

Teens, ‘Tweens and Body Image



It's all about change. As the parent of a teen or 'tween, you know that the years between 8 and 18 are filled with radical shifts, internal and external. For both girls and boys, the significant physical changes are usually accompanied by a new awareness of physicality. Unfortunately, this awareness is often shaped by factors having nothing to do with reality. The media's influence, combined with peer pressure and the heightened self-consciousness of puberty, can create an unflattering image in the mirror that's simply not what everyone else sees. Taken to extremes, body image issues can become a serious problem. There are ways, however, to help our growing children develop a healthy self-image, and build a strong sense of self-esteem.

What We All See

It's not only our kids whose body image takes a beating in today's camera-ready society. Surrounded by pictures of "perfection" on TV and in magazines, how many of us manage to look at ourselves in the mirror *without* thinking "Too fat" or "Too thin" or "Too tall" or "Too short"... or not enough of one thing or another?

Women and girls probably suffer from the most direct blows. Recent studies show that 90% of all women are dissatisfied with their bodies; girls as young as 9 reported that didn't like their shape. A vast majority of teenage girls say that appearance is their biggest concern in life. But is any of this really surprising? Even when not connected with a beauty product, over half of the advertisements in teen girl magazines use physical attractiveness as a selling tool. The overall message is "buy it and be beautiful"; it doesn't even matter what "it" is. The unrealistic "thin ideal" in advertising has a particularly significant impact: research indicates that the "number one wish" of girls from 11-17 is to be thinner, and 80% of 10-year-old girls have gone on diets.

Although boys don't focus as much on their body shape and size as girls do, they're not immune to the media's harmful messages. Men and boys definitely feel the impact of muscle-bound images becoming the new standard of masculinity. Researchers note the huge increase in weight training—along with dietary supplements which guarantee bigger biceps—and fear the repercussions. More and more male teens are reporting body image fears. Your son just wants to look like his well-built action figures or a

real-life sports hero, right? Well, Barbie's not the only plastic doll who puts an unattainable physical goal in front of kids. Think also about the fact that those bulked-up professional athletes your son sees as heroes may be using drugs and steroids to stay on top. As young men are becoming more and more concerned with achieving a perfect body, studies reveal that many turn to smoking as a weight loss tool; boys who work out every day to lose weight are twice as likely to try tobacco as their peers.

What We Can Do About It

The first job we have as parents is to examine ourselves. There's no getting around the fact that the way we think about our own bodies, and deal with our own weight issues, is going to influence how our kids feel about themselves.

Here are some tips on how to become a role model, whatever shape you're in:

- **Let kids know that weight gain is part of growing up.** Especially during puberty—which can last from 2-5 years—different parts of the body grow at different rates. It all evens out.
- **Emphasize that bodies—and beauty—come in all shapes and sizes.** Do your kid a favor by trying not to hide your own body. Girls *should* see that their moms don't always look like runway models, and guys need to know that dads don't usually come with six-pack abs.
- **Don't complain about the way you look.** If you are a woman who focuses only on what's wrong with you, your daughter may well do the same.

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- **Try not to set up comparisons.** Don't compare features, sizes, measurements, habits, or bring out the old "when I was your age" to try to relate.
- **Avoid discussing diets.** Kids are listening all the time, so stop talking about dieting. Conversations shouldn't be about how fat you're getting or how much weight you've lost. Send the message to friends who visit, too: no diet talk.
- **Let your child make food decisions.** Don't become the food police—restricting what a kid can eat may actually promote overeating. Instead, prepare healthy meals and have plenty of nutritious snacks around, emphasizing that that there are no "bad foods" or "good foods."
- **Don't just watch TV, talk about it.** Make sure your child knows the difference between reality and TV. No one wakes up looking like a star. Talk about what goes on behind the scenes to create the artificial beauty that you see.
- **Give couch potatoes physical chores.** If your kids always seem to be in front of the screen—whether it's the TV or a computer monitor—a good way to get them moving is to assign active chores like raking leaves, walking the dog, and carrying in and putting away groceries.
- **Set a good fitness example.** Even if physical activity isn't second nature to you, find creative ways to regularly exercise at least three times a week. Do it for yourself, *and* for your children!
- **Curb your criticism about clothes and styles.** Lots of times, teens and 'tweens find who they are by "trying on" different looks. Kids may truly identify with what they're wearing—even if it's a passing fad—and a critical comment about an outfit could cut deeper than you intended.
- **Don't hold back the compliments.** But send a new message: praise efforts, accomplishments, talents and inner values rather than focusing on appearance.

When to Get Worried

While growing up, most every kid has some difficulties with their body image. Usually there's no cause for real concern. However, parents should not deny that it's possible for their son or daughter to develop severe body image problems. These are sometimes indicated by avoidance of activities such as sports or PE, or isolation and withdrawing from friends and social situations.

Signs of possible eating disorders shouldn't be overlooked. Keep an eye out for behaviors including:

- Rapid or erratic weight-loss
- Wearing extremely oversized clothing
- Eating secretly, or hiding food
- Picking at food, or pretending to eat in public
- Continually talking about being fat
- Spending time in the bathroom after meals
- Using diet pills, or illegal drugs or alcohol.

And although rare, body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) can occur in teens who become obsessed with a particular—often imagined—physical defect or characteristic. BDD is difficult to diagnose, partly because we expect teens worry about how they look. But when worry becomes something which interferes with everyday life, it may be time to step in.

If taken to the extreme, some tendencies which could be indicators of BDD include:

- An unusual preoccupation with appearance
- Repeated grooming and seeking reassurance
- Severely altering appearance with make-up
- Feelings of overwhelming discomfort in public
- Avoiding any physical contact with others
- Overvaluing appearance in overall self-worth.

If you feel that your child's self-image has become a real problem, and manifests as depression or a physical disorder, don't hesitate to reach out and contact a medical or mental health professional.

This material is for individual assistance only. It is not intended to provide any reader with specific authority, advice or recommendations.

If and when you determine it is necessary, please seek advice regarding your particular situation from the appropriate professional.

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