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Body Image and Your Kids:

Your Body Image Plays a Role in Theirs

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness



*"On a diet,
you can't eat."*

*This is what one
five year-old girl
had to say in a
study on girls' ideas
about dieting.*

This and other research has shown that daughters are more likely to have ideas about dieting when their mothers diet. Children pick up on comments about dieting concepts that may seem harmless, such as limiting high-fat foods or eating less. Yet, as girls enter their teen years, having ideas about dieting can lead to problems.

Many things can spark weight concerns for girls and impact their eating habits in potentially unhealthy ways:

- having mothers concerned about their own weight
- having mothers who are overly concerned about their daughters' weight and looks
- natural weight gain and other body changes during puberty
- peer pressure to look a certain way
- struggles with self-esteem
- media images showing the ideal female body as thin

Many teenage girls of average weight think they are overweight and are not satisfied with their bodies. Having extreme weight concerns—and acting on those concerns—can harm girls' social, physical and emotional growth. Actions such as skipping meals or taking diet pills can lead to poor nutrition and difficulty learning. For some, extreme efforts to lose weight can lead to eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia. For others, the pressure to be thin can actually lead to binge eating disorder: overeating that is followed by extreme guilt. What's more, girls are more likely to further risk their health by trying to lose weight in unhealthy ways, such as smoking.

While not as common, boys are also at risk of developing unhealthy eating habits and eating disorders. Body image becomes an important issue for teenage boys as they struggle with body changes and pay more attention to media images of the "ideal" muscular male.

What you can do

Your children pay attention to what you say and do—even if it doesn't seem like it sometimes. If you are always complaining about your weight or feel pressure to change your body shape, your children may learn that these are important concerns. If you are attracted to new "miracle" diets, they may learn that restrictive dieting is better than making healthy lifestyle choices. If you tell your daughter that she would be prettier if she lost weight, she will learn that the goals of weight loss are to be attractive and accepted by others.

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Parents are role models and should try to follow the healthy eating and physical activity patterns that you would like your children to follow—for your health and theirs. Extreme weight concerns and eating disorders, as well as obesity, are hard to treat. Yet, you can play an important role in preventing these problems for your children.

Follow these steps to help your child develop a positive body image and relate to food in a healthy way:

- ✓ Make sure your child understands that weight gain is a normal part of development, especially during puberty.
- ✓ Avoid negative statements about food, weight, and body size and shape.
- ✓ Allow your child to make decisions about food, while making sure that plenty of healthy and nutritious meals and snacks are available.
- ✓ Compliment your child on her or his efforts, talents, accomplishments, and personal values.
- ✓ Restrict television viewing, and watch television with your child and discuss the media images you see.
- ✓ Encourage your school to enact policies against size and sexual discrimination, harassment, teasing, and name-calling; support the elimination of public weigh-ins and fat measurements.
- ✓ Keep the communication lines with your child open.

Information Provided by:
The National Women's Health Information Center, 2004
www.4woman.gov