

Path of the Courageous Parent

Articles for Discussion March 8, 2012

Promoting Positive Body Image for Youth of All Ages

Building Blocks for Children's Body Image

http://www.radiancemagazine.com/kids_project/body_image.html

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for the Body Image Task Force

A child's world is no longer a simple or carefree place to grow. It has become filled with complex ethical and personal struggles that some of us find difficult to grapple with as adults, let alone as children or teens. Issues like drug abuse, violence, teen pregnancy and the decline in educational standards are well discussed and many solutions to these problems are being attempted. Buried among these acknowledged pressures are those as yet unspoken on a public basis: the dangers and destructiveness of mainstream body image in America.

It is now believed that a person's basic body image is determined by age six. Contemporary life contributes many sources towards forming our self image: television programs and advertisements, magazines, billboards, the influence of child care providers, teachers, and day care workers, and others. All of these sources offer basically the same image of acceptable female appearance and a narrowing view of male physical acceptability as well. But by far the strongest influence on a child's body image is parental body image. It is more likely that a child who grows up with a parent who increasingly disparages and seeks to alter his or her own body, will grow up to feel the same despair and practice the same destructive behaviors. And we see this pattern in the rise in cases of second- and third-generation eating disorders.

Body image has a dramatic effect on behavior. How many of us as adults have or have had a list of things we would do if only we could lose weight, be prettier, etc. Children begin to think in this pattern as well at a very young age. By fourth grade 80% of American girls have or are dieting. This startling figure is a good indicator of how well children pay attention to social messages of who is acceptable and who is not. In a study done with six year old children they were shown silhouettes of different people, then asked to talk

about them. The children consistently labeled a silhouette of a fat child as "stupid, dirty, lazy, slow, etc.," regardless of the body size of the child identifying the picture.

Beyond fatphobia, body image issues for children touch on as many aspects of life as they do for adults. All forms of bigotry perpetuate all other forms of bigotry, and looksism, especially, helps to propel many current prejudices. How must the constant racist depiction of Asian women in advertising as compliant sex toys affect a young girl of Korean or Japanese ancestry? Class issues often combine with appearance to perpetuate the "never too thin or too rich" myth which certainly affects children's view of the world. Ageism is entrenched in children's literature as the older woman is almost always presented as ugly and evil, thus promoting their cultural obsession with avoiding natural aging. We can either choose to perpetuate intolerance by teaching it to our children or end this discrimination by confronting it in their environment and in ourselves.

Looksism also has a strong effect when practiced by adults against children. In one study, Dr. M. Clifford, education psychologist, and E. Hatfield, found that teachers took for granted that beauty and brains go together. The study provided different teachers with the same extensive student files. The files contained diverse and abundant information; student grades in reading, language, arithmetic, social studies, science, art, music and physical education. Their attitudes and work habits, and even a tally of absences. The only difference in the files given to different teachers was a "student photo" in the corner of the file. Based on the same information and different photos, teachers came up with completely different analysis of the information. Cute boys and girls were assumed more intelligent, more likely to get advanced degrees, able to get along better with other children, and to have parents more interested in their education. "Homely," or plain children were almost always rated lower in these and other areas even though the grades and factual information were exactly the same. In light of the evidence we now have about how expectation affects behavior, it is easy to see the devastating results looksist assumptions can have on the lives and future of our children.

HEALTH, KIDS & FAT

The primary determinant of body fat is biological heritage. More than 11 studies have tried to show that fat people eat more or differently than thin people, and all of them have failed. What these studies have shown is that fat people have exactly the same eating habits as thin people, some eat a lot, some eat little. We all have a thin friend who eats hardily and gains no weight, and yet few of us have conjectured that there may be fat people who eat very little. And studies of twins who were separated at birth and raised in different environments, found they were all within five pounds of each other. Each person has a natural weight range set by genetics.

One major reason for weight gain in American is *dieting*. It is well documented that at least 95% of all dieters gain back all the weight they lost within five years and that most of them gain back more weight than they lost. This raise in their weight is often irreversible. For children the consequences of dieting may be even more disastrous. While there is no health risk in being the weight you were born to be, whether that is fat or thin, there is always a cost to manipulating the body's natural balance. In our experience and research, we have found that most people in America who are three times or more the average body size (400 lbs +) have dieted repeatedly, usually since childhood. In addition to the other well documented dangers of dieting (among them anxiety, anemia, immunity system deficiency, weakness, heart disease and decreased attention span), for pre-adolescents and teens dieting may dramatically and permanently alter the set-point of their body weight at a higher level than it naturally would be.

