

RESOURCE FOR PARENTS

BACKGROUND TO BODY IMAGE



OVER 50% OF PRESCHOOL AGED GIRLS ARE DISSATISFIED WITH THEIR BODIES

WHAT IS BODY IMAGE?

- ▶ Body Image is the mental image we have of our bodies (shape, size, skin colour, facial characteristics etc.) and our **thoughts** and **feelings** about that image.
- ▶ Having an unhealthy body image is called body dissatisfaction and means disliking your body and is related to feelings of shame.
- ▶ Having a healthy body image means that you accept your body and appearance, most of the time.

WHAT IMPACT DOES AN UNHEALTHY BODY IMAGE HAVE ON PRESCHOOL AGED GIRLS?

During the preschool years, a girl's body image begins to develop and may be shaped by their early experiences. Girls begin to notice how they are different from others in the preschool years. Girls who develop a healthy body image feel good or accept the way they look. They may feel more positive about themselves, and have a healthy attitude towards food and eating.

A girl who feels dissatisfied with their body may:

- ▶ Have low self-esteem
- ▶ Shy away or become withdrawn
- ▶ Worry about the way that they look or what others think of them, and feel sad and unhappy with their body
- ▶ Be at risk for disordered eating in the future

WHAT SHAPES A GIRL'S BODY IMAGE?

There are many factors that can shape a girl's body image development. Some of the most important factors are summarised below.

PARENTS

Parents are role models for body image. Parents who talk negatively about their own weight and appearance may give their daughters the idea that they need to look a certain way to feel accepted. Comments from parents about other people's body shape, size, appearance, and weight (including media figures) can also encourage their daughters to feel poorly about their appearance.

PEERS

Girls who are teased about their appearance, body size, and physical performance are more likely to feel dissatisfied with their bodies.

THE MEDIA

We are constantly surrounded by images of people who are thin and beautiful, on TV, magazines, and the internet. People and characters in the media may influence a girl's early views of what a 'normal' girl is 'supposed' to look like (e.g., tall, slim etc.).

STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

VALUE PERSONAL QUALITIES OTHER THAN APPEARANCE

- ▶ Emphasise the aspects of your daughter that are not related to appearance - for example, personality traits, humour, and kindness.
- ▶ Avoid teasing or being negative about your daughter's appearance, particularly weight.
- ▶ Communicate unconditional love and acceptance in a variety of verbal and nonverbal ways to let your daughter know that she is valued for who she is.
- ▶ Recognise and emphasise your daughter's strengths or qualities that are not appearance related.
- ▶ Acknowledge your daughter's interests and successes in areas that are not related to physical appearance.
- ▶ Help your daughter to develop their confidence in their skills, abilities and personal qualities that are not related to their appearance.

ACCEPTANCE OF DIVERSITY

- ▶ Celebrate diversity with your daughter by discussing ways that everyone has different characteristics and personal qualities.
- ▶ Take opportunities to point out to you daughter that everyone has something special to offer and should be respected regardless of their size, shape, appearance and abilities.
- ▶ Try not to speak critically of other people's body shapes and appearance.

HERE ARE SOME STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE YOUR DAUGHTERS TO HAVE POSITIVE THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS ABOUT THEIR BODIES, ADOPT HEALTHY EATING BEHAVIOURS, TAKE CARE OF THEIR BODIES AND DEVELOP A POSITIVE SELF-ESTEEM.

HEALTH IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN APPEARANCE

- ▶ Encourage your daughter to eat foods for health reasons, not for the effects on body weight.
- ▶ Allow your daughter to choose new fruits or vegetables to try.
- ▶ Set good examples in consuming a healthy balanced diet including breakfast every day.
- ▶ Encourage your daughter to listen to their bodies and their feelings of fullness and hunger.
- ▶ Encourage your daughter to replace sedentary time (e.g., watching TV), with physically active play time.
- ▶ Try to have family meals as often as possible as it gives you as parents the opportunity to show your daughters healthy eating behaviours and positive attitudes towards food.
- ▶ Avoid using 'good food' or 'bad food'. Rather use 'everyday food' and 'sometimes food'. Everyday foods include grains, vegetables, fruits, lean meats and dairy. Sometimes foods are highly processed foods or contain lots of salt, fat or sugar.

REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE A ROLE MODEL

- ▶ Girls copy the attitudes that parents have towards their own bodies.
- ▶ Try to examine some of your own attitudes and beliefs about body image and how they may shape your daughter's body image development.
- ▶ Try to speak respectfully about your own body and appearance and other people's appearances.
- ▶ Try to avoid making negative comments about your own weight or appearance because this may encourage your daughter to develop the belief that the certain body types are unacceptable.
- ▶ Try to avoid talking about dieting and exercising for weight loss, as this may encourage weight change behaviours in your daughter when they are older.