

# Speaking To Your Teenager About Body Image:

## CHECKLIST

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Research has shown that the number one reason people gave for why they thought they were bullied was attitudes towards their appearance.

## **Here are my tips on speaking to your teen about Body Image**

What do you feel when you look in the mirror? Delight? Gratitude? Acceptance? Contentment? Or disappointment and shame?

Poor body image is an issue that many of us as adults struggle with. It doesn't matter how many articles we read that tell us it's what's on the inside that counts; standing in front of a harshly-lit changing room mirror can make us feel depressed and disgruntled.

Feeling badly about the way you look can have a devastating blow to your overall self-confidence, affecting multiple aspects of your life. It's important to re-frame the way you view, think and talk about your body so you can model positive, healthy, realistic ways of speaking and acting for your kids. You as parents, have an important role to play in 'talking and teaching' children to love their bodies from an early age.

During adolescence, young people often think a great deal more about how their bodies look. They also compare their bodies with others. A positive teenage body image is an important part of healthy self-esteem, so it's important to help your child think and feel positively about his or her body.

## **Your child's body image**

Your child's body image is influenced by many factors including your family environment, the attitudes of their friends and peers, the media and advertising, the fashion industry and also their cultural background. In recent years, social media has played a huge role in a teenager's attitude to their body image, particularly when teenagers post 'selfies' and view photos of themselves and others on social media. They often obsess and spend ages filtering the image before posting. The pressure has grown enormously on teenagers to look 'perfect' and bullying and unkind remarks can devastate a fragile teen's self-confidence.

## **Negative teenage body image: some risk factors**

Teens, particularly girls, are more likely than others to feel unhappy about their bodies. In advertising, TV programmes, video games, magazines, song lyrics and music videos, the emphasis is relentlessly on showing off a good-looking and sexy outer shell. In fact, there is so much more in every girl to be nurtured and cherished. Girls might be more at risk of developing an unhealthy body image if they:

- Consistently look at themselves from the 'outside' and worry about how others see them.
- Compare themselves to others.
- Feel pressure from family, peers or media to fit into a narrow idea of beauty and attractiveness.
- If family members, siblings, peers or friends tease them about the way they look.
- Have a different body shape or weight from many of their peers.
- Have a body shape that's obviously different from the 'ideal' shapes seen in the media.
- Are perfectionists.
- Suffer with low self-esteem or experience symptoms of depression.
- Belong to a friendship, sport or dance group that emphasises a certain body type over another.
- Have physical disabilities.

## **Signs To Look Out For If You Are Concerned.**

It's perfectly normal for your teen to become more body conscious as they enter into adolescence as so much is changing, but when young people focus too much on their bodies, it can lead to over anxiousness, stress and low self-esteem. The pressure to conform to an ideal image that only exists in films or on the catwalk is overwhelming.

As parents, start conversations about how photos and images are Photoshopped, airbrushed & altered in magazines, on billboards and on posters, discuss what healthy eating and healthy bodies look like and chat about the pressure & effect people like Kim Kardashian and X Factor Judges have on society, particularly girls, to look a certain way, 'Talk & Teach' and pass on your values and beliefs around a healthy way to look.

I am a real advocate of families sitting down and eating together as it creates a bond, a connection and makes life enjoyable. Kids can chat about their day, their worries or just spend time with you, and you can share your life with them in an easy and natural way. It's also a place to iron out differences, talk about worries and be involved in your child's life.

There are studies by Barbara Fieseby from the American Academy of Paediatrics that show that teenagers who eat with their parents are up to 35% less likely to have eating disorders. Here are some signs to be looking out for:

- Your child might feel inadequate about their body and it's imperfections.
- They may have started criticising their body unduly.
- They may start saying they feel ugly constantly.
- Continually comparing their body with others.
- Not wanting to leave the house because of the way they look.
- Not trying new things because of the way they feel about their body.
- Obsessing about losing weight or about specific parts of their body, like their face, legs, arms, bust or bum that they don't like.
- Frequently checking their body for changes and imperfections and spending huge amounts of time looking at themselves in the mirror or taking photos.
- They begin linking food with feelings of guilt, shame or blame.

## **Body image for young people with special needs**

Developing a healthy body image can be harder for young people with special needs, especially if their bodies are physically disabled or cause them pain and difficulty. Your child might also feel left out of discussions around body image because people with their particular body shape aren't often seen or talked about in the media or possibly in school.

Not everyone has a 'standard' strong and healthy body, so talk about healthy body images with your child and emphasise that it includes all types of bodies, even ones that don't fit the popular ideal. Some people with physical disabilities or differences may feel they are not seen for their true selves because of what they can or can't do.

Other people may have such serious body image issues that they need a bit more help. Working with a counsellor or professional therapist can help young people gain perspective and learn to focus on their individual strengths as well as develop healthier thinking if they are struggling.

