



Helping teens have a positive body image

WHAT IS YOUR CHILD GOING THROUGH?

Social environments, family and friends all play an important role in the development of a young person's body image. Adolescence is a period of transition that involves many physical and psychological changes; it's also when teens develop their personalities. In their own way, they are learning how to deal with the changes in their bodies and may imagine the body they would like to have.

Each day, young people see different ideals of beauty portrayed in the media through advertising, videos, social media, movies and magazines. Young people can be influenced by these sometimes distorted images that represent unrealistic models of men and women. They create the illusion that teens will be popular, happy, admired and respected if they imitate these models.

Boys and girls experience this pressure differently. Although girls are more at risk than boys of perceiving their bodies negatively, boys too can experience body dissatisfaction.

- Boys may want to lose weight or gain weight, be bigger and develop their muscles. Some will exercise excessively and take supplements to bulk up.
- Some girls want to be thinner or taller or have bigger breasts. Some teenaged girls use weight loss methods that can be dangerous for their health, i.e., going on a diet, skipping meals, exercising excessively, which are especially risky if they are still growing.

Young people with low self-esteem are more sensitive to negative messages from parents or friends.

The role of self-esteem

Young people's self-esteem can be fragile and can vary depending on whether they have positive experiences (success in sports, recognition for accomplishments, etc.) or negative ones (hurtful comments, heartbreak, bad grades, etc.).

Young people with low self-esteem may adopt behaviour to please other people and be accepted by them. Some of this behaviour can have repercussions on health (smoking, using alcohol or drugs, having sex without a condom, etc.).

Did you know?

- When parents are satisfied with their bodies, adolescents tend to be too.
- The way young people perceive their appearance influences their self-esteem.
- For young people, having friends who accept them as they are reinforces their self-esteem.

WHAT CAN YOU DO AS A PARENT?

All parents contribute to their children's self-esteem. Here are some things you can do to help them.

Value who they are

- Complement children on their strengths and qualities. Point out the good things they do, encourage them in their projects, and express positive things about their lives in general.
- It's important for teens to know that you notice what they do and that you pay attention to them. Who they are goes beyond their appearance.
- Even teens need to spend time with their families. Family meals are a good opportunity to talk.

Pay attention to your own comments and what other teens say

- Teens hear every comment you make about them and about other people. Ask yourself: What are the messages I want to send about:
 - food? (going on a diet, skipping meals, restricting certain foods)
 - body size and shape? (concern about your appearance and theirs, your weight and theirs)
 - the importance of what other people think?
- Your child also hears comments from other teens. These comments can be hurtful and leave a mark. Ask yourself: Has my child been the victim of negative comments about his appearance? Is she being made fun of because of her height or weight? How does your child react?

Recognize when children don't like their bodies and need support

- Some behaviour can indicate that children don't like their bodies and need help. For example:
 - They have developed worrying eating behaviour (they skip meals, are on a diet).
 - They participate excessively in physical activities.
 - They constantly compare themselves to others: "I want to be beautiful like her; I want to have muscles like him."
 - They are sad and withdrawn, and more so than usual.
 - They become isolated and no longer see their friends: their social lives are affected.
 - There has been a change at school (drop in grades, cutting class).
- Pay attention to this behaviour and to teen's own comments about themselves.
- Do you think they need a particular type of support? There are professionals who can help them accept themselves as they are. Consult the CLSC in your region for guidance.

Things that kids might be wondering

- I feel that I look fat: will I ever get a boyfriend or girlfriend?
- Young people at school laugh at certain parts of my body: how should I react?
- I want to build muscle or lose weight: how do I go about this?

WHAT CAN HELP YOU?

Brochure

Votre influence a du poids. L'image corporelle à l'adolescence. Available from the website www.equilibre.ca under "Publications/Outils d'intervention." (In French only.)

Do you need a professional resource?

Call Info-Santé at 811 or the parent help line at 1-800-361-5085.

Tip

Reassure your teen that their bodies are changing and that they need to adapt to these changes. Help them feel better about their bodies without overdoing it (participate in physical activity for fun, finding a pastime that they like, etc.).