Body image

Body image considers ideas on size and shape, skin colour, physical features, clothing and adornments, and is shaped by factors and influences.

Why is positive body image important?

Having a positive body image helps children and young people feel good about themselves and supports their mental health and wellbeing for life.

People with a positive body image are comfortable with their appearance and are more likely to think about their body in terms of its functionality rather than its form. In other words, they focus mostly on the way their body helps them do the things they want to do – playing sport, climbing trees or walking the dog – rather than how their body looks.

Focus on assets, not flaws

Children and young people with positive body image might not be completely satisfied with their appearance, but they concentrate on assets rather than flaws. This way of thinking contributes to a positive sense of self-worth. It helps them understand and fulfil the body's needs, which means they might be more likely to appreciate the value of exercise and make healthy food choices that enable the body to perform well.

Negative thoughts lead to increased vulnerability

Unfortunately, it's common for both boys and girls to have negative thoughts or feelings about their appearance or be dissatisfied with the way their bodies look. When children and young people have issues with self-worth and body image, they're more vulnerable to developing unhealthy attitudes to eating and issues with dieting as well as low mood. Evidence suggests low self-worth and body dissatisfaction might play a role in mental health conditions like depression and eating disorders during adolescence and beyond.

Body image starts early in life

Body image has traditionally been seen as the domain of secondary schools, but there are many reasons why primary schools – and even early learning services – should also promote a positive body image.

Children are already forming ideas about body image

Research suggests girls as young as five who are exposed to music videos or women's magazines are more likely to be aware of diet practices and cultural pressures to be thin. Concerns about personal appearance seem to emerge around the age of six or seven.

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During primary school, friendships are very important

Peer relationships can have a strong influence on how children and young people feel about their body. The way their primary school classmates feel about their bodies can inform other girls' own body image.

Acting early might be the best approach

Research suggests that programs targeting younger children to build a healthy sense of self-worth and reduce body image concerns might be more effective because beliefs become more entrenched in adolescence.

Body image issues might have more serious consequences for younger children

If body dissatisfaction results in dieting or other eating issues, it might cause significant harm to a child's growth and development during a critical period.

The role of peer relationships

Body image is about how we see ourselves, but also how we think others perceive us.

Children and young people like to fit in. Standing out for being different, particularly based upon appearance, can be incredibly stressful and anxiety-provoking. Seeking acceptance from friends and peers is very important and linked to their feelings of acceptance and self-esteem.

As we know, peer groups can be a source of mixed messaging

They can normalise the wrong ideas and behaviours, such as how to look and feel, how to dress and what to eat, how to exercise and be popular, 'fat talk' and even 'diet talk'. Peer pressure is generally a normal part of growing up, as peers are a significant sounding board for one another. But, until critical decision-making skills are developed, some children and young people may not be able to make confident choices in the face of peer pressure, when they feel their values are being compromised.

The media's role in body image

Children and adolescents are also exposed to a range of messages in the media. Sometimes unhealthy messages can seem like a desirable behaviour, especially when friends and peers are all discussing the same concepts and coping strategies seen on the latest episode of their favourite television show. The good news is that educators can have a positive influence on peer relationships. Children and young people learn from those around them, so having strong role models, reliable educators and supportive influences in their lives ensures they have positive experiences.

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Check out content on the benefits of children and young people maintaining positive and respectful relationships with peers in the Connect module.

What can schools do to promote positive body image?

Schools are great places to model healthy self-acceptance and appreciation of diversity.

They also offer opportunities to teach simple, but effective, health messages such as enjoying exercise because it's fun and eating a variety of foods in moderation.

Your school can promote a positive body image to students

- Some strategies involve a policy response, while others need action at the individual level. They can be integrated into the work you're already doing to enhance students' mental and physical health.
- Establish effective policy and practices which aim to prevent appearance-related teasing and bullying, and support those who are teased or bullied as a result of their appearance, body size or shape, or ethnicity.
- Promote a healthy school culture by modelling and promoting positive body image, an enjoyment of sport and activity, and an acceptance of everyone's strengths and skills.
- Help students develop a strong sense of self as well as the skills to buffer unhelpful messages about body image.
- Teach social and emotional skills in the classroom, including acceptance and self-awareness, especially of the physical self.
- Display posters and other materials that reflect the diversity of students in terms of body shape,

size and ethnicity. This ensures your school is welcoming to students and families, regardless of appearance.

- Provide education about fitness and nutrition that has a positive focus on energy, fun, social connection and health, rather than a negative focus on weight and dietary control.
- Ensure food served in schools is nutritious and balanced.
- Provide information for families about how they can support their children and young people develop a positive body image and a strong sense of self.
- Run family information sessions to provide effective strategies to use with their children and young people, and to highlight the many myths, traps and stereotypes.
- Cultivate a welcoming environment for families, so that they feel comfortable and confident discussing the issue, reiterating the messages at home and asking for assistance if needed.
- Ensure educators are familiar with services available in the community and where to go for the best and latest advice.
- Create student awareness campaigns to encourage conversation at home. Incorporate the messages of acceptance and diversity in homework activities and projects completed at home.

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about observing behavioural and mood changes; inquiring sensitively about your concerns; and providing support for children, young people and their families, by helping them access information and internal and external supports, in the Early Support domain.

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