

# A Woman's Guide to Building a Girl's Healthy Body Image and Self-Esteem



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## Introduction

Body image and self-esteem is a complicated issue that affects each person differently. This guide is designed to provide parents, teachers and friends with information that will help them talk to girls about body image. Not all the answers are here, but the guide also suggests services or other resources that may help.

The information provided in this guide is general in nature and for the most part it refers to caucasian, North American perspective; however the information may be relevant and applied to various cultural groups.

The guide is written from the perspective of a mother speaking with her daughter; however the information applies to other adult/child relationships.



# Body Image and Self-Esteem

## What is body image?

Everybody has a physical look or appearance. Everybody also has a picture in her mind of how she thinks she looks or appears – her body image. The picture in your mind may not have much resemblance to your actual physical appearance, but it can determine how you feel about and behave toward your body and yourself. Some studies have shown that 90 percent of women in western societies imagine that their bodies are larger than they really are! Far too many women dislike – and some even abuse – their bodies as a result.

## What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem is the value we place on ourselves. If we believe that we have worth and value, then we have healthy self-esteem. Our body image can affect our self-esteem. Most of us are not completely satisfied with the way we think we look, but still believe we are worthy and valuable people. However, some people are so unhappy about the picture of themselves that they hold in their minds that they don't feel worthy or valuable at all. When our self-esteem is low, we are more likely to become withdrawn and anxious and depressed. When our self-esteem is low because of poor body image, we are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviours such as dieting and avoiding physical activity, and we may even develop eating disorders.

*“Generally, I have more confidence in my intelligence and my moral character and my sense of humour than in my appearance, but I don't necessarily think that's a bad thing. My parents praised us for our good report cards and for our volunteer work, rather than the way we looked, and I think that's helped me to retain a healthy self-esteem.”*

*- Melanie, age 24*

## How can I tell if my daughter is developing a poor body image?

Our society conditions children from the time that they are very young to have unrealistic ideas about how their bodies should look, and body image problems can start at an early age. Some studies have found that girls display a preference for thinner bodies over heavier ones by the time they're five years old! So it's never too soon to start taking care of your daughter's body image. Have you noticed major changes in her eating habits? Is she suddenly avoiding certain foods? Is she feeling guilty about eating? Does she talk a lot about her weight and about feeling fat? Is she over-exercising? Is she displaying mood swings? These may be warning signs that your daughter may be developing a poor body image.

## Why is it only girls who have these body image issues?

Actually, boys do struggle with some of the same issues. They also receive messages from the media and from advertisers – even from their action figure toys! – that they're supposed to be tall and lean with six-pack abdominal muscles and tans, and they also have to deal with feelings of inadequacy when they can't meet that ideal. But boys aren't judged by our society on their physical appearance to the extent that girls are, so they don't base their own self-image and their own self-esteem on their physical appearance to the extent that girls do. However, studies show that this may be changing, and that males are becoming increasingly concerned with their looks, and are engaging in risky and extreme behaviours to try to change them.

**My teenage daughter is smart and good at sports and popular with other girls, but boys don't seem to be interested in her. I suspect it's because she's a little overweight. It doesn't seem to bother her too much yet, but it bothers me! Should I say anything about it?**

Remember that your daughter isn't the only one who's under pressure to buy into the fantasies that the media and advertisers sell. Her peers and her family – including you! – may also have developed unrealistic ideas of how girls and women are supposed to look and act. If your daughter is healthy and active and not worried about her appearance, you should be pleased and proud. It sounds as if her body image and self-esteem are just fine, and you shouldn't say or do anything that might threaten that. If you focus on her weight, you could give her the impression that she should, too, and your well intentioned criticism of her appearance could harm her self-esteem and self-confidence.

### **How can I help my daughter to develop a good body image?**

You are one of the most important people in your daughter's life, so the messages she receives from you about her appearance and her worth and value are critical! Help her to understand that normal bodies come in many different shapes and sizes and there is no such thing as an 'ideal' body. Teach her to think critically about and reject the messages we all receive from the media and sometimes from others in our society, that tell us otherwise. Encourage her to value herself for who she is and what she does – not for how she looks! Talk to her about the risks of dieting and the benefits of healthy, active living. Talk to the men in your daughter's life about how they can help, too. But before you do any of those things, examine your own actions and feelings about weight, shape and beauty. If you're like the vast majority of women, you have body image issues too, and you may be passing them on to your daughter without realizing it. You are your daughter's role model, and your actions mean just as much to her as your words.

**For more on what you can do to improve your daughter's body image see [Appendix A. Modelling Positive Body Image Checklist](#)**

*Body image and where we get our ideas about what is attractive and what is not comes from TV, media, magazines, friends, yourself, men, and family – definitely family.*

*- Lisa, age 15*



## Normal Bodies, Normal Development

**My daughter is not as developed as some of her friends, and she's getting teased about it at school. I tell her she's just a late bloomer and she shouldn't worry about it, but she still does.**

Healthy North American girls begin puberty at anywhere from age 8 to 14, and whether they develop earlier or later depends on the interaction of a number of biological – including hormonal and hereditary – and environmental factors, and it's all perfectly normal.

