FYSB Family & Youth
Services Bureau

Body Image and Adolescent Sexual Health

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TIPS FOR CONSIDERING BODY IMAGE IN APP PROGRAMMING

Planning

- Seek materials with a variety of different body types.

- Look for ways to incorporate discussions of body image into current programming.

- Check your own biases.

Implementation Practices

- When creating group agreements, consider adding a group agreement about body shaming.

- Make sure your classroom is a place where students of all sizes, abilities, races, and body types feel comfortable.

- Model body-positive language.

- Engage youth in conversations about how to refer to bodies and push them to think about their language choices.

- Teach media literacy.

- Have resources at the ready for students who may be struggling with body image issues.

- Provide information to parents about how they can support a healthy body image among their children.

OVERVIEW

We are constantly bombarded by images of bodies. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we receive messages about which bodies are "good bodies" and which ones are "bad bodies" from media, doctors, family, peers, and others. As educators, we also contribute to these messages with our classroom materials, curriculum choices, and even the words we choose when we teach. For a young person, these messages can be difficult to navigate, especially along with body changes that occur during adolescence.

Educators have a responsibility to understand what body image is, where it comes from, why it matters and how they can help the young people in their lives develop a positive body image despite the messages they receive that imply that a part of their body needs "fixing." This tip sheet provides not only the basics about body image and its relation to sexual and reproductive health and related outcomes, but also concrete steps you can take in your programs today to help build young people's positive body image.

Adolescent Development

Adolescence is a time of change and an integral time for the development of forming healthy or unhealthy body image. Many ideas and feelings about how we think about our physical appearance begins in early childhood and is influenced by many factors during the teen years.

BODY IMAGE 101

Body image is how you see yourself when you look in the mirror or when you picture yourself in your mind. It encompasses what you believe about your own appearance; how you feel about your body, including your height, shape, and weight; how you sense and control your body as you move; how you physically experience or feel in your body (National Eating Disorders Association, 2022).

What influences body image?

Body image is influenced by many different factors in a person's life, including their family, friends, culture, medical professionals, and others. Messages received can be inconsistent and non-affirming, which can leave a person feeling confused, inadequate, or depressed (Kostanski & Gullone, 1998).

Body image is also heavily influenced by the media we consume (Hogan & Strasburger, 2005). Media drive what the "ideal" body should look like and give us a (usually false) sense of what most bodies look like in the real world. Bodies in the mainstream media are usually thin, tall, white, have no visible disabilities, and have clear skin. Representation matters, and a lack of diverse representation in media can cause negative body image.

Some signs of positive body image include an accurate perception of your size and shape, feeling comfortable and confident in your body, and not obsessing about your body or comparing it to others'.

Some signs of negative body image include a distorted or inaccurate perception of your body, feeling ashamed or self-conscious about your body, and spending a lot of time worrying about looks or weight.

Why is body image important?

Negative body image is a public health concern. Negative body image is associated with a greater risk for developing an eating disorder (Cooley & Toray, 2001). It is also associated with social anxiety and depression (Alleva et al., 2015) and considered and attempted suicide (Singh et al., 2021). Negative body image is also connected to negative sexual health outcomes (Blashill & Safren, 2015; Gillen & Markey, 2019; Schooler, 2013), which makes it even more critical to address as part of Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention (APP) programming.

In Winter et al. (2017), adolescent girls who perceived their body size to be too fat had higher odds for all negative health behaviors, including tobacco use and alcohol consumption (Winter, Kennedy, & O'Neill, 2017). Similarly, adolescent body dissatisfaction was associated with a 10% increase in the rate of binge drinking and tobacco smoking (Linardon et al., 2023). Improving body image has the potential to improve overall health and wellbeing in a variety of different ways, as these connections suggest.

BODY IMAGE AND APP PROGRAMMING

The Circles of Sexuality, a model of understanding the complex nature of sexuality, is helpful for understanding the role of body image in APP programming. Created by Dailey (1981), the Circles divide the world of sexuality into five categories:

Sensuality: Sensuality is about what feels good to your body. It encompasses things like skin hunger (our need for touch), visual and auditory stimuli, the sexual response cycle, and fantasy. Even body image itself is an important part of sensuality because how we experience our bodies can have an effect on how we experience other people's bodies.

Intimacy: Whereas sensuality is about bodies, intimacy is about connection and how we express the need to be close with another person. Intimacy includes characteristics like caring for someone, taking risks, being vulnerable, and trusting a partner.

