



# Body-Positive Parenting

## Nurturing a Healthy Body Image in Adolescents

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Helping teens develop a positive body image is crucial for their mental and emotional well-being. Teens' bodies change rapidly during puberty at the same time as they are being exposed to media and messages that show narrow and unrealistic standards of what the ideal body looks like. As a parent/caregiver, you may be looking for ways to counter harmful messages and help teens develop a healthy body image. This guide provides parents and caregivers an understanding of what body image is and how it is shaped by culture and society. It gives you information to help you determine when a teen might be struggling with it. Most importantly, it offers practical tips you can use to foster a healthy body image among the teens in your life.

Throughout this document, the term “parents and caregivers” includes biological or adoptive parents; guardians; other relatives such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents; and other supportive adults who care for a teen.

## UNDERSTANDING BODY IMAGE

### What is “body image?”

Body image is the perception people have of their own physical appearance, which starts developing in early childhood. It involves a variety of thoughts, perceptions, and emotions about one's body, including perceptions of height, shape, weight, skin color, physical features, hair texture and color, ability status, gender identity and expression, and muscularity.<sup>1</sup> When someone has a positive body image, they feel comfortable in their body. They don't worry about their body or compare it with others'. When someone has a negative body image, they may have a distorted perception of their body and feel ashamed or self-conscious and may compare their body with others.

Researchers who study the subject have found that body dissatisfaction is linked to adopting unrealistic body ideals promoted by society.<sup>2</sup> In particular, mass media may expose adolescents to specific and narrow “standards” for physical beauty. This exposure can make them feel dissatisfied or unhappy if their bodies don't conform to these standards, and it can put them at risk for developing eating disorders.<sup>3</sup> Body image is a concern for all adolescents, regardless of their gender identity or expression. It can vary by culture, but in Western/European-based culture, girls and women often feel pressure to be thin, whereas boys and men often feel pressure to be lean and muscular.

## How does body image affect adolescents?

Body image can influence adolescents' physical and mental health and relationships and even contribute to risky behaviors.

- **Physical health:** Negative perceptions of one's body can have significant effects on physical health. Adolescents with negative perceptions of their bodies may engage in unhealthy behaviors to alter their appearances, such as extreme dieting, excessive exercise, or tobacco use. A distorted body image is also linked to the development of eating disorders like [anorexia nervosa](#), [bulimia nervosa](#), or [binge-eating disorder](#).<sup>4</sup> These conditions can cause severe nutritional deficiencies, electrolyte imbalances, and other physical health problems. Stress and anxiety related to negative body image can lead to sleep disturbances, such as insomnia.<sup>5</sup> Lack of sleep is associated with a range of health issues, including impaired cognitive function and an increased risk of chronic conditions.<sup>6</sup>
- **Mental health:** Poor physical self-image can affect self-esteem and lead to depression, anxiety, and risk for attempted suicide.<sup>7-11</sup>
- **Relationships:** Teens who lack confidence may avoid social situations or activities, which can lead to isolation and loneliness. Negative body image can also affect relationships because individuals may struggle with intimacy, communication, trust, or jealousy caused by insecurities about their image.<sup>12</sup>
- **Risky behaviors:** Negative body image in teens can also lead to unsafe behaviors, including tobacco and alcohol use and risky sexual behaviors.<sup>13-17</sup> Teens with negative body image may turn to alcohol or drugs to cope with feelings of inadequacy or low self-esteem. Some teens may resort to smoking as a weight control method, influenced by the belief that smoking can suppress their appetite or help with weight management. They may be more susceptible to peer pressure because of a desire to fit in. Unhealthy body image can also contribute to a lack of assertiveness or boundary-setting in relationships, potentially leading to risky sexual behaviors. Teens with poor body image may seek validation or acceptance through risky sexual behaviors, thinking that these actions will make them desirable or attractive.



## PROMOTING A POSITIVE BODY IMAGE

As a parent/caregiver, you are in a great position to positively influence body image among the teens in your life. It's important to recognize that adolescence is a time of big physical, emotional, and psychological changes. During this period, young people grow at different rates. Some may have growth spurts early on, while others may develop more gradually. Some may be taller, shorter, leaner, or larger, and these differences should be celebrated rather than compared.

It's crucial for adolescents to learn that there is no single "ideal" body type. One key aspect of helping adolescents navigate this stage is fostering an understanding and acceptance of different body types and emphasizing that health and well-being come in many forms. Reinforcing the idea that everyone develops at their own pace and that these differences are normal will help adolescents appreciate their own unique development.

