

10 Ways To Help Your Child Build a Positive Body Image

If you're worried about your child's relationship with their body or food, firstly I have so much compassion for you. I know it can feel like a minefield navigating so many mixed messages about what's healthy for children to be eating, or how much they should be exercising, what their weight should be, not to mention the hard to control exposure to unrealistic body ideals that most kids experience on a daily basis. We can't always control or protect children from see and hear, but what we can do is be mindful of our own influence, which can make an enormous difference whether they are your own kids, kids you work with, or just kids that you know. Below are 10 ways you can help the young people in your life feel more confident in their body as it is right now, regardless of their size, shape, weight, colour or ableness:

1 Choose your language around bodies and food

Children are enormously influenced by the narratives they hear concerning appearance. The more they hear you talk about all different types of bodies in a curious, non-judgemental and accepting way, the more at ease they are likely to feel in their own bodies and want to take care of them. The same goes for how you discuss food. Presenting all foods as neutral and avoiding moralisations like good/bad, healthy/unhealthy, naughty/virtuous and so on will help to avoid your child feeling like their self-worth is influenced by their food choices. This can be extremely challenging, however, when you've lived your whole life in a culture that privileges thinness, associates fatness with poor health, reveres 'healthy eating' and restriction and celebrates weight loss regardless of how it is achieved. Be kind to yourself. Notice when you hear judgemental thoughts and acknowledge them with your child, highlighting how people sometimes say mean things about different body types but all bodies are good and it is the view of difference that needs to change, not the bodies

themselves. This will help to protect your child if they themselves are the victim of unkind comments targeting their appearance, which are so often one of the precursors to mental health decline and disordered eating. Be mindful too about how you speak about your own body. If your kid regularly hears you saying you “feel fat” in a negative way, they will quickly begin to associate being bigger-bodied with something unacceptable and shameful, even though the comment isn’t directed at them. Similarly if they hear you saying that you’re “being good” because you’re only eating salad, they are more likely to internalise this to mean that they are bad if they eat other types of foods. Surrounding yourself with body positive people both on and offline, and seeking professional support if you recognise this is an area you really struggle with, can help to shift your own mindset around this, helping to create a more peaceful relationship with food and body for both you and your kids.

2 Make your home a body neutral space.

Take a look around your home and do an audit. If there’s a lack of diversity in the way that bodies feature, think about ways that you can introduce more positive representation of different body types. From the pictures on the walls to the magazines on the coffee table, ensuring that a wide variety of bodies are evident will help to counteract any negative messages kids are exposed to outside of their home. Body positive art, a well-stocked fridge if means allow, books on self-acceptance, clothes that fit comfortably in the wardrobe and avoiding comparisons (of both yourself and your kids to others!) are all ways of promoting body confidence in your home.

3 Keep an eye on the messages your kid’s favourite TV shows and films convey around bodies.

Having done a lot of research on the impact of children’s media on their body image, I have been quite shocked about the subtle, and often not so subtle, ways in which

stereotypes around both body type and gender are conveyed. For example, bigger bodied children are most often depicted as either the funny, stupid or fat ones, and are almost never shown enjoying exercise or other health-promoting activities, even though this is what many larger kids do every day. Similarly, disabled children are often invisible in the media, leading to poor awareness and a lack of role models for children with disability. Seeking out programs that celebrate diversity to show your kids and calling it out when you see or hear stigmatising language or harmful stereotypes will support your child in developing their own criticality around what they watch and reinforce their belief that all bodies are ok and deserve to be seen and respected, including their own.

4 Make exercise about enjoyment and taking care of your body, rather than changing weight or shape.

Make movement as fun as possible for your child, even if it means thinking outside of the box. If your kid has a bad relationship with P.E and organised or competitive sport, then something outside of that frame of reference, such as dance, yoga, or walking in nature, may feel more enjoyable for them. Helping your child find a form of exercise that helps them feel good in themselves is so helpful in establishing a healthy relationship with their body and movement. Research shows that the habits we form around exercise during childhood tend to be sustained through into adulthood, which is important as exercise is associated with improved self-esteem and cognitive functioning as well as a myriad of physical health benefits.