Sexual Identity: Sexual identity answers the question "who am I?" This is not only sexual orientation but also biology and anatomy, gender identity, gender roles, and other parts of the sexual self.

Sexual Health and Reproduction: As the name implies, sexual health and reproduction covers the physical body and the care and keeping of the sexual and reproductive organs. Many sex education topics, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs), anatomy, birth control, and accessing reproductive healthcare, fit into this circle.

Sexualization: Finally, sexualization is the ways in which people use their sexuality to manipulate or control others. This can include more innocuous things like flirting and seduction but can also contain the ways we weaponize sexuality through media messages, sexual harassment, and sexual violence.

The Circles of Sexuality are not discrete, separate circles but more like a Venn diagram where each circle overlaps and interacts with the other four. Therefore, one piece of a person's identity can affect all five circles. Here is an example using body image:
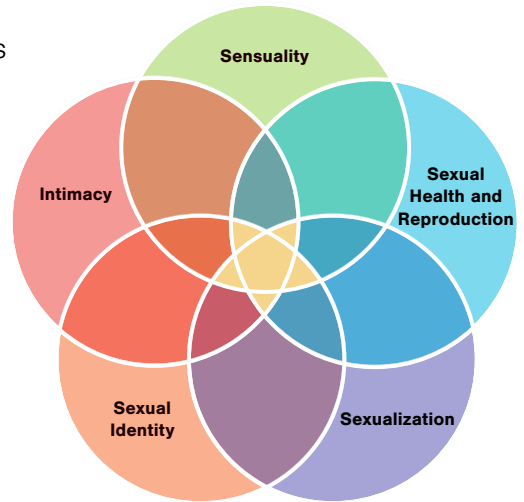
Jamie (they/them) has a very negative view of their body. When they look in the mirror, all they can see is flaws. Jamie does not feel comfortable having sex or even thinking about sex because of how disconnected they are from their body (sensuality). They had sex one time, about a year ago, with someone they met online. Jamie did not continue the relationship because they felt uncomfortable and struggled to let the person into their life (intimacy). Jamie thinks they might be non-binary, but they struggle with using a label because they don't feel like they look the way a non-binary person is "supposed to" (sexual identity). Since Jamie had sex a year ago, they have been experiencing some symptoms of an STI, including pain and discharge. They haven't gone to the doctor because they don't feel like it is that important (sexual health and reproduction). Two months ago, one of the other students in Jamie's social studies class started harassing them and making inappropriate comments during class. Jamie has been too afraid and embarrassed to tell anyone (sexualization).

As you can see from this example, our circles are interconnected. Jamie's negative view of their body impacts how they feel about having sex, about being in a relationship, about their gender identity, their sexual health, and even how their sexuality is used by others. Sexuality is about a lot more than just sex, so it is vital that we take a more holistic approach to sexual health and consider how body image affects sexual health. According to a study conducted by Schooler (2013), body satisfaction is directly related to condom use. The study measured body satisfaction in 10th grade and then condom use in 12th grade. For every increase in body satisfaction in 10th grade, the odds of using condoms correctly increased by four times. Other studies connect negative body image with risky sexual activity (Littletone, Breitkopf, & Berenson, 2005) and issues with sexual functioning (Weaver & Byers, 2006).

Body image for All

People of all races may experience body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and other related health concerns; however, much research on body image has focused primarily on white women, leaving many other groups out of the discourse (Warren et al., 2005). Many populations have unique needs where body image is concerned, and it is important to make sure their voices are heard as well. It is critical that we consider overlapping identities when discussing body image and that educators have tools available to be culturally competent.

People of all genders also experience body dissatisfaction, and some may be excluded from the conversation. For example, cisgender boys also experience body dissatisfaction and may use anabolic steroids, participate in extreme bodybuilding behaviors, and exhibit exercise dependence because of body dissatisfaction (Labre, 2002). Transgender and nonbinary students' body image can be affected by our culture's binary assumptions of what people should look like. Additionally, discrimination faced by trans people is a risk factor for depression, anxiety, and body dissatisfaction (Tabaac, Perrin, & Benotsch, 2018).

TIPS FOR CONSIDERING BODY IMAGE IN APP PROGRAMMING

The following tips will help you integrate body image into your programming.

