

# Encouraging a Healthy Body Image

## What Is Body Image?

Body image is the way you feel about your body. Children who have a healthy body image feel good about their bodies. They are happy with how they look, how their body moves and grows, and what their body can do. Body image is part of a child's whole self-image.

Having a good body image helps kids feel confident. It adds to their self-esteem. Children with a poor body image don't feel good about their body or looks. A poor body image can take away from a child's self-image. It can lower self-esteem.

A healthy body image grows over time. It starts in babyhood. It builds as kids grow. It changes when kids go through puberty. It gets shaped by what others say. At every stage, parents can do things to help support a child's healthy body image.

## Body Image in Babies and Toddlers

Babies and toddlers seem naturally happy with their bodies. They love to kick their feet and play with their toes. They love to squirm and use their bodies to move. Once they can stand and walk, toddlers feel proud when they can do things "all by myself."

Parents help babies and toddlers feel good about their bodies when they:

- give tender care and cuddling
- play in ways that let babies move their bodies
- play in ways that let toddlers use new skills
- show how proud they feel
- give plenty of smiles and praise

## Body Image in Growing Kids

As kids grow, they can build good feelings about their bodies. Sometimes it shows. Kids beam with pride when you say how tall they've grown. They smile at themselves in the mirror. They like how they look in a favorite outfit or new haircut. They want you to watch how fast they can run. Or see what they can do on a skateboard.

As they grow, kids may compare themselves with other kids. They want to feel good about how they look. They want to be able to do what other kids can do. When they feel good about how they measure up, it builds their body image.

To help kids build a healthy body image, parents can:

- teach them about their body
- help them take care of their body

- say nice things about how kids look
- let kids show you what they can do
- show them you're proud of what they can do
- be active with kids
- have kids be active every day

## **Body Image in Puberty and Beyond**

Kids' bodies change as they go through puberty. The way they feel about their body may change too. Some kids are excited to look like an older kid. Others feel shy about their changing body. It can take time to get used to a body that looks and feels different.

Puberty doesn't happen at the same time for everyone. Some kids develop early. They may feel awkward at first. Or they may feel proud to look more mature. Some kids go through puberty later. Some feel OK about it, while others can't wait to catch up with their friends.

It's normal for girls to have a little extra body fat when they go through puberty. But this causes some girls to worry about their weight.

Preteens and teens may care a lot about how they look. They may try out new looks and styles. They may dress to fit in or to stand out.

They may focus too much on what they don't like about their looks. Boys may wish they had more muscles. Girls may wish they had more curves, or fewer curves. Being too self-critical can hurt a teen's body image.

To help teens have a healthy body image, parents can:

- say nice things about how they look
- allow them to try new looks and styles
- avoid criticizing how a teen looks
- make sure teens get plenty of sleep and eat a healthy diet
- make sure teens are active every day

## **Can Teasing Affect a Kid's Body Image?**

Some kids get teased, bullied, or shamed about their body or looks. This can make kids feel deeply hurt. It can harm their body image and their self-esteem.

If this is happening, parents can:

- take steps to stop the teasing or bullying
- help their child repair the hurt feelings and shame

They can do this by talking and listening to their child. If it's needed, they can get more help for their child from a counselor or therapist. A child's body image can change for the better, even if it's been hurt.

## **Can Having a Health Condition Affect a Kid's Body Image?**

Some health conditions prevent kids from doing what other kids can do. Some affect how a kid looks, moves, or grows, or how active they can be.

But having a health condition doesn't mean a kid can't have a healthy body image. A healthy body image comes from accepting your body, liking it, and taking care of it. Even when there are things kids can't do, they can feel good about what they can do.

## **What Else Can Parents Do to Help?**

Remember to be a good body image role model. Be active every day. Eat a healthy diet. Talk about your own body in positive ways. Accept your own body, and take good care of it. Kids will pick up on this and do the same for themselves.

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