Other dangers of obsessive concern with weight and dieting in children are the way they can lead to eating disorders, malnutrition and drug abuse. Studies now show that most eating disorders begin with a diet. That the deprivation sets into motion dangerous physical and psychological forces that can lead to anorexia, bulimia and compulsive eating. You cannot tell if a person has an eating disorder by looking at them, and many anorexics and bulimics become quite good at hiding their self-destructive behavior. The eventual results of this devastating disease can be death, and thousands die of eating disorders every year.

Malnutrition in children not attributable to poverty conditions has grown in America since the mid-eighties. First dubbed "Muesili Malnutrition" because of its emergence among "health conscious" families, it has since then spread to all levels and classes of our society. This malnutrition is caused in children because they do not eat enough of the food fat that they need for growth. In addition, fat carries vitamins to the rest of the body. While it may be a very good health choice for adults to monitor and examine food fat in their diets, the same is not true for children. Children need on average about twice the fat of adults for various growth and health related reasons. The American obsession with weight loss has endangered our children by causing parents to put children on low fat diets for their "health."

As complex an issue as any other aspect of the substance abuse problem, teens are using drugs to aid them in their battle against their bodies. Methamphetamines, specifically cocaine, have become the drug of choice among teenage girls trying to lose weight. Over the counter diet pills are being used in an abusive manner by young girls as well. Cigarette smoking has in recent years declined among every group except young women. Most often cited as the reason they began smoking and/or won't quit, is the fear of weight gain.

For young men the problem is often perceived as the opposite of women's; rather than trying to diminish their physical selves, they are incited to "pump up" and become "more

powerful" and "real" men. This media bombardment coupled with the question caused by changing gender roles has led to record levels of steroid abuse by teen boys and the numbers are still growing. In addition, the weight gain/loss cycles pushed in wrestling and other competitive sports programs promote unhealthy eating patterns which are leading many young boys into eating disorders.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

The problem of looksism seems overwhelming. Its many destructive effects on our youth are seemingly beyond the ability of any one parent or person to change. But we can change things for the better as individuals, as families, and as a community.

As individuals we can seek out information, question the truth of what "everybody knows" and decide for ourselves what we believe. We can ask who profits from what information and how? (The diet industry alone makes 33 billion dollars a year, and this does not count weight loss surgeries, "fitness" equipment, novelty items such as pig magnets, or any of the thousands of other related products our weight obsessed culture produces.) As families we can discuss with each other and our children the images we see on television and how they affect us. We can actively participate in our children's education and be aware of the attitudes teachers and caregivers are passing on to our children. As a community we can choose to specifically foster tolerance and diversity. We can bring our concerns up at social gatherings and community meetings. We can begin to change the problem by first recognizing that there is a problem. Some specific suggestions are:

1. Provide children with alternate images. The problem really is not that there are many images of beauty constantly bombarding us. The problem is that there is really only one for each gender. Models looking like Barbie and GI-Joe should not be the standard for real life people to base their idea of personal success on, and yet many of us unconsciously do. We can help our children to understand that beauty comes in many packages by providing them with many images of real human diversity. Look through non-traditional magazines for images and books on other cultures. Take the opportunity when out with your child, to point out all the different ways real people look and how beautiful and interesting they are.
2. Be aware of advertising and toys aimed at children. It is amazing the number of blond haired blue eyed dolls made for children. Even among sets of dolls (such as Barbie or Polly Pocket) the primary doll is almost always anglicized. Dark skin or dark hair among the doll population indicates a lesser being. Boy's dolls or "action figures" reflect the "He-man" ideal of what makes men attractive and powerful. Many of the play products aimed at little girls are fashion and make-up oriented. All of these combine to perpetuate and emphasize to our children that women's primary

concern is their appearance and what appearance should be, and that all real men have the muscles to "prove and enforce it."

