healthy and desirable.

Start with your attitude. Social scientists know that the ability of the parent to model positive body image is important. The parents' attitude toward body shape, weight, and appearance guides their children's understanding and perceptions of self. Children notice how their parents talk about their own bodies, the bodies of their children, as well as others. By maintaining a positive body talk environment within the home, countering discussions on body dissatisfaction with body satisfaction (e.g., focusing on health instead of weight), parents can draw a healthy conceptualization of body image within their children. Combatting negative societal messages obtained through peer social involvement and various media can neutralize many of the negative consequences of such exposure. Parents can take this information and use it to encourage their children's positive views of their bodies and relationships. When parents resist standardized or idealized pressures of beauty, regardless of circumstance, their children may produce a similar resistance and formulate a higher sense of their ability to challenge exaggerated, distorted, and unhealthy social norms about their appearance.

Caitlyn is a seventeen-year old female. Due to a physical limitation that came with birth—spina bifida—others may look at her and feel pity for her. After all, Caitlyn is a teenager who desires to be romantically involved with a male peer, but she cannot walk without her arm-brace crutches. Probably, others see Caitlyn and feel the disappointment that they would have, if they were Caitlyn. The problem with this is that Caitlyn sees herself differently. She can readily acknowledge her physical limitations and, also, affirm her desirability as a young woman, even if “the pickins’ are slim.” Sometimes, her body positivity surprises her, not to mention how others are usually shocked. In short, Caitlyn accepts who she is, chooses to like who she is, and welcomes others to like her, too.

In other words, another key factor to establishing a healthy concept of body image is resisting self-objectification which comes when one internalizes themselves as an object to be evaluated from the perspective of the observer. Parents who model and teach body appreciation are able to challenge objectification through practices that formulate self-acceptance and self-respect for their bodies despite perceived imperfections which provides opportunities for positive cues surrounding body appreciation. By assisting your children with attaching positive views of their body, you may be better able to influence positive body image while also influencing healthy eating patterns, more attunement and attention to oneself, and more diligence in maintaining balance in healthy versus unhealthy perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward body image and food. Furthermore, your children may come to adapt a more balanced perspective of themselves by incorporating body appreciation and intuitive eating as opposed to unhealthy eating patterns and perceptions of self. When you adore your children, including their body appearance, you foster more resistance to societal projections of body image and increase responsible decision-making around the utility and enjoyment of food. Establishing an accepting and non-judgmental stance on your own appearance as well as your children's can contribute to your children's positive relationship with you and their positive regard for themselves, including how they look to themselves.

Parents can also encourage their children's view of their body by promoting gratitude for their capabilities and focusing on what the body can do and what it allows one to feel. Focusing on how the body functions rather than how it looks can shift the dynamic of self-objectification to body appreciation and promote a sense of awareness and honoring that encourages greater acceptance of one's appearance. Additionally, parents can shift their children's focus through giving attention to their skills and internal qualities unrelated to appearance. These may include academic competence, personal interests (such as birding or chess), family support, personal values (such as generosity or courage), athletic ability, and other areas in which your children demonstrate skills or mastery. Parents can also encourage their children to attend to multiple identities of themselves through participation in many different activities (e.g., soccer, yoga, volunteering, scouting, etc.) that help them explore and define their own physical capabilities along with enhancing their attunement with their personal needs and feelings. Parents can also help their children learn broader conceptualizations of beauty to assist with their ability to encompass greater aspects of the person beyond appearance. This may include focusing on individual personality attributes and skills as well as motivations. By supporting and teaching other aspects of beauty and appearance, your children may learn to lessen their tendency to compare their body to others while also embracing an eating regimen consistent with good health and enjoyment for themselves and others.

By far, one of the most subjective features contributing to body image issues has been related to media consumption. Exposure to media messages and images has become a natural part of everyday life. Thus, it is essential that parents also teach media literacy to their children by continuing their own learning in areas pertaining to media exposure such as alterations of digital media to portray a particular body image and by challenging images and messages that impose potential threats to one's body image. Parents can help their children protect themselves against internalizing messages and images that are impossible to achieve. Parents can also assist their children in formulating an ideal version of themselves that is consistent with their capabilities and that align with their genetic disposition. Parents can emphasize self-acceptance and self-respect as ways to harness one's own potential. By encouraging your children to rely on domains and activities that extend beyond physical appearance and attractiveness, your children may be able to better identify their unique attributes that embody a holistic sense of self including positive associations of body image.

Parents should also work to promote responsible eating habits with autonomy, self-regulation, and mindfulness activities incorporated at the forefront. Eating when you are hungry and stopping eating when feeling full and satisfied, eating slowly while savoring every aspect of the experience, and focusing on acknowledgment and gratitude of the preparation process involved in partaking in a meal can increase appreciation of food intake and reduce tendencies to overeat. Likewise, avoiding judgment about food and eating can have a more meaningful effect on how children adapt healthy eating habits and behaviors. By engaging your children in a food preparation process inclusive of positive interactions and free from distractions, your family can give a healthy impression of food and eating that reinforces connection and support, self-confidence, and self-control. Parents can be creative and refreshing (e.g., regularly presenting new food options) in presenting healthy foods to make those food options available and exciting for their child to incorporate into their regular diet.

Dual parent homes should work as a team to model and teach positive and effective body image and eating behaviors. There are cases in which a child may resonate better with a particular parent in areas of body image and eating behavior. Each parent should support the other parent's efforts in promoting factors and initiatives related to body appreciation, self-empowerment, and autonomous motivation toward healthy eating habits. Parents should not transfer their negative attitudes and behaviors related to food, body image, and weight onto the child. Instead, parents can endorse a system of positivity that reinforces a positive attachment to food, a healthy diet, and activities that are consistent with the promotion of holistic health.