These strategies and activities will help you empower teens to think for themselves and counter the negative messages they might see from peers and in the media.



### Start the conversation.

The first step is to create an opening. Not all teens want to have conversations about this topic, especially those who might be self-conscious about their physical appearance. Try to find an opening when you both see something that could affect their physical self-perception, like an advertisement or TV show or a comment they might make about wanting to look like a certain celebrity or social media influencer. To find out whether they are open to having a conversation, pay attention to verbal and non-verbal cues. Make sure you choose an appropriate time and setting, create a relaxed environment, and be prepared to share your own thoughts and experiences. Listen actively and nonjudgmentally and build trust to keep them talking. It's important not to criticize a teen's body or compare it with others' (even your own). Even teasing that may seem harmless to you can increase the odds of a teen having body dissatisfaction.<sup>18-19</sup>

**ACTIVITY:** Use these reflection questions to initiate a discussion about the topic. By beginning the conversation with these broad questions, you can help the teen in your life feel comfortable with the topic without putting them on the spot.

- *How do you think the way we feel about our bodies affects our self-esteem or confidence?*
- *What are some things in society that might make it difficult for teens to develop a positive body image?*

### Help teens understand what factors influence body image.

Expand on your conversation with the questions below to examine the role of media—including social media, movies, TV shows, songs, music videos, video games, and ads—in shaping body image. Discuss how unrealistic beauty standards portrayed in the media can contribute to negative self-perception and why it's important to actively oppose these influences.<sup>3, 20-21</sup>

Talk about the role of peers and adults who are important to the teen in your life. Explore the culture of your child's peer group. Do they value authenticity or pressure each other to have what they consider to be a "perfect" appearance by using filters and carefully curating their social media profiles?



Are the adults in the life of the teen you care for comfortable with their bodies or do they reinforce the idea that one must struggle to attain the “perfect” body by making critical remarks about their or others’ bodies?

It might be helpful for teens to know that body standards have changed over time and can vary by culture or sub-culture. For example, images in art and media suggesting what the ideal woman’s body is like have ranged from images of curvy and full-figured women to very thin women. Although the standard may change over time, the pressure to meet the standard has affected women in every era.<sup>22</sup>

**ACTIVITY:** Use these questions to engage teens in a conversation about how society influences body standards. As you talk, it’s important to help them understand that images today are sometimes digitally altered and may not be a true representation of someone.

- *Have you ever felt pressure to conform to certain beauty standards promoted by the media?*
- *Do you find yourself comparing your body to people in the media?*
- *What emotions do you experience when you see media content related to body image?*
- *What is your opinion on using filters or other methods to alter images of people’s physical appearance?*

If the teen in your life is comfortable with the conversation so far, express any concerns you have regarding their body perception and offer support. By normalizing these kinds of discussions, you can better address potential issues early. Be sure to let them know you’re there to listen about anything that concerns them.

**ACTIVITY:** Use these prompts to learn about a teen’s concerns about their own body.

- *It’s so common for both teens and adults to struggle with body image. I want you to feel comfortable talking to me about anything, including how you feel about your body. Any concerns or thoughts you’d like to share? I’m here to listen and support you.*
- *It seems like you’ve been feeling a bit uneasy about your appearance lately. It’s common for people to feel that way, and I’m here to listen.*

Strong parent/caregiver–teen communication has been shown to improve body image and decrease body dissatisfaction.<sup>23</sup> Use [6 Steps to Strengthening your Parent/Caregiver–Teen Relationship: A Guide for Parents & Caregivers](#) from *We Think Twice*™ to create a strong connection and positive communication with the teens in your life. The parent/caregiver guide comes with a discussion guide to promote open communication with teens and a separate resource just for youth—the [Parent/Caregiver Relationship Quiz](#), a *We Think Twice*™ tool that helps teens discover the strengths and challenges in their relationships with parents, caregivers, and other trusted adults.



## Recognize and celebrate teens' achievements beyond physical appearance.

Highlight and celebrate accomplishments unrelated to physical appearance. This helps teens develop a well-rounded sense of self-worth. Provide compliments and positive affirmations about who they are as a person—not their physical appearance or physique. Avoid appearance-based comments about the teens in your life (even if seemingly positive) and about yourself (because teens often model what they see).

**ACTIVITY:** Ask these questions to get teens thinking about their achievements rather than their physical appearance:

- *What makes you feel good about yourself?*
- *What are some ways you have made a positive impact on others?*
- *What are some personal goals you've achieved recently?*
- *Think about a time you stepped outside of your comfort zone. What have you learned from that experience?*

It's important to let them know that you're proud of their accomplishments and character. Emphasize that their worth goes far beyond how they look.