3. Talk back to the television. And this goes for any outside "authority." Passivity is our worst enemy. Talk back to the T.V. when you disagree, and teach your children to do so. This counters the idea (often internalized) that you just have to accept comments made by the media. Write letters, they do have an impact, and include your children in your actions. Do not allow doctors or teachers to make harmful statements about or in front of your children unchallenged. Remember that "authorities" are people too, raised with the same cultural bias and myths as we were. Questioning them will help your children to develop the skills of making up their own mind in the face of outside pressure, as well as showing them that there is not just one way to see anything. Especially who they are "supposed" to be.
4. Support your children in standing up for themselves. When the black child comes to a parent with a story of racist treatment at school, the parents don't tell the child to bleach their skin or imply that it was their own fault. Then why do parents put children who are teased about their weight on a diet? When children are ridiculed about their appearance, it is important that adults support them in telling them that they are fine the way they are, and that it is not okay for other children to harass them.

As parents we want what is best for our children, as people we sometimes make mistakes. Most people who put their children on diets are not trying to cause them physical or emotional harm, but rather save them from the perceived health risks and cruelty our culture perpetuates. But the time has come for us to recognize that the health risks of dieting and bigotry, perpetuated by our appearance prejudices, are the real dangers, and must be changed. We cannot protect our children from looksism but we can teach them to recognize and fight it. ☺

On March 25, 1994, eleven-year-old Brian Head shot and killed himself. Associated Press reports stated he was teased and ridiculed about being fat by his classmates until he felt he could do nothing else. When his peers were told of his death they showed no remorse. This pamphlet is dedicated to him in the hope that it takes no more such losses to show us that prejudice ultimately kills.

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Kids Health.org: Male Body Image

http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_body/take_care/male_bodyimage.html?tracking=T_RelatedArticle#

Al's friend Rachel invited him to go to the lake for the day with her family. Rachel thought Al was fun to be around — plus he was cute. Rachel really hoped he'd say yes.

Al turned Rachel down. He liked Rachel, too, but was self-conscious about taking off his T-shirt. He worried that her family and others at the lake would see what he saw when he looked in the mirror — a scrawny excuse for a man. Al hadn't gone to the pool in more than a year because he was so self-conscious about his appearance.

The Truth About Guys

Many people think of guys as being carefree when it comes to their appearance. But the reality is that a lot of guys spend plenty of time in front of the mirror. It's a fact — some guys care just as much as girls do about their appearance.

You may hear a lot about being a tough guy, but how often do you hear that being a guy is tough? Guys might think that they shouldn't worry about how they look, but body image can be a real problem for them. Unlike girls, guys are less likely to talk to friends and relatives about their bodies and how they're developing. Without support from friends and family, they may develop a negative self-image.

The good news is that self-image and body image can be changed.

Why Is Body Image Important?

Body image is a person's opinions, thoughts, and feelings about his or her own body and physical appearance. Having a positive body image means feeling pretty satisfied with the way you look, appreciating your body for its capabilities and accepting its imperfections.

Body image is part of someone's total self-image. So how a guy feels about his body can affect how he feels about himself. If he gets too focused on not liking the way he looks, a guy's self-esteem can take a hit and his confidence can slide. (The same thing can happen to girls, too.)

How Puberty Affects Body Image

Although body image is just one part of our self-image, during the teen years, and especially during puberty, it can be easy for a guy's whole self-image to be based on how his body looks. That's because our bodies are changing so much during this time that they can become the main focus of our attention.

A change in your body can be tough to deal with emotionally — mainly because, well, your body is yours and you have become used to it.

Some guys don't feel comfortable in their changing bodies and can feel as if they don't know who they are anymore. Being the only guy whose voice is changing or who's growing body hair (or the only guy who isn't) can also make some guys feel self-conscious for a while.

Some guys go into puberty not feeling too satisfied with their body or appearance to begin with. They may have wrestled with body image even before puberty started (for example, battles with weight or dissatisfaction with height). For them, puberty may add to their insecurities.

It Could Be in Your Genes

It can be tough to balance what you expect to happen to your body with what actually does happen. Lots of guys can have high expectations for puberty, thinking they'll develop quickly or in a certain way.

The best way to approach your own growth and development is to not assume you'll be a certain way. Look at everyone in your family — uncles, grandfathers, and even female relatives — to get an idea of the kinds of options your genes may have in store for you.

When Everyone Else Seems Bigger

Not everyone's body changes at the same time or even at the same pace. It can be tough if all of your friends have already matured physically and are taller and more muscular. Most guys eventually catch up in terms of growth, although some will always be taller or more muscular than others — it's in their genes.

It's natural to observe friends and classmates and notice the different ways they're growing and developing. Guys often compare themselves with other guys in certain

settings, and one of the most common is the locker room. Whether at a local gym or getting ready for a game at school, time in the locker room can be daunting for any guy.

