

## Women's wellness: Tips for guiding girls to a healthy body image

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Girls often face significant pressure to look attractive. The quest for a perfect body or appearance can take a heavy toll, though. Find out what

you can do to help young girls develop and maintain a healthy body image and self-esteem.

## CAUSES OF A NEGATIVE BODY IMAGE

Maintaining a healthy body image during adolescence, a period of major physical and emotional changes, can be difficult. Factors that might harm a girl's body image include:

- Natural [weight](#) gain and other changes caused by puberty
- Peer pressure to look a certain way
- Media images that promote the ideal female body as thin
- Having a mother who's overly concerned about her own weight or her daughter's weight or appearance

Research suggests that seeing material that sexually objectifies [girls](#)—where a girl is seen as a thing for others' sexual use rather than an independent, thinking person—can also have a harmful effect.

## CONSEQUENCES OF A NEGATIVE BODY IMAGE

Body image can affect how a girl feels about herself. If your daughter doesn't live up to her ideal body image, she might begin to feel inadequate and ashamed of her body. This can increase the risk of low self-esteem, depression and eating disorders.

A negative body image can harm girls' nutrition, causing them to skip meals or take diet pills. Some girls might try to control their weight by smoking or change their appearance by buying beauty products or getting cosmetic surgery. Having a negative body image might affect a girl's comfort with her sexuality or reproductive body functions, such as menstruation or breast-feeding, as she gets older.

Spending time worrying about their bodies and how they measure up can also take away from girls' ability to concentrate on other pursuits.

## TALKING ABOUT BODY IMAGE

Talking about body image with your daughter can help her become comfortable in her own skin. When you discuss body image, you might:

- Explain the effects of puberty.

Make sure your daughter understands that weight gain is a normal part of her development, especially during puberty.

- Talk about media messages.

Television programs, movies, music videos, websites, magazines and even some toys might send the message that only a certain body type is acceptable and that maintaining an attractive appearance is the most important goal. Check out what your daughter is reading or watching and discuss it. Encourage her to question what she sees and hears.

- Monitor internet use.

Teens use social networking sites and services to share pictures and receive feedback. Awareness of others' judgments can make teens feel self-conscious about their looks. Set rules for your teen's Internet use and talk about what she's posting and viewing.

- Discuss self-image.

Offer reassurance that healthy body shapes vary. Ask her what she likes about herself and explain what you like about her, too. Your acceptance and respect can help her build self-esteem and resilience.

- Use positive language.

Rather than talking about "fat" and "thin," encourage your daughter to focus on eating a healthy diet and staying physically active. Discourage family and friends from using hurtful nicknames and joking about people who are overweight.

## OTHER STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE A HEALTHY BODY IMAGE

In addition to talking to your daughter about a healthy body image, you might:

- Team up with your family doctor.

Your [family doctor](#) can help your daughter set realistic goals for BMI and weight based on her personal weight history and overall health.

- Help establish healthy eating habits.

Offer healthy meals and snacks.

- Counter negative media messages.

Expose your daughter to women who are famous for their achievements—not their appearance. For example, read books or watch movies about inspiring women.

- Praise achievements.

Help your daughter value what she does, rather than what she looks like. Look for opportunities to praise her efforts, skills and achievements.

- Promote physical activity.

Participating in sports and other physical activities—particularly those that don't emphasize a particular weight or body shape—can help promote good self-esteem and a positive body image.

- Encourage positive friendships.

Friends who accept and support your teen can be a healthy influence.

- Set a good example.

Remind your daughter that you exercise and eat a healthy diet for your health, not just to look a certain way. Also think about what you read and watch as well as the products you buy and the message your choices send.

## WHEN TO CONSULT A HEALTHCARE PROVIDER

If your daughter is struggling with a negative body image, consider professional counseling. Additional support might give your daughter the tools she needs to counter social pressure and feel good about her [body](#).

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