

## Body Image in Children and Adolescents – tips for parents and carers

Body image attitudes are formed in childhood and, according to Australian GP and researcher Dr Ramesh Manocha, 'research shows that about 50 per cent of eight to 11-year-old girls and 40 per cent of eight to 11-year-old boys think a lot about being thinner' (*Growing Happy Healthy Young Minds*, Ed. Dr Ramesh Manocha, pp 266). Once established, body image concerns frequently continue into adulthood and they continue to have a negative impact on wellbeing.

In Australians aged 11-24 years, approximately 28 per cent of males and 35 per cent of females are dissatisfied with their appearance. The Mission Australia National Youth Survey has revealed that body image was listed in the top three concerns for young Australians from 2009-2015. In our role we sometimes talk with students who express concern for others about their eating habits and/or weight and occasionally these students are in the Junior School. The adults in a child's life have a vital role to play in the language they use related to appearance and desirability.

Some signs that a young person is experiencing body dissatisfaction are:

- preoccupation with weight, shape or size.
- body weight, shape or size being very important for self-worth.
- frequent weighing or checking body size.
- avoiding social activities that may bring attention to appearance.
- feeling a very strong need to control weight, shape or size.
- excessive amounts of time spent exercising, including weight training especially when ill or injured, or feeling guilty for not exercising (*Fostering a Positive Body Image* by Professor Susan Paxton and Dr Sian McLean).

Risk environments for children include families in which there is a high value placed on appearance levels and where children are exposed to appearance focused media and appearance-focused peer environments. Unfortunately, the representation of females and males in mass media regularly show people who are thinner and who are more muscular than average people in society and the media creates social norms for appearance by portraying people who meet appearance ideals in a positive manner and portraying people who do not meet appearance ideals in a negative manner. These messages are present in magazines, television shows, music videos, animated cartoons, video games and social media.

An important way of communicating appearance norms is through peer appearance conversations. In girls these conversations sometimes involve wanting to be thinner, feeling fat, wanting to lose weight, weight loss methods, the appearance of celebrities, clothes, fashion and comments on photos posted online.

Social media friendship environments have the potential to have a strong influence on body image. There is a high expectation and hope that if a photo, particularly a 'selfie' is posted, friends will 'like' the photos and post favourable comments. Receiving fewer than

expected 'likes', or fewer than peers' photo 'likes', is found to be associated with greater feelings of self-consciousness and doubts of self-worth. A lack of response to social media photo posts represents disapproval by others.

Some teens are not as subtle as not posting anything and instead post negative comments which, of course, greatly contribute to doubts about self-worth, and weight and body concerns depending on the nature of the post.

Take home messages:

If you think your child is experiencing body dissatisfaction, it is important to intervene. Ask open, inquisitive questions. Help your child to have a balanced perception of their worth by focusing on qualities other than appearance.

- Praise your child for achievements in areas unrelated to appearance.
- Seek professional help if your child is engaging in unhealthy behaviours to control weight, shape or size.
- Model a positive attitude to your own and others' bodies by speaking positively about your own body, be expressive in your acceptance of different body shapes and sizes in others.
- Never criticise or tease (or allow others to do so) your child's appearance even in what might seem like a joke.
- Do all you can to help your child focus on the functions of their body and what it can achieve, as opposed to what it looks like.

For further information please consult the following websites:

[https://au.reachout.com/identity-and-gender/body-image?qclid=Cj0KCKQjw6pLZBRCxARIsALaaY9Z0AgPFVvS6lgbNA8bzR7fSfi653IIJ5iljA\\_rUlDVPPrduU\\_zg0NsUaAgUgEALw\\_wcB](https://au.reachout.com/identity-and-gender/body-image?qclid=Cj0KCKQjw6pLZBRCxARIsALaaY9Z0AgPFVvS6lgbNA8bzR7fSfi653IIJ5iljA_rUlDVPPrduU_zg0NsUaAgUgEALw_wcB)

<https://www.getthefacts.health.wa.gov.au/our-bodies/body-image>

<https://www.youthbeyondblue.com/understand-what's-going-on/low-self-esteem-and-body-image>

<https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-body-image>

***Gai Bath and Andrea Maver***

*SMC Counsellors*

[gbath@smc.tas.edu.au](mailto:gbath@smc.tas.edu.au)

[amaver@smc.tas.edu.au](mailto:amaver@smc.tas.edu.au)