But normal bodies don't just develop on different schedules. They also develop in different ways. Fashion models may be 5 feet 10 inches or taller, but that doesn't mean that many girls will grow to that height! While the average North American woman stands about 5 feet 4 inches, the normal range is from about one foot shorter to one foot taller than that. The same thing goes for weight. The average weight for a North American woman is 153 pounds, but depending on her height and her bone structure, she could weigh less than 100 pounds or more than 200 pounds and still be normal and healthy.

Normal body shapes vary widely, too. Your daughter is very unlikely to develop the hourglass shape of a Barbie doll or a video game character. Women's normal body shapes are sometimes described in terms of fruit. A banana shaped body is straight up and down, with a waist that's not much smaller than the chest and hips. A pear shaped body has hips that are larger than the chest and the waist. An apple shaped body has a chest that's larger than the hips and the waist. Most North American women have banana shaped or pear shaped bodies.

Make sure your daughter knows that she'll develop when she's supposed to develop. Make sure she understands that she'll develop the way she's supposed to develop, and that she and her friends won't all look the same, because they're all supposed to be different.

**My daughter appears to be developing breasts, but she is only eight years old. Isn't that too early?**

Your daughter may be showing breast buds earlier than her friends. She may also develop curves before her friends. Each girl goes through puberty at her own pace, and developments may be more visible on girls with heavier weights. You may be interested to learn that two-thirds of boys also develop breast buds during puberty. Because breast growth in boys can be symptomatic of other conditions, a physician should be seen to rule out any medical concerns. However in the vast majority of cases, boys' breast buds will disappear in six to 12 months.

**My daughter is 12 years old. I'm concerned about the amount of weight she has put on during the last year. Could she be eating too much?**

Weight gain is one of the most pronounced ways that girls' bodies change during puberty. Girls gain weight as a result of height increase (puberty signals the last time one's body will grow in height), breast development, and an overall increase in body fat. Girls' bodies naturally become curvier, so weight gain should be expected. Girls may even be hungrier than before puberty because of these changes. As with any other time in her life, good nutrition and eating a variety of healthy foods is important. It would be unhealthy for your daughter to diet to try to stop this normal weight gain.

**I've noticed that my teen daughter has become increasingly self-conscious about the size of her thighs. She has mentioned several times that they are too big and that she 'has to do something about that'. She is a perfectly healthy weight and I am worried about her unrealistic expectations.**

Your daughter is not alone. When asked what they'd most like to change about their bodies, more women say their thighs than any other part. Clearly, there are an awful lot of us with unrealistic expectations in that area! Let your daughter know that, and let her know also that the size of her thighs – like her body shape in general – depends on a number of factors, most of which she can't do anything about. Body fat and muscle mass can be modified slightly, but bone structure and, most importantly, genetics can't. Rather than trying to change her thighs, your daughter should try to change the way she feels about them. You can help her to do that by encouraging her to think and talk only positively about her body. For example, instead of referring to her thighs as 'big' or 'fat', encourage her to refer to them as 'strong' or 'powerful'. Teach her to love the good things her thighs do for her.

*"I have a friend who has always been bigger than I have. She's always complaining about it and saying things like "I wish I had your body." I never really know what to say to her. Once I said, "If I could give you my body, I would, but I can't." Then she responded by saying "could you keep your hips?" I found this very rude and have always been self-conscious about the size of my hips since then. Deep down I know that my friend didn't mean to hurt me but she did. The point of this story is that friends sometimes make mistakes. A lot of the time people may not mean to hurt you but you may take the comment as criticism."*

*- Brittany, age 13*

**My daughter thinks that one of her breasts may be larger than the other. Should I be concerned?**

It is entirely normal for breasts to develop at different rates. Your daughter's breasts will continue to change in size and similarity throughout puberty. Because the human body is not symmetrical, she may always have one breast that is larger than the other, just as her ears may not be completely level with each other and her feet may differ slightly in size.

**My daughter has some stretch marks on her thighs and won't wear a bathing suit because she's embarrassed by them. Is this normal?**

Stretch marks occur when the tissue under the skin is pulled by a sudden growth spurt. This often happens during puberty, when girls are developing very quickly. Breasts, buttocks and thighs are common places for stretch marks and the good news for your daughter is that her marks will likely fade over time.