Try to keep in mind in these situations that you aren't alone if you feel you don't "measure up." Many guys feel exactly the same way about their own bodies — even those whose physiques you envy. Just knowing that almost everyone else will go through the same thing can make all the difference.

You could try talking to a trusted male adult — maybe a coach, a doctor, a teacher, or your dad. Chances are they went through similar experiences and had some of the same feelings and apprehensions when their bodies were changing.

Picture Perfect?

Guys put enough pressure on themselves, but what about the pressure society puts on them to be perfect?

It used to be that only girls felt the pressure of picture-perfect images, but these days the media emphasis on men's looks creates a sense of pressure for guys, too. And sometimes (actually, many times) that "as-advertised" body is just not attainable. The men you see in those pictures may not even be real. Magazines and ad agencies often alter photographs of models, either by airbrushing the facial and muscular features, or by putting a good-looking face on someone else's buff body.

Building a Better Body Image

So in the face of all the pressure society places on guys — and guys place on themselves — what can you do to fuel a positive body image? Here are some ideas:

Recognize your strengths. Different physical attributes and body types are good for different things — and sometimes the things you did well as a kid can change during puberty. What does your body do well? Maybe your speed, flexibility, strength, or coordination leads you to excel at a certain sport. Or perhaps you have non-sports skills, like drawing, painting, singing, playing a musical instrument, writing, or acting. Just exploring talents that you feel good about can help your self-esteem and how you think of yourself.

A good body doesn't always translate into athletic success. Too often, the way guys see their body image is closely associated with their performance on a sports field or in

the gym. The upside to this is that if you're good at a team sport, you might have a pretty good view of your body. But what if you don't like team sports or you got cut from a team you really wanted to make? In these cases, it helps to look at individual accomplishments.

If you don't like team sports, that's OK. Find another form of physical activity that gets you going. Depending on your interests and where you live, that may be mountain biking, rock climbing, yoga, dancing, or jogging. This will help you stay in shape and help you to appreciate skills you may not have realized you had in a team environment.

If you like team sports but didn't make a particular team, don't let it get you down. Use this as an opportunity to discover what you're good at, not to lament what you aren't best at. Maybe try out for another team — so soccer wasn't for you, but maybe cross-country running will be. Or, continue to practice the sport you were cut from and try again next year. The people around you probably won't remember that you didn't make the team — not being picked is a much bigger deal to you than it was to them.


Look into starting a strength training program. Exercise can help you look good and feel good about yourself. Good physiques don't just happen — they take hard work, regular workouts, and a healthy diet. There's no need to work out obsessively. A healthy routine can be as simple as exercising 20 minutes to an hour 3 days a week. Another benefit to working out properly is that it can boost your mood — lifting weights can lift your spirits.

Don't trash your body, respect it! To help improve your view of your body, take care of it. Smoking and other things you know to be harmful will take a toll after a while. Treating yourself well over time results in a healthier, stronger body — and that contributes to a better body image. Practicing good grooming habits — regular showering; taking care of your teeth, hair, and skin; wearing clean clothes, etc. — also can help you build a positive body image.

Be yourself. Your body is just one part of who you are — along with your talent for comedy, a quick wit, or all the other things that make you unique. Your talents, skills, and beliefs are just as much a part of you as the casing they come in. So try not to let minor imperfections take over.


While it's important to have a positive body image, getting too focused on body image and appearance can cause a guy to overlook the other positive parts of himself. If you're like most guys

who take care of their bodies and wear clothes that look good, you probably look great to others. You just might not be aware of that if you're too busy being self-critical.



Big Bullies

Sometimes if people haven't caught up physically, bigger kids may tease them. Often, the guys who put others down do it because they aren't comfortable with their bodies. Putting someone else down makes them feel more powerful. A simple and effective way to deal with annoying guys like this is to be comfortable with who you are and get in touch with your strengths. Use humor and wit to combat a bully – he won't know what hit him.



When Body Worries Go Too Far

It's normal for a guy to have a few minor complaints about his looks, but a focus that's too intense can signal a problem. Body Dysmorphic Disorder is a mental health condition in which people are so preoccupied with what they believe are defects in the way they look that they spend hours of time and attention every day checking, fixing, or hiding appearance flaws. This body image disorder interferes with a person's ability to function or be happy, and requires a professional's help.

