

# Promoting positive body image: FAQs for parents

## How can I help my child develop a healthy body image?

There are many ways you can help your child feel positive about their bodies. Good self-esteem is highly connected with a positive body image: people who feel good about themselves also generally feel good about their bodies. Help your child develop a healthy regard for themselves, their strengths and abilities.

Children like to use their bodies for physical activity – encourage this as a fun and healthy thing to do. Scheduled sports are fine, but don't forget the fun of swimming at the beach, kicking a ball around the local park or going on a family bike ride!

Commenting on your child's body weight is very rarely appropriate. If you want to compliment your child, try to think of a character strength rather than an appearance based comment. "I love how you always persevere" or "you are being super kind today!" means so much more than "your hair is pretty", and takes the focus off external appearances.

## Is body image an issue for boys?

Body image is most definitely an issue for both boys and girls. Boys tend to want to be more muscular (e.g. wanting a "six pack" from an early age), whereas girls tend to want to be thinner. The problem is still the same - body dissatisfaction,

low self-esteem and the possibility of extreme behaviours (such as steroid abuse in adolescence). Some studies have shown that boys are not as vulnerable to media until later in adolescence, but they are still affected. The rates of eating disorders amongst boys are rising rapidly - and nearly half of adults affected by binge eating disorder are men. Creating a healthy attitude to food and body image is extremely important for all children.

## How can I teach respect for all bodies when my child sees images every day that use bodies to sell products?

It's a great idea to teach your children some media literacy skills. What is being sold? How, and why are those images and words being used? How do those advertisements make them feel? Call out photoshopped and altered images when you see them, and show them how trashy magazines teach people to judge and comment on people's bodies. Look around you at the shops – do normal people look like the people in advertisements? There's such a huge diversity of people in the real world that isn't reflected in the media. Ask them which real life people are important to them. What makes them special? Why do they love them? It probably isn't because of their looks!

## Some statistics

- Amongst Australians aged 11-24, approximately 28% of males and 35% of females are dissatisfied with their appearance.
- A large number (41%) of children are specifically worried about the way they look with 35% concerned about being overweight (44% of girls and 27% of boys) and 16% being too skinny.

## My child is overweight - what should I do?

It's important to remember that children's bodies grow at different rates. In particular, puberty causes huge body changes, as well as an increase in a child's awareness of their own body and weight.

Ask yourself why you believe your child to be overweight – have others commented? Is it possible you have unrealistic expectations? If your GP has suggested your child lose weight, there are many things you can do to help.

- Increase the amount of time your child and family spend being active, not just through scheduled sports. Walking or riding to school, walking the dog, or going on bike rides are

## Promoting positive body image: FAQs

all good examples. Make sure the focus is on fun and health, not weight loss.

- ✔ Ensure healthy foods are always available at home; for example, a fruit bowl, veggie sticks etc.
- ✔ Teach your child to listen to their own body's hunger cues. People of all ages overeat when they have lost the ability to listen to their body's hunger and fullness cues. If you associate watching a family movie with eating popcorn every Friday, then you are using external cues to know when to eat, rather than listening to your body. Children may need help to relearn how to trust their body's cues. Encourage them to eat when hungry (not bored!) and stop when their body has had enough. Check they are not thirsty, rather than hungry. You may need to help them in situations of high temptation however!
- ✔ Don't put your child on a diet, weigh them or make them feel anxious about their weight. Criticising a child's eating can backfire and lead them to behaviours such as sneaking/hiding food, or restricting. Research consistently shows that trying too hard to control your child's eating or engaging in battles over food is counterproductive.

### My child is being teased about their weight

The vast majority of overweight children have been teased about their weight. Teasing is a way that children share and confirm society's norms. If your child is being teased or bullied, it's important to teach them both resilience and how to

stand up to bullies in an appropriate way. One example of something they could say is "I don't care what you think because you're not my friend - and if you were my friend you wouldn't say that to me". It's a good idea to help children strengthen their self-esteem to protect themselves from the effects of teasing. Your school may have a bullying policy that can help with these strategies.

### My child says they are fat

Even young children of kindergarten age are aware of the societal pressure to be thin. Studies show that by the age of 5, they equate fat with "bad". Children are constantly exposed to anti-obesity messages which can lead to an extreme fear of being overweight. It's important for children to realise that being overweight is only harmful if it's associated with poor health.

If your child mentions they think that they are fat, try not to give them a big reaction – let it go if it seems like a passing comment. However, if they are showing ongoing signs of being upset about their size, help them break down what they mean by fat, and why they see it as a negative. Is it that they feel bloated, sad, or feel bad about themselves? You can talk about what their body can do, not what it looks like. You can talk about how bodies come in all shapes and sizes, and that's OK. Bodies also grow at different rates, which is normal.

You are your child's best role model for body acceptance. It can be confronting, but think about your attitudes towards your own body. Try to be mindful of talking about weight loss, dieting, other people's bodies (even "You look great, you've lost weight!") and how you talk about your own body.



### Should I buy my child a fitness tracker?

The current trend for wearable fitness trackers and pedometers has filtered down to secondary and primary school children, with many parents seeing them as a way of encouraging physical activity. On the surface, there is no issue with them, but it depends on the mindset of the child using them. On someone who is prone to competitive behaviour or perfectionism, there is a danger that they can be used to promote extreme behaviour. Ensure the tracker doesn't have a calorie counter. You know your child best, but do be aware of the potential issues.

