

Family Focus

How to Help Your Child Develop a Healthy Body Image (Part 2)

By Margie Ryerson, MFT

The good news is that you are probably the proud, loving parents of wonderful children. The difficult news is that you are also daily role-models for these children. It's amazing what children choose to notice about their parents – sometimes, unfortunately for us, just the moments we would like to forget!

- In order to help your child develop a positive body image, she must see that you regard your own body in a positive way. If you stand in front of the mirror and critique your appearance or complain about your stomach, your child will learn to look at herself critically as well. If you are not satisfied with your body, a common phenomenon in our society, perhaps you can get some counseling to help. At the very least, it is important to keep your negative thoughts and comments private and to try to be a model of self-acceptance for your children.

- Family gene pools influence body build, height, and weight distribution. Help your child understand that her body type is inherited just like her eye color, and that features can only be altered to a certain extent. For example, if her genetic make-up includes a tendency to carry weight in the thighs, help her to learn to accept this.

- Of course, we also want to model exercise as an excellent way to improve our body image. It increases endorphins and metabolism, while it also helps us appreciate our body and how it functions and performs. If parents have a sedentary lifestyle, often children will adapt to this and won't incorporate regular exercise into their lives.

- Be sure that you have an appropriate relationship with food, or seek outside help before it affects your children. I worked with an anorexic teenager whose mother never sat down for meals with the family. Her children rarely saw her eat, and her daughter unconsciously began to mirror her behavior. It is also impor-

tant to avoid taking extreme approaches with food, such as prohibiting sugar. You want to be able to model healthy and flexible eating for your children.

- Needless to say, joking or teasing about any feature of your child's appearance can have a negative impact. One client's father teasingly called her "chubby" when she was nine years old, and this had a lasting effect on the way she viewed her body.

- One last suggestion is crucial, especially with society's emphasis on external appearances and possessions. Parents need to counteract harmful messages children receive from the media and other sources by downplaying interest in the appearance and cost of houses, cars, jewelry, and clothes. It is essential that you make it a point to not scrutinize your child's appearance, your own appearance, or that of others. Avoid commenting on people's appearance in general. Children and teens have said that hearing their parents' remarks about others' bodies or physical attributes makes them question what their parents really think about theirs.

If a child is exceptionally attractive, it is especially important not to fuss over or emphasize her appearance. You may need to intercede so that family and friends avoid doing this as well. Instead, place emphasis on her special qualities, personality and skills, so that she learns those are far more important than one's physical appearance.

If you see your child beginning to struggle with body image issues, consult with a professional early. It is always easier to prevent problems than to treat them once they have developed.

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