Boost Your Child's Body Image

By Leigh Felesky

<http://parenting.kaboose.com/behavior/bodyimage.html>

"I hate my hips." "My arms are too skinny." "If only I was thinner." These are the kind of comments that some parents may hear as their children reach the pre-teen years - or even earlier. Those kinds of comments are not surprising, considering that adults themselves frequently talk negatively about their bodies, saying how they "feel fat" or "need to lose weight." Plus, with most fashion models being thinner than 98% of American women, many critics agree the media bombards children with unrealistic body images.

According to National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), having a negative body image can lead to everything from not wanting to go swimming (for fear of wearing a bathing suit,) to eating disorders, depression, low self esteem and obsession with weight loss. And these issues affect a large number of children. In recent studies, forty-two percent of elementary school students between the first and third grades said they want to be thinner and eighty percent of 10-year-old children said they're afraid of being fat.

Parents can make a difference. Here are seven things you can do to help encourage a positive body image.

Identify your own biases. Understanding your own attitude about body shape and weight will help you to foster a positive environment. "Practice taking people in general and women in particular seriously for what they say, feel and do, not for how slender or 'well put together' they appear," advise researchers Michael Levine, Ph.D. and Linda Smolak, Ph.D. Former president of the National Eating Disorders Association, Doug Bunnell, Ph.D., agrees that being aware is important. One exercise he suggests: after you're done reading this article, for the next twelve hours pay attention to how often you're judging someone based on his or her appearance and weight. "If you're doing it regularly, you probably feel others are doing it to you, and it perpetuates the cycle," he notes.

Stay positive. In our weight-conscious society, first graders are already making distinctions between those who are overweight and those who aren't, says Bunnell. Kids are also exposed to stereotypes that overweight people aren't as smart or as good. Bunnell suggests treating negative weight and body shape comments the same as any other discriminatory remark, such as those based on race, religion or a disability.

Parents should also avoid making negative comments about their own bodies and those of other people. "For teenage girls especially," explains Bunnell, "comments about weight and shape can have an enormous impact. In particular, dad's comments can have a special power around girls who are going through puberty."

Use your body. Bodies aren't for decoration - bodies are for doing things! Talk to your kids about how our bodies get us where we want to go and help us to play, run, skate, go to school and explore life. So encourage your children to treat their bodies well, and to think about what they can achieve with them.

Put health first. Always use health, not weight-loss, as the reason to grab an apple rather than a bag of chips. Remind your children that healthy eating means feeling better. Levine recommends that you don't limit your child's caloric intake unless a physician requests that you do so because of a medical problem. Instead, focus on eating a wide variety of healthy foods, and eating only when you're hungry (rather than when you're tired or upset).

Analyze the media. Consider talking to your children about unrealistic media images. For example, talk about the ads you see. Ask such questions as, "How are the women and men portrayed in the commercials? Are they all thin? How are overweight people portrayed?" Teach you kids that in reality there are lots of different body shapes and the goal is to take care of yours with healthy eating and activity. For help, use resources from

organizations such as Child and Family Canada, which has an activity that explores how the media affects perceptions.

Look for role models. Seek out positive body image resources by young people and share them with your children. For girls and their dreams.org, for example, has links to Web sites by girls for girls including Bodypositive.com. An associated pre-teen magazine, "New Moon," also has occasional body image articles. For boys, there aren't as many resources but while the concerns can be different - for example, in some cases wanting to look muscular rather than thin - many of the body positive messages are the same.

Seek help if needed. If you sense that your child's self esteem is excessively connected to how she sees her body, this could be of concern, according to Bunnel. One sign that a child has a negative body image could be that she avoids doing certain activities because she is uncomfortable about her body. If you are concerned, consult your doctor. Eating disorder information can be found at NEDA (Information: (800) 931-2237).

Links to more articles on Body Image

Probing Question: Do boys or girls suffer more from poor body image
<http://www.physorg.com/news199706785.html>

Encouraging Positive Body Image
http://kidshealth.org/parent/positive/talk/body_image.html#

Body Image Questionnaire and How to Love Your Body
<http://www.healthyplace.com/eating-disorders/main/body-image-questionnaire-and-how-to-love-your-body-and-yourself/menu-id-58/>

Boys and Body Image Tips
<http://www.commonsemmedia.org/advice-for-parents/boys-and-body-image-tips>

Healthy body image: Tips for guiding girls
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/healthy-body-image/MY01225>