Virginia Cooperative Extension

Healthy Weights for Healthy Kids:
What Should I Do if My Child Has a Poor Body Image?

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Thin is the "in" image. Flip through any fashion magazine or turn on the television and you will see overly slender models and actresses and male models and actors with unrealistic muscle definition. Most of those fashion models are thinner than 98 percent of American women. Some of the images have even been digitally altered to make the model's bodies look a certain way.

These images do not represent the majority or diversity of Americans. However, model's sizes influence the way Americans, particularly young people, perceive their own bodies.

It is important to promote a positive body image among youth since it can influence their concept of self worth, as well as confidence.

Sizes and weights of people in the media are not realistic for most people.

What is body image?

Body image is how a person views him- or herself in the mirror and in his or her mind. It can change over time. A body image—positive or negative—can affect a person's sense of worth or self-esteem. A person with a positive body image feels comfortable and confident in his or her body. He or she also recognizes that a person's physical appearance says little about character.
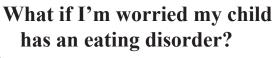
Why is body image important?

There are several possible consequences to having a negative body image. A poor body image can lead to low self-esteem; feelings of isolation, unhappiness, and depression; and unhealthy attitudes and/or behaviors toward eating and physical activity. For overweight children these issues can be magnified, given our society's concept of a "perfect" body. Being teased or made fun of is one of the more painful consequences of being an overweight child.

Our children face more challenges and responsibilities than did past generations. Recent research shows that depression and anxiety are increasing among our youth. As a result, it is important to take steps to promote mental health. One way of doing this is to nurture a healthy body image.

What if I'm worried my child has an eating disorder?

Eating disorders, by definition, are patterns of disordered eating. Someone suffering from an eating disorder will either eat in an unu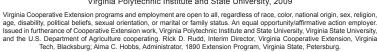sual manner, or not eat at all. Many researchers believe that the foundation for an eating disorder is negative body image. Warning signs include:

- weight loss
- skipping meals

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- eating in secret
- stomach upset or bloating following meals
- frequent visits to the bathroom after meals
- constipation or diarrhea
- depression and anxiety
- weakness or dizziness
- an intolerance to cold (wearing layers of clothing or complaining of feeling cold)

Other indicators may be loss of interest in family and friends, compulsive exercise habits, using diet or laxative pills, and, for girls, a loss of menstruation. If you are concerned that your child may have an eating disorder, consult a doctor immediately. Eating disorders are extremely dangerous and, in some cases, can be life-threatening.

If you think your child may have an eating disorder, see a physician, a psychologist, or a counselor.

What can I do to help my child?

If your child is concerned about his or her body, respond honestly but gently. Explain that there is no standard for being normal or average, but that every person is unique. Remind your child that he or she is constantly growing and changing. During childhood, children can be heavier or lighter, shorter or taller than their friends and still be healthy. Most people have something about themselves that they like or dislike. It is important to accept yourself as you are and remember that there is more to you than just your physical body.

How can I create a positive body image?

You can help your child by focusing on positive personal characteristics independent of weight. Just as we should encourage acceptance of diversity in color, we should accept diversity in size and focus on a person's individuality. There is not one body that is "better" or "worse" than another—just different. Individual differences in body type, size, and shape are normal. "Fatism," the discrimination or maltreatment of individuals based on weight, should be discouraged.

Ways you can help:

- Beauty can be defined in many ways—not just body shape. Help your child appreciate that what he or she may feel uncomfortable about (height, shape, coloring, etc.), others may find wonderful.

- Discourage teasing, even if it's *in fun*. Teach your child some positive responses to teasing.

- Teach your child that inner strengths are more important than physical appearance. Focus on and praise good character, intelligence, and abilities rather than looks.

- Learn together about the importance of fitness and good nutrition. Reinforce that any person can be healthy, regardless of size.

- Lead by example. Do you say negative comments about your body when you look in the mirror? Do you put yourself down? Remember that your child absorbs these attitudes. If you want your child to accept him- or herself, you will need to learn to accept yourself, too.

- Make sure that you set a good example of healthy eating and positive body image for your children. Nurture a healthy environment that rewards positive attitudes toward one's body and self.

Where can I get more information?

Virginia Cooperative Extension offers educational and cooking classes on preventing childhood overweight for parents, childcare providers, and children. Visit the Virginia Cooperative Extension website at *www.ext.vt.edu* to locate your nearest Extension agent for more information on food, nutrition, and health programs and resources.

For more resources and information to promote positive body image and health:

Healthy Weights for Healthy Kids: What Is a Healthy Weight?, VCE Publication 348-270, *http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/348-270/*

Body Positive is an organization aimed at empowering people of all ages, especially youth, to celebrate their natural size and shape instead of what society promotes as the ideal body: *http://www.thebodypositive.org*

Girl Power! is a national public education campaign sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to reinforce and sustain positive values among girls ages 9 to 13 about health: *http://www.girlpower.gov*

National Eating Disorders Association, a national nonprofit organization dedicated solely to the elimination of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction: *http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org*