## Fantasy Bodies, Hurried Development

### **I tell my daughter that she's beautiful just the way she is, but what can I do about the fact that her role models are all impossibly gorgeous celebrities?**

Does your daughter watch television, read fashion and beauty magazines, or go to movies? Does she play video games or watch music videos? If she does, she's exposed not only to the images of the actresses and models and dancers and fantasy characters in the shows and stories and games, but also to the advertisements that go along with those forms of entertainment. All those sources are telling her, sometimes very intentionally, that she's not beautiful enough. Chances are that she's hearing that message from those sources almost constantly. The average person sees between 400 and 600 advertisements per day and the average girl has seen an estimated 77,546 commercials by the time she is 12 years old! So there's no way you can compete with their volume. What you need to do instead is teach her to evaluate what she's hearing and to understand the difference between what's real and what's make-believe and what's downright manipulation.

*"I think there is a ridiculous amount of pressure on people to be gorgeous, skinny and flawless. Shows like "How to Look Good Naked" seem to present a more accepting approach to the subject but can be overshadowed by the bombardment of other television shows depicting the ultra skinny and borderline unhealthy. In this day and age, media plays a huge role in youth development and their perceptions of the world; the unfortunate part is that they are being sent the wrong messages 90% of the time. The media encourages people to be thin and perfect, while it should be encouraging a healthy and fit lifestyle. Granted it's not all bad. However, the inclination to look past the negative images is often deferred and can be difficult to maintain."*

*- Olivia, age 24*

### **I tell my daughters that no one is perfect, but everywhere they look they see perfect-looking women.**

They probably aren't seeing many perfect-looking women at school or at the mall. They're probably seeing them on screen or paper. The faces and bodies your daughters are envying are unusual to begin with (models are not only much taller than the average woman, but they also weigh 13% to 19% less!), and then they're so completely altered – by make-up and other artificial enhancements including surgery, clever lighting and photography, and even by computer techniques – that the models often don't even recognize themselves afterwards! Even 'perfect-looking' actresses aren't perfect enough for the fantasy world of films, and body doubles are commonly used. One lovely young actress confessed in an interview that for a nude scene her director ordered a body double, because he didn't think her real buttocks were round enough!

### **My daughter buys a lot of teen magazines, but seems to get depressed when she reads them. Should I ban the magazines?**

Many studies have shown that the more young women read fashion magazines, the worse they feel about themselves. That's really not surprising when you consider that these magazines are mostly just advertisements for beauty products. You could ban the magazines, but that might just make them more appealing to your daughter. A better approach would be to read the magazines with your daughter, point out the ads and explain to her how advertising works. Sellers of beauty products need to make us feel inadequate so that we'll buy what they're selling in order to try to feel better about ourselves. But if we fall for their sales pitches and buy their products, we still won't look like the models in the advertisements (because they're not real), and then we'll feel even worse. When your daughter realizes how she's being manipulated, she'll be better equipped to reject the advertising and enjoy the magazines for the make-believe they are.



**My daughter and I have always had a close relationship, but now that she's getting older and spending more time with her friends, I fear that she might succumb to peer pressure to engage in unhealthy behaviours like dieting or taking diet pills.**

Staying connected through adolescence is critical, but it can be a challenge! Start with making time for you and her in a new way. Try mother and daughter coffee dates, after dinner dog walks, or your own homemade spa days. Try to build in privacy and enough time for her to discuss whatever is on her mind.

It is a normal and healthy part of adolescent development to want to take risks and experiment, and it's your role as a mother to help your daughter find safe opportunities to do so. Belly dancing, wall climbing, or singing in public might be outside of her comfort zone but present healthy challenges if she is willing to take them on.

Signing up with a friend to volunteer or join a community theatre program will keep her busy with new adventures, allow her to bond with her friend in their risk taking and show them both that safe risks can be fun too.

There are four key life skills every girl should have – decision making skills, conflict resolution skills, communication skills and coping skills. They won't protect her from every challenge but they will boost her self-esteem and give her a fighting chance to negotiate her way safely through the maze of adolescence. Local girls groups, mother and daughter workshops and self-help groups are a great starting point in helping her to build these skills.

**I am uncomfortable with how my daughter is dressing. I feel that she sometimes wears clothing that is too revealing. How can I talk to her?**

It's not bad enough that girls are supposed to meet unachievable standards of beauty, they're under constant pressure to look sexy,

too, and this can be inappropriate, especially for young girls. Be sensitive. Avoid shaming your daughter, which may leave her with a diminished and cheapened sense of her own sexuality. Instead, try admiring your daughter's inner strengths and affirm that she is a wonderful person. With sensitivity, demonstrating your care, give her valid reasons for your concern and maybe suggest an alternative outfit.

**Shopping for clothes used to be a fun mother and daughter activity. Now it's a nightmare. She is 12 and wants to wear stilettos and other clothes that are meant for older teens. The music and the culture of her favourite stores make me uncomfortable and it seems that all we do is argue.**

Decide on the ground rules before you go shopping. It might be helpful to look at clothes together on-line or in magazines to get an idea of what each of you has in mind before you venture out to the mall. When she points out the low cut dress or super high heels, this is a good time to discuss what aspect of the item appeals to her. Tell her you're worried about the message her clothing sends and that she will attract attention she is not ready to handle. However, she is likely attracted to the colours, patterns, the coolness factor and the hope of fitting in. To help keep her self-esteem intact, you could suggest age appropriate ways to wear the current fashions, like layering that baby doll dress over jeans, or the spaghetti shirt over a fitted T-shirt. Instead of stiletto heels, she may be just as excited to purchase the flats if they are red and patent leather.

