



Promoting a Healthy Body Image in our Daughters and Sons

For too many young people, what they see in the mirror triggers sadness and anxiety that they don't measure up to the images of beauty or brawn that surround them. In fact, researchers have found that about 80% of females are dissatisfied with their appearance, and more than 80% of 10-year-old girls say they're afraid of being too fat. Body image problems are increasingly common among boys as well. But parents have a strong influence on children's body images and that influence begins very early in a child's life. So, what can parents do?

I. Background

- When we think of poor body image, we often think of eating disorders. Researchers estimate that about 7 million post-pubescent girls and women in the U.S. have an eating disorder, which includes anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder. About 1 million males have an eating disorder.
- But beyond clinical disorders, which are associated with deeper psychological issues as well as concerns about body image, a very large percentage of females and a significant number of males suffer from poor body image and may engage in "disordered eating" even if it doesn't reach the level of being a clinical disorder.
- One contributing factor is the unrealistic standard set by media images that surround us – and the way we buy into those images and compare ourselves to them. For example, the average American female is 5'4" tall and weighs 140 - 150 pounds, while the average American fashion model is 5'11" and weighs 117 pounds. Starlets, on average, wear a size 2 or 4, while the average dress size of ordinary women is a 12 - 14. (Never mind air-brushing of photos, which only exaggerates the comparison.)

II. Encouraging a healthy body image

- Watch what you say
This includes not only comments you make to your child about his or her body, but casual comments you make about others.
- Engage your child in critical thinking about media images
- Focus attention on healthy role models
Seek out role models of all shapes and sizes who are strong, smart, accomplished and doing good in the world.
- Make healthy eating and exercise a lifestyle for your whole family
- Nurture your child's self-worth through competence and character development