Planning

- *Seek materials with a variety of different body types.* One easy way to boost positive body image in the context of APP programming is to be sure to include diverse bodies in your materials. This could include anatomy diagrams, videos, pictures, and other media. If you are unable to substitute videos or pictures, be sure to let students know that you are aware the materials are limited and discuss how it can be helpful to see a wider range of body types.

- *Look for ways to incorporate discussions of body image into current programming.* Some topics will naturally tie into body image, such as adolescent development, puberty, and self-esteem. You can also incorporate body image into your Adulthood Preparation Subjects (APS) topics because you may have more flexibility with those lessons. Adolescent development and healthy life skills are both natural places to incorporate information about body image and media literacy.

A note about language: The terms "overweight" and "obese" are offensive to many since they medicalize people with larger bodies and label them as a problem. Some have reclaimed the term "fat" to be a neutral word (Matacin & Simone, 2019); however, not everyone is comfortable being referred to as fat. More neutral terms might include "people at larger body weights," "people of size," or "people with larger bodies."

- *Check your own biases.* We all live in a culture that conflates health and weight and may have preconceived notions about people because of their body size, gender expression, race, and other aspects of their bodies. Reflect on the assumptions you make related to people's bodies and work towards body neutrality. Take the "Weight" Implicit Associations Test offered by Project Implicit to see if you have an implicit bias toward thin people vs. fat people. To see the menu of tests without registering, you can log in as a guest. Becoming aware of your own biases is the first step toward reducing their impact and modeling acceptance of all body types in the classroom.

Implementation Practices

- *When creating group agreements, consider adding a group agreement about body shaming.* Be sure to define body shaming so learners understand what is expected of them. Merriam-Webster defines body shaming as "the act or practice of subjecting someone to criticism or mockery for supposed bodily faults or imperfections."

- *Make sure your classroom is a place where students of all sizes, abilities, races, and body types feel comfortable.* If you hear body-shaming, bullying, or other negative comments, take appropriate action.

- *Model body-positive language.* Talk positively or neutrally about your own body (even if you have to fake it!). Do not assign values to your eating or exercise habits. For examples, see **Table 1, Changing Language**. When referring to other people's bodies, use neutral language or ask them what language they would like you to use. See Developing & Modeling Positive Body Image by the National Eating Disorders Association for additional tips on modeling body-positive language.

- *Engage youth in conversations about how to refer to bodies and push them to think about their language choices.*

- *Teach media literacy.* Media literacy is a topic that can be woven into many APP programs. Help young people develop the skills to decode messages they see in the media related to bodies and their value. Encourage students to think critically about gender norms, media and social media, and other body messages they may receive. See Media and Your Body Image: What You Need to Know by the National Eating Disorders Association for five key questions about media and body image.

- *Have resources at the ready for students who may be struggling with body image issues.* Add eating disorder treatment to your referral lists.

- *Provide information to parents about how they can support a healthy body image among their children.* This Guide for Parents and Caregivers has helpful tips.

> Remember: All of your students are on a journey with respect to their body image, sexuality, and sense of self.

Table 1. Changing Language

FOR EDUCATORS	
Instead of:	Say:
I've been so good all day, I deserve a little dessert.	I think I will have some dessert today.
Yuck, I feel so fat today.	I don't feel well today. (Fat is not a feeling, what is the actual feeling you have?)
People who are overweight or obese are unhealthy.	People of all sizes can be healthy.
I can't eat that, I'm on a diet.	None for me, thanks!
REDIRECTING STUDENT LANGUAGE	
If you hear a student say:	Then you should:
He's such a jerk, I bet he has a tiny penis.	Ensure youth have accurate information about myths and facts about penis size.
You don't look like a girl.	Have a conversation about gender expression and different gender norms. Make sure to reinforce that all people deserve respect.
You need to lose weight if you want to get a partner.	Talk about how people of different sizes can be attractive and have relationships.
Any of the comments in the educator section.	Engage in a conversation about body shaming and refer back to the group agreements.

RESOURCES

Even if you don't have time to devote an entire lesson or segment about body image in your APP programming, provide resources for young people who may be struggling with their body image. Here are some examples to get you started!

- National Eating Disorders Association

- Maintenance Phase

- The Body is Not an Apology

- Gordon, A. (2020). What we don't talk about when we talk about fat. Boston, Beacon Press.

- Amaze videos

  - Why Don't I Like the Way I Look?

  - Social Media and Self-Image

  - Bodies: Different Shapes and Sizes. All Beautiful!

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