**When I take my daughters shopping, I'm always confused about the sizes I see in the stores. How can anybody be a size zero? I'd say my teenage daughters are average height and weight for their ages. So what size of clothing should they be wearing?**

Anyone who has ever tried on women's clothes in North America will know that there really isn't a standard system of sizing. Different manufacturers use different strategies to set their sizes, and the physical dimensions of the clothes and the bodies they are designed to fit is just one consideration. Marketing is another. Some clothing manufacturers use 'vanity sizing'. That means that they intentionally inflate sizes in order to make buyers feel smaller than they really are. It's the practice of vanity sizing that's led to the existence in North America of size zero clothes – and even double zero clothes! Of course, nobody is smaller than nothing. In other parts of the world, where women are on average smaller than in North America, there is no such thing as size zero clothes.

Many clothing manufacturers continue to design clothes for women with hourglass shapes, meaning that their chest and hips are the same size and substantially larger than their waists. However most women aren't built like that. The majority of women are larger around the hips than they are in the chest. So it's very common for women to wear one size in tops and a completely different size in bottoms, even when the manufacturer is the same.

Your daughters shouldn't worry about the sizes they see on the clothing labels. They should try everything on and buy whatever items of clothing fit them comfortably and make them feel good about themselves.

**Cosmetic surgery, in its many forms, seems very popular and easily accessible. My daughter and her friends talk about it as if it was as easy as a trip to the spa. I am concerned that they don't begin to understand the seriousness of any kind of cosmetic surgery.**

**Am I wrong to be concerned?**

You are right to be concerned. Plastic surgery or cosmetic surgery is becoming more popular and more accessible than ever. The number of teens wanting cosmetic surgery is on the rise and can include injections and laser treatments. There are always inherent risks and complications that are associated with any kind of surgery. Among the side effects that can occur are allergic reactions, hematoma (blood clotting), excessive scarring, temporary or permanent numbness, high levels of pain, bleeding and infection. In rare cases, cosmetic surgery patients have died. Cosmetic surgery is seen by teens as a way to fit in and look acceptable to friends and peers. There are a few things you can talk to your daughter about. Cosmetic surgery is unlikely to change her life. A person considering cosmetic surgery needs to be emotionally mature enough to handle the surgery and needs to be sure that she is doing it for the right reasons. It is important that your daughter is finished growing before she considers any kind of cosmetic surgery. If not, the results she hopes to achieve could change over time. It is important for your daughter to determine if she is considering cosmetic surgery because she wants it for herself or if it is to please someone else. Your daughter's body continues to change through the teen years. Body parts that might appear too large or too small now can become more proportionate over time. Remember as well that our bodies are not symmetrical. Staying physically active and healthy eating can result in your daughter feeling better about herself and her body without surgery.

## My daughter and her friends have recently taken to tanning. Is this something I should be worried about?

Tanning has always been part of our culture but with the recent increase of indoor tanning salons, year round tanning has become the norm if not the expectation for many girls. The fact is whether you tan indoor or out the damage and risk are the same. Easy access to insta-tans may be contributing to a frightening spike in skin cancer rates among the young. The World Health Organization estimated that up to 60,000 deaths world wide are caused each year by excessive UV exposure and urged youths under 18 to steer clear of indoor tanning.

It may not be as simple as just telling kids to stay away though. Current adolescent culture encourages compulsive tanning. In some circles a year round tan is part of the uniform, for example cheerleading. Also images of perpetually bronzed pop icons help to reinforce the value of a 'good tan'.

Tanning has been compared to smoking because the negative effects of tanning are often not seen for many years. Also, like smoking tanning may cause skin damage after a prolonged period of time. Tanning has also been shown to have some addictive qualities. Tanning triggers the release of endorphins which may be the reason that frequent tanners experience withdrawal-like symptoms if they don't get their regular fix.

To answer your question, yes, you should be worried. Tanning is a practice that has serious long-term consequences and should be avoided when possible. Dermatologists recommend using sunless tanning lotions as an alternative.



## The Don'ts of Dieting

### **Just about every woman I know diets. I've lost weight dieting myself. So why shouldn't my daughter diet?**

Dieting is ineffective at best and dangerous at worst. Dieting may create some short-term results for some people, but the vast majority of people gain back every ounce of the weight they lose through dieting, leading to feelings of failure and further harming their body image and self-esteem, and this ugly cycle can actually contribute to the development of eating disorders. Many diets 'work' by depriving the body of necessary nutrients, so can be harmful to health, and that's why diets are particularly dangerous for children and youth whose muscles, bones, organs and brains are still developing.