### Sports and body image

Some sports and activities have a particular focus on body shape, weight or composition. Ballet, gymnastics, diving, cheerleading, rowing, swimming or muscle strength sports are examples of sports that can encourage people to conform to a specific body type.

The competitive nature of many sports can be a risk, especially when athletes are judged or compared with each other on an individual basis.

## Promoting positive body image: FAQs

If your child participates in these sports or activities, try to choose a club or team that has a body positive culture. Participation in strength based sports is a risk factor for adolescent boys to go on to steroid abuse, so make sure to talk to your children about ways they can keep their bodies healthy and strong without engaging in dangerous behaviours.

### What about social media?

The legal age for most social media platforms is 13+, but the reality is that by upper primary school many of your children will be using social media with or without your knowledge!

It's important for you to have open communication about the use of technology in your home. While it's unrealistic to ban social media, you can teach your children about how to switch off if social media is affecting their self-esteem. It's a good idea to ban apps that allow for anonymous questions and "ratings" of selfies, and chat to your child about why these sites and apps are so dangerous. And keep in mind, studies show that using image-based social media and engaging in a lot of appearance-based comparisons can negatively affect your body image. Talk to your children about how they use social media and how it might affect how they feel.

### I eat clean at home. How can I encourage my child to want to eat well too, instead of nagging for junk?

We all want our children to grown up as adults who are able to make good choices. Your child will generally follow your lead and the habits of childhood, allowing for some adolescent rebellion! Try to

avoid using moral or judgemental language such as "good", "bad", "clean", "naughty" to describe food. It's better to describe foods as "sometimes" or "every day" food. The more something is forbidden, chance are the more they will want it. Make sure you always have healthy food available and teach your child to listen to their body's cues. And remember, moderation is key!

#### Did you know...

- A 2007 Sydney University study of nearly 9,000 adolescents showed one in five teenage girls starved themselves or vomit up their food to control their weight. 8% of girls used smoking for weight control.
- Dieting is the single most important behavioural risk factor for developing an eating disorder. Girls who diet moderately are 5 times more likely to develop an eating disorder than those who don't diet, and those who diet severely are 18 times more likely.

### A note about obesity

We live in a society that promotes obesity but idealises thinness. How do we prevent obesity in our children without creating an unhealthy weight obsession? Should we "accept" bodies that are obese and possibly unhealthy?

Did you know that at the same time as Australia's obesity rate has risen, so has the rate of eating disorders? The truth is that obesity and eating disorders share many of the same risk factors including low self-esteem, dieting, depression, and anxiety. Telling someone who is obese to "go on a diet" is extremely unhelpful. Likewise, concern for

someone else's health because they are overweight often masks a conscious or subconscious prejudice against overweight people.

### I had/have an eating disorder myself, and am worried my child will develop one too. Is there anything I can do to avoid this from happening?

Given that an estimated 914,000 people in Australia have an eating disorder at any one time, it's inevitable that many will be parents themselves. There is some research that indicates eating disorders have a genetic component, however there are strategies you can put in place to help guard your child against developing an eating disorder. Eating meals together, getting rid of your scales, not dieting, not commenting on your own or other people's bodies and encouraging your child to be media literate are all things that you can do that can make a difference.

### I need to lose weight myself – how can I do this without being a bad role model?

Absolutely, though we would encourage you to also be body positive and kind to yourself as well! See the EDV Mindful Eating fact sheet at [www.eatingdisorders.org.au/resources/edv-fact-sheets](http://www.eatingdisorders.org.au/resources/edv-fact-sheets) for more detailed suggestions.

Try not to let your own body insecurities stop you from enjoying time with your children – throw on your bathers and hit the beach! The Beyond Stereotypes study of 3,300 girls and women found that 67% of all women 15 to 64 withdraw from life-engaging activities due to feeling badly about their looks – it doesn't have to be this way.

# Promoting positive body image: FAQs

## When should I worry?

If you are worried that your child is displaying signs of excessive exercise, disordered eating (e.g. dieting, skipping meals, cutting out major food groups) or other behavioural eating issues (hiding food, refusing to eat with the family, intense interest in diet or “health” foods), you can get advice and information from the EDV Helpline on 1300 550 236, email [help@eatingdisorders.org.au](mailto:help@eatingdisorders.org.au), or see your local GP. It's always better to intervene early than assume potential problems will go away by themselves. There is also an excellent resource *Feed Your Instinct* ([www.feedyourinstinct.com.au](http://www.feedyourinstinct.com.au)) that has checklists for parents to answer then print to take to their doctor.

## Further information

Eating Disorders Victoria (EDV) has a range of services including psychologists, support groups and a Helpline that can offer support, information and referrals: contact 1300 550 236 or [help@eatingdisorders.org.au](mailto:help@eatingdisorders.org.au).

EDV Education run a range of workshops for primary and secondary students, staff and parents - call 1300 550 236 for more information.

Accredited workshops are also available for specific groups such as fitness professionals and GPs.

[www.eatingdisorders.org.au](http://www.eatingdisorders.org.au)

