

Looking good!

How to help kids build a healthy body image. *by Karen Giles-Smith*

With our culture's obsession with thinness and the barrage of ultra-buff bodies in the media, parents may wonder if it's even possible for their children to have a healthy body image. The good news is: It is possible—and parents can help.

The media may be a weapon of self-image destruction, but not everyone is negatively affected by the unrealistic, unattainable images of body size and shape the media portrays.

Not everyone compares their body to others and decides they don't measure up. What is it, then, that makes some people immune to the media's potentially negative influence? "Body image is closely aligned with self-esteem," says Esther Rose Park,

a registered dietitian and medical nutrition therapist in private practice who specializes in eating disorders and weight related issues. "If you don't feel good about yourself, you won't feel good about your body. A well-rounded, solid self-esteem is the best antidote to disordered eating and poor body image."

How can parents help children build the bedrock that is self-esteem? Mostly by example, says Park. Children intuitively know how parents feel about them and others. A parent's poor self-esteem can affect how children view themselves. Park recommends that parents discover their inner strengths and help their children do the same. Inner strengths are the personal

qualities and characteristics that generate pride, such as a sense of humor, curiosity and kindness. "Find strengths that are important to you and build on those strengths from the inside out," says Park. "You'll project confidence, you'll have more positive experiences, and that will build self-esteem."

The first thing parents can do is consider their own attitudes and thoughts about their own body. For example, are you striving for the unattainable or do you accept yourself as you are? Park notes that acceptance doesn't



mean you'll become complacent or can't change. In fact, if you're tearing yourself down, change can't occur. Look around you. Real people's bodies aren't perfect: Human beings come in all shapes and sizes. In her classes, Park asks participants to go outside and find the perfect stick. Inevitably, participants ask, "How? I don't know what kind of stick you're looking for."

That's the point, says Park, there is no such thing as a perfect stick.

Park recommends these additional steps to build a healthy body image:

- Make it a priority to feed yourself and your family on a dependable schedule. Well-fed people don't get preoccupied with food.

Honor your appetite within the structure of regular meal and snack times. Eat the foods you like. Pay attention while eating, slow down and enjoy.

- Avoid dichotomizing food into good vs. bad or not fattening vs. fattening—this can lead to restrictive eating and bingeing.
- Share with children the dangers of attempting to alter body shape by dieting. Diets don't lead to long-term weight loss, in fact, diets can make you fat. Diets also may lead to disordered eating.
- Instill the value of moderate activity for the pleasure of moving your body (*not for the calorie-burning effect*).

It's important to realize, and teach children, that improving physical appearance won't make you feel better about yourself. Dig deep to discover inner strengths, then cherish and develop those strengths. Think and talk about yourself—including your body—in positive, appreciative ways. Instead of comparing, consider your body's attributes and what it can accomplish. For instance, strong legs are great for hiking and therefore enable you to see the natural world. Treat your body right by eating well and being physically active in enjoyable, comfortable ways. Respect yourself and your body in thought, word and deed. Your children will follow suit.

Editor's note: For more information about the services provided by Esther Rose Park Associates, send an e-mail to parke@msu.edu.

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Body Talk: Tips for Parents
(from WomensHealth.gov)

- 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.

Body Image Resources

Body Image and Your Kids at WomensHealth.gov:
www.womenshealth.gov/bodyImage/

Tips for Kids on Eating Well and Feeling Good about Yourself at NationalEatingDisorders.org:
www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/p.asp?WebPage_ID=286&Profile_ID=69224

BodyPositive.com