*"I've never dieted or really watched what I ate, but at the same time I refuse to weigh myself because I know whatever I weigh I'll always think it's too much. All in all, I do worry constantly about my appearance, but I worry more for my friends who obsess about weight. I can't imagine counting calories or throwing up all I eat and it kind of bothers me that others think it's normal."*

*- Kendra, age 15*

### **What should I do if I believe my 10 year old daughter is unhealthily overweight?**

There is a wide range of healthy weight, and your daughter could be just fine. Remember that skinny does not equal healthy. If you're concerned, take her to the doctor to have her body mass index (BMI) checked. Many children grow into their weight so the doctor could advise watchful waiting until your daughter turns 17. Do not put her on a diet. Only morbidly obese children should diet, and even then, only under a doctor's supervision.

Whether or not your daughter is overweight, you should follow Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating for children ages 6 to 12.

Serve whole grains and fruit for everyday snacks and allow junk food only occasionally. Encourage physical activity based on your daughter's interests.

### **My daughter has suddenly started to over-eat and she has put on extra weight. I am worried for her, but do not want to hurt her feelings. How should I approach this?**

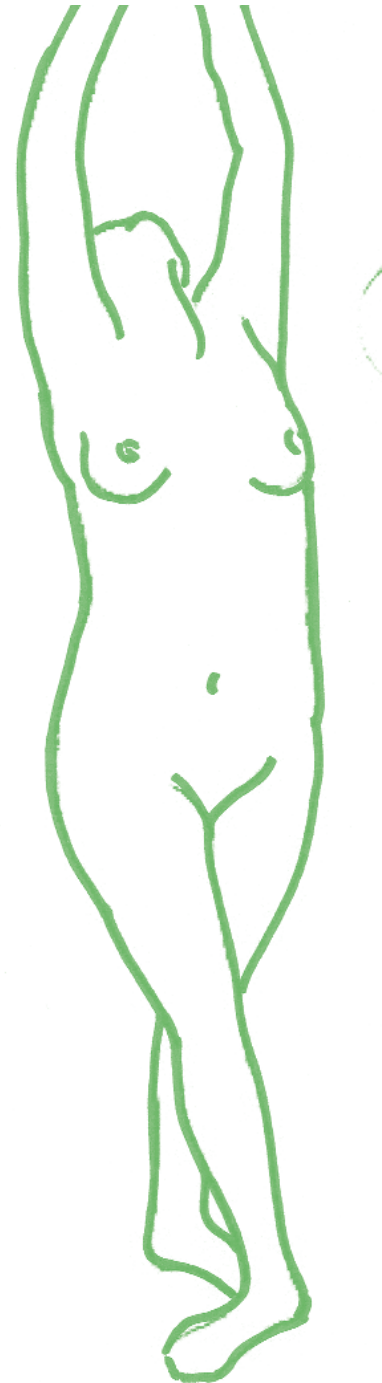
Studies show that criticism from family members can have long-lasting harmful effects. Rather than commenting on your daughter's weight gain, engage her in healthy activities like walking, bike riding, or playing sports. Replace sweets in the house with healthy snacks and homemade meals. If overeating persists, seek the aid of a registered dietician or a doctor to find out if there are additional factors at play, such as a deficiency in her nutrition. Another possibility you may wish to explore is that your daughter might be struggling with a personal issue and may need counselling or another form of support.

### **My daughter has become a vegetarian. I have heard her talk a lot about weight loss and I am worried that she is not getting the nutrients that she needs. Is there anything I can be mindful of when watching her food patterns?**

Any diet that is rich in healthy vegetables will have many health benefits including reduced risk of heart disease and some cancers, and reduced blood pressure and cholesterol levels. However by eliminating certain foods from their diets, vegetarians need to work to add foods into their diet that will provide the nutrients found in meat products. Ensuring that your daughter eats a variety of foods including fruits, vegetables and whole grains, she can get nutrients she need from non-meat sources. There a number of vegetarian websites and cookbooks that will help her to incorporate enough protein and other nutrients into a vegetarian diet.

Another risk associated with vegetarianism is that many people are turning to a plant-based diet as a weight loss aid. The controlled eating patterns of a vegetarian diet can easily mask disordered eating patterns. Evidence also suggests that vegetarians are more likely to be at risk of developing an eating disorder than non-vegetarians. You may want to talk to your daughter about the benefits and risks of vegetarianism and from that conversation you can judge what her motivations are.

**For more information about disordered eating see Appendix B: [Signs of an Eating Disorder Checklist](#)**





## Healthy, Active Living

### **My daughter doesn't like playing sports, so what can I do to encourage her to be more active?**

Children who do not like organized or team sports often enjoy individual or family activities. Plan physical activities you can do together, like bike riding, hiking, rock collecting, swimming or skating, playing catch or flying a kite in the park. Figure out what moves you and your daughter, and you'll both enjoy the benefits!