### Encourage hobbies, talents, and interests that boost self-worth.

Support the exploration of diverse interests and talents. When youth engage in activities they are passionate about, it contributes to a positive self-image based on their skills and accomplishments. Ask about activities that make them happy or proud. Exploring their interests can bring a sense of accomplishment and joy.

**ACTIVITY:** Use this [resource](#) from *We Think Twice™* to spark a conversation about what the teen in your life is passionate about.



### Boost teens' media literacy skills.

Teens view up to 1,260 advertisements a day on social media alone, which is 10 to 20 times the number of ads children saw on TV at the turn of the century.<sup>24</sup> Many ads use physical features to sell products. Social media encourages teens to compare themselves with others, which is known to harm body image.<sup>25-26</sup> However, research suggests that media literacy education has the potential to reduce body dissatisfaction.<sup>27</sup> Other studies show that parents, especially, can lessen the effects of media by having strong communication with teens and helping them take control of their social media habits.<sup>28-29</sup>

- **Teach critical thinking about media portrayals of beauty and body ideals.** Educate teens about the intentional manipulation of images in media. Help them develop critical thinking skills to question and challenge unrealistic beauty standards they see in advertisements and on social media.

For example, you can ask, “How do you feel about what you see on TikTok, Instagram, or reality TV shows? Do you think these images represent real life, or could there be some alteration involved?”

**ACTIVITY:** The [Get Real! Digital Media Literacy Toolkit](#) contains activities to do with the teen in your life to help them learn to think critically about messages they see, hear, and read in the media about physical appearance.

When talking with teens about media and body image, ask these reflection questions to help them understand that content creators don't always have teens' best interest in mind. Usually, the content is created for profit:

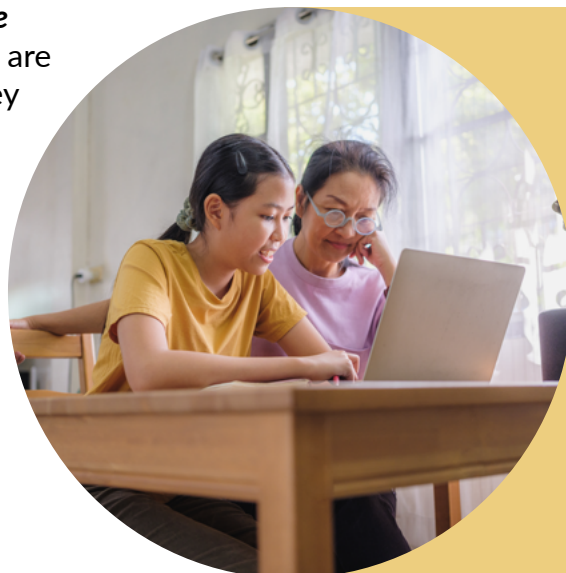
- *Who created this content?*
- *What is the purpose behind it?*
- *How could this portrayal affect the viewer's body perception and self-esteem?*

- **Discuss photo editing software and filters, emphasizing the difference between reality and manipulated media imagery.** Explain the prevalence of image manipulation tools and filters. Highlight the disparity between digitally altered images and reality. Encourage the teens in your life to post photos to social media without using filters.

**ACTIVITY:** Ask teens:

- *Why do you think teens so often use filters or photo editing software?*
- *How easy or hard would it be to not use filters or photo editing software?*
- *How can teens support each other in being authentic online?*

- **Support them in developing a more positive relationship with social media.** Most teens are online daily and more than a third say they use social media “almost constantly.”<sup>30</sup> Social media isn't going anywhere, but you can educate yourself about the social media platforms teens commonly use, the positive and negative aspects of different online behaviors, and the ways you can help minimize risks to teens in your life and steer them toward healthy use. You can also learn about parental controls for social media and your options for monitoring for signs of potential harm.



**ACTIVITY:** Check out these resources from *We Think Twice*™ created especially for teens and their parents/caregivers:

- For teens: Share the [Mental Health and Social Media quiz](#) with teens in your life. It will help them find out how their own social media habits might be affecting their mental health.
- For parents/caregivers: Read [Social Media and Teen Mental Health: Guide for Parents & Caregivers to Support Healthy Social Media Use Among Teens](#), then use the accompanying discussion guide to discover how teens in your life are using social media and start a conversation with them about it.