All in all, your children's physical, mental, and emotional well-being is at the forefront of your priorities in sustaining positive parenting. This requires ongoing attention and consideration as your children matriculate through their developmental path. Creating an environment that displays empathic regard and active support along with features that encourage positive body image and a healthy regard to food and eating will assist in combatting negative projections obtained throughout developmental experiences. And, your children will grow happier and healthier in identifying and relating to the best version of themselves.

Reference

Carbonneau, N., Hamilton, L., & Musher-Eizenman, D. R. (2021). From dieting to delight:

Parenting strategies to promote children's positive body image and healthy relationship with food. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne*, 62(2), 204–212. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cap0000274>

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WHAT MAY PARENTS SAY AND DO ABOUT BODY IMAGE

Parents know that they often have the right motivation toward their children, but also know that they are not clear about what to do or say. The article, *Body Image*, that appears elsewhere on this website, provides many good ideas about how to think about parents may help their children with body image. This article takes these ideas and asks a very simple question. "What may I do or say to my children about their body image?"

The question may be frustrating, because it introduces the thought that you, a parent, may need to change some things about how you provide parenting for your children. Indeed, this may be the case. However, the important thing here is that you want your children to receive your love and to love themselves in healthy ways. After all, as a parent, you are the most influential person in your children's lives.

Parents may DO many things with their children to increase their appreciation of their bodies. Probably, most parents assume that they will do these things, just because they are good things to do. Here are some of these things.

Help them to take care of their bodies. Specifically,

Help them to know how to brush their teeth.

Help them to know how to wash themselves.

When possible, join your children in enjoyable exercise.

Solicit recommendations about healthy food from your children.

Depending on age and interest, encourage your children to take the lead in food selection and preparation.

Honestly and sincerely, address your children's concern about their bodies. At least, listen carefully to their concerns so that you may more likely help them.

Show them how you take care of your body.

Help your children to get acquainted with others who may provide positive influences on their view of their bodies.

When facilities are available, take your children to places, such as a park or a gym, where your children can exercise.

Take your children to professionals, such as pediatricians or dieticians who can give them valuable information about taking care of their bodies.

Teach them about their bodies.

Give them correct information and terms about body parts.

Give them good information about puberty.

Give them good information about sex, including explanations of menstruation, wet dreams, sexual desire, and sexual interaction.

Let them know that changes in bodily functions, including the ones that may be embarrassing to discuss, are almost always healthy changes.

Give them good information about how necessary, important, and real it is to want to be loved—including sexual love—by another person.

Share physical activities with your children. If you could do only one thing to help your children to gain and maintain a positive image of their bodies, you would do a few simple things early in their lives. Young children learn about themselves and their basic relationships through touching. So, hugging your children, snuggling with them, helping them to dry with a towel after their bath, wrestling with them, tucking them in when they go to bed, and so on, are activities through which your children can gain an almost permanent and positive view of their bodies. Several researchers about children have reported that children who receive a lot of good touching early in their lives move through puberty and adolescence in relatively smooth and healthy ways.

When children reach adolescence, they are not likely to welcome or need the kind of touching that they received when they were very young. Still, hugs will continue to provide a high level of assurance about their positive view of their bodies. Hugs do not guarantee a positive view of their bodies, but, no doubt, they help a lot.

Help your children with specific physical challenges.

If you cannot dance, you can gather information that will help your children to know how to dance. In other words, you can be a coach, whether the activity is dancing, softball, painting, swimming, or another physical activity.

Validate and encourage your children's concern about needing to improve.

Validate and encourage your children's skillful execution of physical activity.

Maybe, you and your children can utilize the services of a professional trainer.

What parents can SAY to their children about body image.

“I like how you are looking. What do you think about how you look?”

“I appreciate how you invent ways to adapt to changes.”

“You take really good care of yourself.”

“Would you like to try [to wear] something different?”

“I like what you said about yourself—you’re the authority—but I have a different view. I think you look really good.”

“Thanks for letting me know what you think about how I look to you. I would like to know more.” [Usually, when a child describes how a parent’s appearance is disappointing, they are expressing their fears about how they look. So, it is better to get more information from them.]

“I remember when you were carrying an ice cream cone, tripped and fell, but didn’t lose a drop of ice cream. Your balance was incredible.” Or, “I remember when you climbed to the top of the big oak tree in our back yard and climbed back down to the ground without even a scratch. Amazing!”

“I was always concerned about my big lips, too, but somewhere I learned that they help me to smile bigger and more beautifully. So, I’m okay with my big lips.” [Big lips or whatever the relevant body feature may be.]

“What would you like to do to make things better for you? Sleep? Eating different? Going to places where the food is what you really want? Are you okay with looking at some possibilities?”

“I’m here to support you.”

“I admire how you are able to talk about what concerns you.”

“If you don’t like how you look, keep in mind that it’s not a permanent condition. We can change it.”

“Are we missing some activities that you would enjoy doing?”

To be sure, parents can say and do many different things, as they interact with their children. And, parents may say and do the wrong thing, particularly from the view of their children. This means that making mistakes comes with the attempts to nurture and care for your children. Allowing for some inevitable mistakes, children are also very forgiving of mistakes, when their parents demonstrate that they strive to be dependable, loving, engaged, honest, concerned, open to possibilities, and positive toward their children. In short, with regard to body image and other important issues with which parents are inevitably confronted, you can do this. Really, you can do this. Really!