### **I'd like to sign my daughter up to play a sport, but don't know which one is best.**

Playing sports is great for girls! Research shows that girls tend to become less active and to lose self-esteem as they approach and reach adolescence. However, girls who participate in sports are not only fitter than girls who don't, but they tend to maintain higher levels of self-esteem, have greater satisfaction with their own bodies, and have a greater sense of control over their own lives. The benefits don't stop there. Girls who are involved in sports are less likely than girls who don't play sports to smoke, use drugs, and get pregnant. They tend to wait longer to have their first sexual experience and to have fewer sexual partners.

Different sports bring different benefits and also different risks, but the important thing is to choose a sport that your daughter will enjoy and want to stick with. There are so many sports opportunities for girls nowadays that you really can pick the one that best suits her. Does she want to be part of a team? Then consider a sport like baseball or soccer. Or is she more interested in challenging herself? Maybe swimming or figure skating are better choices for her. Does she prefer being indoors? Basketball or gymnastics are options. Does she want to develop a skill she's already got, or does she want to learn new ones? Is she interested in competing, or just in having fun? Talk with her about what sports she'd like to try and why she'd like to try them. Talk with the sports organizers, too.

### **I want my girls to be fit and active, but worry that sports may be too stressful for them.**

Physical activity is one of the best stress-reducers there is! But girls who haven't been exposed to sports and who haven't had the opportunity to develop sports skills may find getting started discouraging and even stressful, especially if they're trying to play at a level that's too advanced for them. The best thing to do is to help them to develop sports skills from an early age. One of the most important skills to teach them is the ability to throw a ball overhand. That simple overhand movement is used in baseball, in football, in tennis, even in many track and field events. If your daughters are older, and are just getting into sports, make sure they're involved in a program or on a team that focuses on skill development and enjoyment, rather than on competition.

If and when your girls do decide to get into competitive sports, they may face pressure to perform from coaches, teammates, and other parents too. A little pressure isn't a bad thing. It's a fact of life that can motivate us to try harder and achieve more. But too much pressure can undo all the benefits of participation in sports, and can turn girls off sports forever. You can help your daughters cope with pressure by being their involved and encouraging supporter, and by listening to how they're feeling about their experiences. Remember that playing sports should make them feel more confident about themselves, not less.

### **My daughter plays soccer on her school team, and has practices or games almost every day. And when there's not an organized practice, she goes running. I think that's too much.**

If your daughter's team is very competitive, and if she's keen to excel, she may be tempted to over-train. This can have harmful effects on her both psychologically and physically. Young athletes who train too much can neglect other important things like school

and friends and family, and they're also more prone to injury. You can encourage her to maintain perspective on her sport and balance in her life by insisting that she budget time each day for other activities and take at least one day each week off training altogether.

**My daughter wants me to sign her up for gymnastics, but I've heard about the pressures on girls in gymnastics to maintain unnaturally tiny bodies.**

One of the reasons that participation in sports is good for girls is that it teaches them to value their bodies for their strength and endurance and coordination, instead of just for looking a certain way. But some sports, like gymnastics and dance and figure skating, do emphasize appearance, too, and can actually foster a heightened pre-occupation with body weight and shape. Girls who participate in these so-called 'aesthetic' sports are indeed more likely than those in 'athletic' sports, like soccer, hockey and track and field, to suffer from eating disorders and factors associated with eating disorders, like elevated weight concerns, body dissatisfaction, and excessive dieting. This is especially true of athletes at elite levels of competition.

Teenage girls' body fat levels shouldn't fall below 12 to 14%. If dieting or over-training causes them to lose too much body fat, they can begin to suffer from menstrual irregularities and low bone mineral densities (otherwise known as osteoporosis). They can also become much more susceptible to injury. Keep an eye out for the warning signs of extreme weight loss and missed periods and talk to your doctor about any concerns you may have.



## Messages From Men

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### **I am a father of two daughters. What can I say in order to help my daughters feel good about themselves and their body image?**

Be careful with what you say when you talk about women and their bodies. If you routinely comment, positively or negatively, on women's appearance, your daughters may internalize these comments and judge themselves by these standards. Challenging inappropriate comments made by other men and boys is excellent role modeling and may lead to a reduction in the harmful comments that girls and women are so often exposed to.

### **As a man in our changing world, I'm no longer sure if it is okay to comment on a girl's appearance, even to offer a compliment.**

If the focus of your praise or positive comments tends to relate to girls' bodies or their physical appearance, girls are more likely to learn that they need to look a certain way in order to be accepted, liked, and appreciated. Try commenting on other strengths and accomplishments such as intelligence, athletic achievements, creativity, or other talents.