- **Encourage a diverse media diet that includes body-positive content.**

Suggest a variety of media content that shows diverse body types and promotes body positivity. This helps adolescents develop a more inclusive view of beauty. Find examples of social media influencers and celebrities who are refusing to allow their images to be altered. Steer teens toward social media accounts that promote acceptance of one's body rather than those that create impossible expectations. Body-positive accounts, hashtags, messages, and pictures pop up on image-based social media sites like Instagram, making it easy for users to find body positivity resources on social media. For example, a quick #bodypositivity search on Instagram reveals 12 million posts use the hashtag to promote a healthy acceptance of one's body. You might also want to consider encouraging the teens in your life to unfollow or unfriend accounts that promote extreme dieting, a certain body type as the ideal beauty standard, or other harmful ideas and behaviors. Spend some time with them exploring websites and social media accounts that celebrate all body types. Seeing a variety of people helps us appreciate the beauty in diversity.



**ACTIVITY:** Ask these questions:

- *How do the accounts you follow make you feel?*
- *Are there other accounts out there that might show a greater variety of bodies?*


### Encourage healthy lifestyle choices.

Teach teens to focus on health over appearance. Empower them to set life-long healthy habits with these strategies:

- **Promote a balanced approach to nutrition and physical activity.** Caution against fad diets or extreme or restrictive eating habits. Emphasize the importance of nourishing the body with a balanced diet and engaging in physical activities for health rather than for appearance. Eating nutritious foods and being active are essential for overall health. It's about feeling good and having energy.



**ACTIVITY:** Explore the following resources for finding nutrition/exercise advice with teens:

- eatright.org: [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: For Teen](#) 
- U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA): [MyPlate Nutrition Information for Teens](#)
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases: [Take Charge of Your Health: A Guide for Teenagers](#)

Being a certain weight doesn't automatically mean someone will have a positive body image or that they are healthy. Weight is only one measure of health, and it's totally normal for weight to go up and down during adolescence. The key is for teens to find balance and follow the advice of health professionals instead of comparing themselves with others and using diets to control their weight. Health professionals can support teens in safely monitoring their weight over time so that it's right for them.

- **Teach teens about the benefits of mindfulness.**

Researchers have found that mindfulness practice can improve body appreciation and self-esteem and decrease the risk for eating disorders.<sup>31</sup> Mindfulness means focusing one's attention on the present moment, including thoughts, feelings, and sensations. It involves nonjudgmental acceptance, which can foster a sense of calm and well-being.

**ACTIVITY:** Share [8 Healthy Habits for a Mindful Life](#) with the teens in your life to help them begin practicing mindfulness. It's written especially for teens by *We Think Twice*<sup>™</sup>.

- **Emphasize the importance of self-care, including stress management and sleep.** These practices contribute to a healthier mind and body. Managing stress, getting enough sleep, and taking time for yourself are crucial aspects of self-care. They contribute to a healthy mind and body.

**ACTIVITY:** Help teens make a self-care plan using materials included in [this lesson from We Think Twice](#)<sup>™</sup>. The materials include a set of well-being and self-care resources designed especially for teens.

### Be a positive role model.

Positive self-talk sets an example for teens.<sup>32</sup> Avoid criticizing your own or others' bodies and avoid talking about wanting to change your body. Instead, remember to show appreciation for your body. Rather than saying, "I don't like this about myself," try saying, "I appreciate my body for what it allows me to do." When you talk about eating or exercise, talk about the health benefits of your decisions instead of how they might affect your appearance. Don't talk about some foods being "good" and some being "bad." Rather than saying, "No dessert for me today...I want to look good in my swimsuit next month," try simply saying, "No thank you."





**ACTIVITY:** Discover any bias you might have about body size. Most people tend to have an automatic preference or bias for thin people over fat people. Take the Weight Implicit Associations Test offered by [Project Implicit](#) to see if you have a bias toward thin people vs. fat people. To see the menu of tests without registering, you can log in as a guest. After signing on as a guest, read the page entitled “Preliminary Information” and click “I wish to proceed.” Then choose “Weight IAT” and follow the instructions. Becoming aware of your own biases is the first step toward accepting all body types and being a good example for the teens in your life. You might be surprised by what you learn!

### Surround adolescents with positive role models who prioritize health over appearance.

Show the teens in your life how they can identify and connect with positive role models who prioritize health, confidence, and self-acceptance over narrow beauty norms. Share stories of positive figures who inspire you because of their kindness, confidence, or achievements.

