

Parent Resource

Body image and how to support your child



Body image is how we think and feel about our bodies. Parents and carers can create a positive influence on their child's body image particularly through the early years and pre-teen years.

Children with a positive body image are more likely to have healthy self-esteem and emotional well-being.

Parents can play a central role by actively modelling body positivity and encouraging resilience against societal pressures.

Body image is formed by thoughts, feelings and attitudes during adolescence, in particular:



- Body image can be influenced by factors such as puberty change, social media and body comparison with peers
- Sometimes a person's image in their own mind of their own body, may or may not match their actual body's shape and size often increasing stress
- Body image is related to a person's self-esteem. When you feel confident you are more likely to have good self-esteem and positive mental health
- Establishing a positive self body image, can maintain a balanced attitude toward physical activity and nutrition

How to get started



- Praise your child's character rather than their appearance. Help them to focus on their strengths
- Monitor your child's social media use and limit exposure to content that may trigger a negative body image
- Use neutral language when talking to children about food. There's no such thing as 'good' or 'bad' foods; some foods are more nutritious, some enjoyed in moderation
- Teach your child to challenge unrealistic beauty standards in the media (social media advertising and TV)
- Show them how images can be edited using photoshop and filters
- 'Be the askable and tellable parent'* Encourage open communication with your child where they feel comfortable discussing any body image concerns they might have
- Be a good listener. Practise active listening without judgement and validate their emotions



Body image in females and males

Concerns can impact all children, but the ways these present often differ based on gender and societal expectations. Females experiencing body image issues often obsess over achieving a thin or slender body shape:

- Obsession with weight and clothing size
- Extreme dieting, restrictive eating (including calorie counting)
- Excessive exercise

Many males experience pressure to achieve a muscular and lean physique, perpetuated in the media. This can lead to:

- A dissatisfaction with a lack of muscle mass
- An obsession with fitness
- A fear of gaining weight

Body image in gender-diverse children



Gender-diverse and non-binary children may experience distinct challenges, particularly as they navigate a world structured around binary gender expectations. Children may face unique pressures to conform to stereotypical gender appearances, which can create additional layers of self-consciousness or body dissatisfaction. Concerns may be:

- Feeling added discomfort during puberty with physical changes that do not align with their gender identity
- Pressure to conform to traditional masculine or feminine traits
- Feelings of isolation, anxiety, depression due to social pressures
- Risk of mental health challenges and withdrawal from social interactions

How to support your child

We often focus on a child's appearance and compliment something as simple as their hair or smile but shifting the focus to who they are and their unique qualities and characteristics can take the focus off their shape and size.



Model body positivity

- As parents and carers we know our children are always watching us and the behaviour we model can have a big impact on how our children feel about their body
- It is hard for children to believe what we say about body confidence and having a positive body image, if we are then making self-deprecating remarks about our own body
- Instead of focusing on how your body looks, you can switch the talk to focus on what you are grateful for about your body
- Together you may wish to start a routine with your child to reconnect with your body. Start with simple deep breathing techniques or some gentle morning stretching can support a renewed appreciation your body and what it does for you
- For both boys and girls you may like to engage in a nightly hygiene routines together - washing face, brushing teeth and hair. These are opportunities for you to model self-care and body appreciation

Keep it kind

- A bit of banter or gentle teasing are often part of the family dynamic however as children start puberty and their body begins to change they may start to feel more self-conscious and any gentle ribbing or comments about their body can be met with increased sensitivity and embarrassment
- They may start to wear baggy over sized clothes, or their posture may become slumped to hide some of these changes. Remember what it was like to start developing breasts, or have a voice that was changing? Limit banter and instead use this as an opportunity to discuss puberty
- Weight teasing by family and peers has been associated with anxiety and low self esteem. It is important to create a safe space for children. Share strategies to deal with the unnecessary comments, such as ignoring or walking away and if necessary, you may wish to talk to family members and friends and explain the impact these comments are having on your child



Body image and social media

Social media can be such a powerful influence in teens and adults alike and new research shows the constant bombardment of beauty messaging can take a toll on body image.

Although screen time is often a tricky subject to navigate with teens there are ways to make time online a fun uplifting experience and more body positive. Encourage children to pay attention to how they feel after scrolling – does the content inspire and uplift them or do they finish scrolling feeling flat, depressed and 'not good enough'?

These days most images we see on social media have been filtered and digitally distorted and this can create unrealistic expectations for children and teens. With the rise in AI we are now seeing 'influencers' who are not even real. Our children may find themselves unknowingly comparing their real human faces with a digitally created image.

Have regular conversations with your family about media literacy, discuss stereotypes when watching TV together or see if you can pick which images have been edited if scrolling social media together. We all need to be reminded that the media is more like art than a moment of 'real life'.



Where to get help

If you feel your child needs additional support, consider reaching out to:

- Your GP
- Your school's wellbeing team or Guidance Officer
- A Psychologist
- A Nutritionist



Helpful websites

There are also educational guides for parents and children on media literacy and body positivity here:

- Raising Children Network
- Better Health Channel
- Butterfly Foundation
- Children's Health Queensland