

Spotlighting Teen Issues

for
Parents

Weight and Body Image

Betty Greer, Professor – Nutrition, UT Extension

Why are so many teenagers obsessed with their looks? Both males and females in today's society are under pressure to measure up to a certain social and cultural ideal of beauty. Some of this pressure comes from the media; but unfortunately, a lot comes from family and friends, who mean to be helpful but whose comments can have a negative effect on how teens feel about themselves.

Body image is how you feel about how you look. It is the mental picture you have of your body — what it looks like, what you believe and feel about it. Self-esteem is the real opinion you have of yourself. Self-esteem is how you value and respect yourself as a person. It has a direct effect on how you take care of yourself emotionally, physically and spiritually. Self-esteem and body image exert influences on each other — it is hard for you to feel good about yourself if you hate your body! Body image comprises four different attitudes and behaviors:

- Satisfaction with your appearance, but choosing healthy eating and physical activity habits to feel good
- Choosing a wardrobe that you feel good wearing
- Practicing personal grooming habits to take care of your appearance
- Realistic attitude about your own body characteristics (For example, many people with eating disorders see themselves as fat when, in fact, they may be underweight.)

It's unfortunate that our culture is making young people, even small children, feel that they have to look a certain way to be loved and accepted. Below are some signs that your teen may have a negative body image.

- Has a distorted perception of body shape — parts of the body are seen as unlike what they really are. (My neck is too long — or too short. My mouth is too large — or too small.)
- Has the conviction that only other people are attractive and sees own body size or shape as a sign of personal failure.
- Has feelings of discomfort and awkwardness with own body.

Here are some ways parents can help their teen develop a healthy body image.

- Provide praise and positive comments focusing on your teen's strengths. Do not refer to body size as either a strength or weakness.
- Openly discuss any concerns teens express about their bodies.
- Never tease a teen about his or her body.
- Recognize that a teen may be healthy at a range of weights.
- Recognize that a child's body shape will change as he or she grows. A short, stocky child at age nine may grow to be tall and lanky.
 - Avoid talking about your own body faults.
 - Discuss how the media uses unrealistically thin models to sell their products.
 - Create an environment of acceptance for all teens regardless of physical appearance.

Parents can help teens and children relax about appearance and enjoy their own unique characteristics, talents and interests. For



good health, encourage your teen or child to focus on a lifestyle that includes healthy eating and physical activity.

- Eat at least five fruits and vegetables a day
- Enjoy whole grain foods
- Drink adequate fluids (unsweetened beverages)
- Eat reasonable portion sizes
- Select healthful snacks
- Listen to your own hunger and satiety signals and help teens to respond to their own internal cues of satiety to avoid overeating
- Be physically active at least five days a week
- Accumulate at least 30 minutes of exercise most days of the week
- Enjoy different types of physical activity
- Involve family and friends in a physically active lifestyle



For More Information

National Mental Health Association
<http://www.nmha.org/>

National Mental Health Information Center, SAMHSA, HHS
<http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/>

Weight Control Information Network, NIDDK, NIH, HHS
<http://win.niddk.nih.gov/index.htm>

National Eating Disorders Association
http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/p.asp?WebPage_ID=337

National Eating Disorders Information Center
<http://www.nedic.ca/>

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<http://www.nedic.ca/knowthefacts/documents/Appearanceandselfesteem.pdf>

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