### Address bullying and peer pressure.

Bullying about physical appearance is one of the most common types of bullying youth experience.<sup>33</sup> When teens are bullied about their appearance, weight, or physical features, it can cause shame, embarrassment, and low self-esteem, contributing to a negative body perception.<sup>34</sup> Being excluded by peers based on physical appearance can reinforce negative feelings about one’s body. Online harassment can further heighten feelings of insecurity. A negative body perception can also make a teen more susceptible to bullying because they may lack the confidence to stand up to bullies. Use these strategies to help a teen who is facing bullying related to their appearance.

- **Let them know they have your support.** Encourage them to confide in you or another trusted adult if there is anything bothering them. If you notice a change in their behavior, mention your concern and offer to talk about it. Reassure them that the bullying is not their fault. Ask open questions to find out the details of what happened and talk through a plan for how they can respond and how you can help.
- **Encourage assertiveness and self-advocacy.** Teach teens to express their needs and boundaries confidently. Assertiveness means standing up for yourself while respecting others.
- **Inform the school administration about the bullying.** Discuss what steps the school takes to prevent and address bullying and the limitations around what can be done based on policies and laws. With cyberbullying, it’s best not to respond directly to the bullying. [Learn about your options for reporting cyberbullying.](#) In severe cases, consider reporting the bullying to authorities if the school is not able to resolve the situation.

**ACTIVITY:** With the teen in your life, make a list of adults in their life who focus on developing positive character traits and meaningful achievements. Don’t put excessive attention on the teen’s physical appearance or compare them with others.

**ACTIVITY:** Use role play to help teens practice responding assertively to in-person bullying (either responding to someone who is bullying them or standing up for a peer who is being bullied). Have them practice using unemotional language and a calm tone and using assertive body language like maintaining eye contact.

For more information on how parents and caregivers can address bullying, visit [stopbullying.gov](https://stopbullying.gov).

## SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP

**Know the signs of body image-related issues that may require professional intervention.**

Become familiar with the red flags indicating potential body image struggles, such as significant changes in behavior, mood, or eating habits.

- **These are some warning signs to look for:**<sup>35-36</sup>
  - A relentless pursuit of thinness and unwillingness to maintain a normal or healthy weight
  - Intense fear of gaining weight
  - Being heavily influenced by perceptions of body weight and shape
  - Denial of the seriousness of low body weight or rapid weight loss (no matter the starting weight)
  - Excessive exercise patterns
  - Checking behaviors (checking appearance in the mirror often, measuring body parts, pinching skin)
  - Being preoccupied with a perceived flaw in physical appearance that is not observable to others or is a slight physical difference ([body dysmorphia](#))
  - Consistent negative self-talk
  - Body avoidance (avoiding situations where body image may cause anxiety, such as swimming)
  - Making excuses to avoid mealtimes or situations involving food
  - Dramatic changes in eating habits (e.g., meal skipping, marked dietary changes, refusal to eat with family or peers)



**Encourage seeking help when needed and reduce the stigma surrounding therapy.**





Stress the significance of getting professional assistance when concerns about physical appearance impact teens' overall well-being. Reducing the stigma around therapy promotes early intervention and support. Just like we go to a doctor for physical health, seeking help from a mental health professional is a positive step toward taking care of our emotional well-being. It's a sign of strength, not weakness. The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD) has a free [Eating Disorders Helpline](#) available for treatment referrals, support and encouragement, and general questions about eating disorders. Call (888) 375-7767 Monday–Friday, 9 am to 9 pm CST for support.

## CONCLUSION


Empowering adolescents to develop a positive body image requires a comprehensive approach. By fostering open communication, promoting self-esteem, nurturing healthy habits, and being mindful of societal influences, you can play a crucial role in supporting the well-being of adolescents in your care. Every conversation and action contributes to building the resilience and self-acceptance necessary for their overall well-being.

## RESOURCES

### For parents/caregivers

- National Eating Disorders Association: [Media and Your Body Image: What You Need to Know](#) 
- Nemours KidsHealth: [Helping Kids Deal with Bullies](#) 
- National Public Radio: [It's time to have the 'Fat Talk' with our kids – and ourselves](#) 
- [National Alliance for Eating Disorders](#) : This organization maintains a free helpline run by licensed therapists who specialize in eating disorders and offers regular, free, and virtual therapist-led support groups.

### To share with the teens in your life

- Nemours TeensHealth: [Body Image and Self-Esteem](#) 



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This guide was created by the *We Think Twice™* campaign with support from the Family and Youth Services Bureau. It is one of several valuable resources designed for youth-serving professionals as well as parents/caregivers. It is intended to encourage positive youth development by strengthening prevention education and other youth development programs.



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