### **I don't feel comfortable talking about body image with my daughter, but I want to feel that I am having a positive impact on the way she feels about her body. How can I do this?**

Making general comments about the pressure society puts on women may open the conversation to find out where your daughter is at with her own self-awareness and acceptance of her body. For example, commenting that it is both sad and disturbing that thousands of women are unhappy with their natural bodies and are dealing with eating disorders can lead to meaningful conversations. In fact, discussion about media and societal pressures can invite your daughter to think critically about these issues. If you have sons, you should have similar conversations with them.

*"There was a period of a couple of years when I was into body building and was very focused on my fitness goals. I had many male friends of mine who would comment not to become "too muscular" because I was a girl, after all. I rejected these comments, but perhaps I might have felt less certain about my love for body building had my father not been such a support. We would talk about our fitness routines – he'd tell me about his morning doing Pilates and I'd tell him how much I had benched!"*

*- Robin, age 23*

### **I want my sons to play a positive role in my daughter's feelings about her own body. How can I talk to them?**

The first step is to role model the behaviour you wish to see from your sons. If you confront derogatory comments about women's weight and appearance, and refrain from using language and words that put women down, you are setting and reinforcing a positive example.

### **How does my relationship with my daughter affect the way she feels about her body?**

A healthy relationship in which your daughter feels loved, appreciated and accepted for who she is will have a positive effect on her self-acceptance and affirm her own self-worth. As her father, you model the first relationship your daughter has with the opposite sex. Your thoughts about women's appearance, and what you consider to be their positive qualities are all messages that your daughter may internalize as her own.

## Body Image & Violence

**I was sexually assaulted as a teen so I find it very difficult to talk to my daughter when she asks me about body image and self-esteem. How can I help her?**

Experiences of sexual abuse and violence have been shown to impact women's and girls' relationships with their own bodies and their overall well-being. Self-esteem and body image can be related to the shame that may be associated with the sexual assault.

If you have experienced sexual violence, you may struggle at points with your own body image. Triggers for decreased body image and self-esteem may be present during pregnancy (as a woman may feel a great sense of being out of control of her body) or when your daughter reaches the age at which you experienced sexual abuse. These are not abnormal reactions. Your body holds onto traumatic memories. If this is the case, be kind to yourself and know that healing is possible.

As a mother, you are a role model to your daughter in regards to body image. What your child witnesses in regards to how you feel about yourself is very powerful. Are you taking care of your body? Do you treat your body with care and respect?

If you struggle with issues related to sexual violence, or your daughter has experienced sexual abuse, there is free and confidential counselling support available. Please see the resource list at the back of the guide for a counselling center near you.

**I've heard my daughter's boyfriend make rude and demeaning comments about her physical appearance, her weight and breast size. As a result, she has become increasingly self-conscious about her body. What can I do?**

The importance of body image for women is huge. Negative comments about women's bodies will have a big impact on their self-esteem. These kinds of comments are an example of verbal and emotional abuse, using words to hurt feelings. This could be one way that her boyfriend is trying to use power over her or control her. This should be considered a warning sign in the relationship. Talk with your daughter about healthy relationships and what makes a relationship safe and respectful. Having a partner who makes her feel good about who she is, who is supportive and caring, and who encourages her to have her own ideas are all examples of elements present in a healthy relationship. Consider the relationships that you are in and what she is learning from these. Most communities have a women's shelter where you can get information and support about healthy and hurtful relationships.



## Modelling Positive Body Image Checklist

We all want our children to hold on to the positive body image and self esteem they were born with. This checklist is a guide – not a critique. No one is perfect but every body is a somebody!

- I believe everyone has the right to feel good about themselves, their body and their life.
- I exercise for health and enjoyment, not for weight loss.
- I eat 'everyday' foods, such as whole grains and fruits, and 'sometimes' foods such as cookies.
- I take people seriously for what they say and feel; not how they look.
- I can challenge cultural myths and stereotypes on how people 'should' look.
- I am open-minded and examine my own beliefs about beauty. Beauty comes in many forms from the inside, out.
- I pay attention to the things I like about myself. (Children are more likely to feel good about themselves when the adults they look up to have a positive view of themselves.)
- I avoid conveying an attitude about myself that says "I will like myself better if I lose weight, eat less, wear a smaller size and/or eat only 'good' foods."
- I say something positive about myself every day.
- I can accept compliments from others by saying thank-you rather than yes, but...
- I am courageous! I can choose to do something I am putting off until I am 'thin enough'. I enjoy being active in my body and am not trapped in self-consciousness.
- I look for the inner qualities and strengths of others and appreciate my own.
- I develop interests and skills that will lead to success, personal expression and fulfillment without focusing on appearance.
- I can say no. I do not have to be all things to all people. My health and well-being comes first. I encourage myself to be active and enjoy what my body can do and feel like.
- I realize models and TV personalities are not realistic. Less than 5% of the population is naturally 'model thin'. If magazines trigger critical body thoughts I can throw them out.
- I do not compare myself to others. Comparisons are meaningless, painful and destructive to self-esteem.
- I have a zero tolerance for teasing and discrimination, including body size discrimination.
- I am positive and accepting of my own body.