5 Be a self-care role model

It can be so easy to end up prioritising everyone else's needs when you're a parent and/or have a demanding job. But demonstrating self-care, even in small ways like holding boundaries around adult time, taking 5 minutes to practice mindfulness, or

repeating positive affirmations in front of your child, helps to model to them that it's good to take care of your self both mentally and physically. If this feels hard to do because it evokes feelings of guilt for you, remember that you cannot pour from an empty cup, and those you care about will get the best of you if you feel well nourished and looked after yourself. Spend some time reflecting on where you developed the belief that your needs aren't important compared to everyone else's and consider how well that belief has served you. Prioritising others often stems from our own childhood, particularly if we grew up in an environment where we had to learn to be highly attuned to others' emotional states in order to feel safe.

6 Audit toys for unrealistic or unhealthy attributes like tiny waists, bulging muscles, enormous eyes, impossibly long, thin legs and so on.

As with the media your child is watching, be aware of the influence their toys have on them too. Are they playing with dolls that have realistic and diverse body shapes and ethnicities? Or are they playing with toys that reinforce the idea that you have to be thin, white and able-bodied as a female or impossibly muscly, athletic and chiselled as a man? Do they have access to toys that encourage them to be active, like frisbees, balls and even interactive, movement-based video games? Try to be conscious of the types of toys your child has access to and what messages they are sending them.

7 Help your child become digitally literate and to think critically about the accounts they follow on social media.

Social media can have an enormous impact on how children perceive themselves and exacerbates their natural tendency to compare themselves to others. It can therefore be a really useful tool if kids are following body positive accounts that emphasise the value of a very wide array of bodies, or it can be potentially damaging if the accounts they follow advocate impossible to reach ideals or encourage weight loss, overtraining,

restrictive eating practices and so on. Depending on the age of your child, this is where encouraging them to become both critical thinkers and digitally literate will arm them with the skills to be able to discern between helpful and unhelpful content, recognise where misleading information or doctoring has been used, and navigate away from these feeds. Talk to your child, in an age-appropriate way, about marketing and the ways in which some accounts manipulate their images to present in a specific way, so that they feel less inclined to compare themselves when they do come across unhelpful content.

8 Avoid complimenting body size, weight or shape and focus on what your child's body can do rather than how it looks.

Whilst complimenting kids on how they look is well-intended, it can be extremely loaded, reinforcing the idea that how they look is key to feeling accepted and worthy. This is especially problematic when compliments are in response to attributes such as weight or skin complexion, both of which can fluctuate but are largely out of personal control. So for example, if a bigger-bodied child receives positive feedback for losing weight, if they regain that weight (which is statistically highly likely, given that 95% of diets fail) they have been given the message that they weren't ok at a higher weight and that they are less valuable as a person when they are bigger. This is an incredibly destructive dynamic for a child especially given the extremely poor evidence behind dieting as an effective means of weight loss. Instead, compliment your child on their effort, their characteristics, their clothing choice or hairstyle, their self-care... essentially anything that they actually have real control over.

9 Remember that all children's bodies need good nourishment and deserve to feel properly satisfied.

Regardless of whether your child is fat or thin, ALL children need proper nutrition. That means that regardless of your child's size, it's important that they know that all foods are available to them, they deserve to eat well and be satisfied, and that you trust their body's intuition for how much it needs, and they should too. This will prevent your child getting caught up in a battle with their body, in which they lose trust in their own feelings of hunger and satiety, which has been severed for so many adults who have been raised amidst a destructive diet culture. Interrupting this trust by externally governing how much children eat paradoxically leads to a rebound effect, which tends to look like secretive eating, binge eating, and subsequently shame-driven comfort eating. It's a vicious cycle and can be easily avoided by helping your child honour their body, treating all food as neutral, and allowing food to be kept in its rightful place.

10 Encourage your kid to have autonomy over their body

It's completely natural to want to keep your kid safe, but constantly telling them to be careful or watch out can instil a sense that the world is a dangerous place and they can't trust their natural intuition to work things out. Obviously it's important to assess risk, but it can be really beneficial to ask your kid if something feels safe for them, and if not, what help they need from you to make it safe. Doing so will ensure that they build confidence in their body's abilities and utilise their instincts, along with their confidence to reach for help when they need it. So for example, if your child wants to walk along a wall, you can ask them if it feels safe for them to do so, and if not, whether they need to hold one of your hands, or perhaps both. Another way to help your child feel more connected to and comfortable with their body is to invite them to reflect on how their body is feeling in various situations. This will help them recognise what feels good and

what doesn't for them personally, promotes mindfulness, which is beneficial in maintaining good mental health all round, and reinforces body trust and respect; both key to a positive body image.

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