## Signs of an Eating Disorder Checklist

When do I need to take action? When do I need to seek professional help?

Poor body image can lead to disordered eating/exercise behaviours and ultimately, to an eating disorder. The earlier any of these concerns are treated by a professional, the greater the chance for success.

- Obsessed with appearance, food or exercise
- Constantly weighing him/herself
- Has an intense fear of gaining weight
- Change in weight or fluctuations in weight
- Preoccupied with food, constantly looking at food labels for calories and fat content
- Avoids certain foods
- Avoids eating with others
- Skips meals
- Makes excuses for not eating
- Lies about eating habits
- Hides food
- Drinks excessive amounts of water, diet soda, coffee or other non-caloric drinks
- Feels guilty when eats food
- Exercises excessively
- Wears baggy clothes to hide weight loss or to keep warm
- Changes in emotional well being: depressed or irritable, makes abusive remarks about self
- Physical symptoms including any one of: amenorrhea (loss of menstruation in girls), thinning hair, delay in onset of puberty, swollen or puffy face, yellowish skin, increased cavities in teeth, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, problems with bowels (constipation or diarrhea)
- Denial of changes in behaviours

An eating disorder is a chronic, progressive disease, meaning it will only get worse if left untreated.

Checklist prepared by the Eating Disorders Awareness Coalition [www.edac.wr](http://www.edac.wr)

# Body Image and Self-Esteem Resources

## Books

*Body Image Workbook: An 8-step Program For Learning To Like Your Looks*, by Thomas F. Cash, PhD, 2008.

*Bodylove: Learning to Like Our Looks and Ourselves*, by Rita Freedman, PhD, 2002.

*Body Thieves: Help girls reclaim their natural bodies and become physically active*, by Sandra Friedman, 2002.

*Body Wars: Making Peace With Women's Bodies*, by Margo Maine, PhD, 2000.

*Feeling Good About The Way You Look: A Program for Overcoming Body Image Problems*, by Sabine Wilhelm, PhD, 2005.

*Love Your Body: Change the Way You Feel about the Body You Have*, by Tami Brannon-Quan & Lisa Licavoli, 2007.

*Self-Esteem Comes in All Sizes: How To Be Happy and Healthy at Your Natural Weight*, by Carol A. Johnson, 2001.

*The BDD (Body Dysmorphic Disorder) Workbook*, by James Claiborn, PhD & Cherry Pedrick, RN, 2002.

*The Body Myth: Adult Women and the Pressure to Be Perfect*, by Margo Maine, PhD & Joe Kelly, 2005.

*The Broken Mirror: Understanding and Treating Body Dysmorphic Disorder*, by Katharine A. Phillips, MD, 1986.

*101 Ways to Help your Daughter Love her Body*, by Brenda Lane Richardson & Elane Rehr, 2001.

## Websites

[www.bodypeace.com](http://www.bodypeace.com)

Provides resources created by Rebecca Radcliffe, a national speaker and author on women's issues, body image, emotional eating, eating disorders, and self-esteem.

[www.aboutkidshealth.ca/thestudentbody](http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/thestudentbody)

Learning modules for teachers and parents on media, peer pressure, healthy eating, active living, teasing, adult role models & school climate.

[www.bodyimagecoalition.org](http://www.bodyimagecoalition.org)

Provides information and resources that promote healthy body image, including list of services available to residents of the Region of Peel and Every BODY Is a Somebody - Facilitator's Guide

[www.edacwr.com](http://www.edacwr.com)

Provides information and resources on eating disorders, body image, and dieting, including directory of services, community workshops, youth presentations, community workshops, and family and friends support group.

[www.gurze.com](http://www.gurze.com)

Publishes and sells resources (books, DVDs, newsletter) on eating disorders and body image. Website also offers free articles, recovery stories, and a therapist directory.

[www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)

Provides education, resources and support to those affected by eating disorders. Website provides articles, stories of hope, and toolkits for professionals and parents.

[www.nedic.ca](http://www.nedic.ca)

Provides information and resources on eating disorders, food and weight preoccupation, body image, and self-esteem.

[www.thebodypositive.org](http://www.thebodypositive.org)

Provides information and resources that promote the Health at Every Size (HAES) model.

[www.turningpointsprogram.com](http://www.turningpointsprogram.com)

Developed by Lakehead University, Turning Points is a DVD program that discusses issues related to body image, healthy eating and relationships.

Members of the Social Action and Advocacy Committee

Elizabeth Clarke

Kim Decker

Joanna Baker

Sara Casselman

Amaryah Degroot

Shelley Guy

Cathy Middleton

Iliana Pressman

The Social Action and Advocacy Committee of the YWCAs of Kitchener-Waterloo and Cambridge thanks the following agencies and people. They helped in gathering and checking the information contained in this guide:

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