



GULP!

Talking With Your Kids About Sexuality



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Focus on Body Image

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Body Image.

The key to dealing with body image is to stop being obsessed about it ourselves. Let's take the pressure off kids, and help them love their bodies just the way they are.

Ages 0 to 5: Setting the Stage

by Katherine McLaughlin

Parents all over the country are increasingly facing a new challenge: having to address body issues with their young children. Young girls are concerned about their weight and are worried that they're getting fat, and young boys feel the need to get bigger, stronger and more muscular. As parents of young children, we need to start helping our kids feel better about their bodies by building a solid foundation against cultural messages about our bodies.

This is a daunting task, however. We live in a culture that is afraid of fat and judges people who are considered overweight. One study asked 3rd grade students to look at pictures of other children and decide which child they would not want to become friends with. Overwhelmingly, children picked the kid who was overweight they judged him to be "lazy and stupid." We also see messages about the ideal body size from the toys marketed to our young children. Aside from being thing, Barbie has proportions that are unrealistic--if she were human, she would have to walk on all fours.

GI Joe's proportions have changed as well. His biceps in 1960 measured 12"; in 1997, his biceps measured 26". Barbie and GI Joe, as well as other toys and characters marketed toward young children, can cause both boys and girls to feel they need to have the "ideal" body even when these images are unrealistic.

Parents have a big influence on how their kids feel about their bodies, and often give indirect messages about ideal body size. When a parent makes negative comments about her own body such as "I'm so fat," or is constantly dieting, it sends a message to young children that we need to change our bodies to fit a certain image, rather than accept our bodies and take care of them.

Parents also make comments about their child's body that might seem harmless or playful, but give subtle messages to their children. If a mother tells her three year old daughter, "you better be careful eating all that food or your thighs will stay chubby forever", she might get the message that it's not okay to have a healthy appetite.

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"Childhood's learning is made up of moments. It isn't steady. It's a pulse."

—Eudora Welty

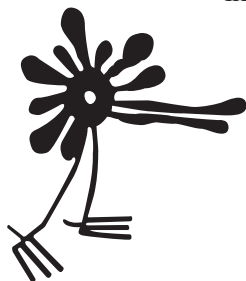
Bodies are... **UNIQUE**

Ages 5 to 9: Getting Started

by Hilary Bandtlow

Many 6-9 year-old children are active and comfortable in their bodies. They may climb trees, skip, run, dance, or proudly march around the bathroom naked while the bath's running. They may seem years away from the stresses of puberty or eating disorders. But recent studies show it is not uncommon for 7 and 8 year-old girls to begin menstruating. And today's young children are often concerned about issues previously associated with the teen years (like dating and dieting). These early elementary school years provide a great opportunity to help shape a positive body image for your child.

At this age, children are really learning to master the use of their bodies. The five year old who couldn't spread peanut butter on bread without getting it everywhere else too transforms into the nine year-old star pitcher on the local little league team. In these years, a child enters the world of gym class, sports teams, dance lessons, bike riding, and neighborhood games like tag and "kick the can." As their bodies rapidly grow, they become acquainted with a whole world of physical activities that test their strength, flexibility, coordination and natural abilities. They are learning what society's standards are for "ideal" beauty. Perhaps your little girl is experimenting with make-up and trying to dress like



Britney Spears. Perhaps your little boy is starting to idolize the muscular athletes of professional sports. These experiences, including how the child feels and how others respond to her, will shape her body image. How you and other people around her react to her body and appearance (to weight, height, skin color, or prominent features) has an impact.

Parents are extremely powerful role models for children this age. Think about body or food issues you may have yourself. Often, the issues of the parent become the issues of the child. If well intentioned parents focus on their child's appearance too much, the child may feel inadequate, develop lower self-esteem, and become preoccupied with his or her body as a way to improve him- or herself in the eyes of others. Young children must learn that their bodies are unique and beautiful, not something for comment or discussion by others.

Another way children learn how to behave is by imitating role models in the media.

American children spend more time watching television than any other activity except sleeping! What is television teaching children about body image? It presents a world in which most people are young, white, thin, fit and beautiful. Cartoons are full of stereotypes, with villains

usually possessing non-Caucasian features and speaking in foreign accents. Old people are rarely seen, or shown as feeble grandparents baking cookies. Many ads for unhealthy products (such as

sugar-coated cereals) are marketed directly to your children. Unhealthy depictions of certain body types (for example, fat people being teased) are common. Food is often shown as a bribe, something that brings happiness, or a sinful indulgence. Models of thin women and muscular men are everywhere in a child's environment. The media's physical stereotypes are reinforced through toys (like Barbie dolls and Power Rangers), billboards, and magazines. In a 1997 Body Image Survey, both girls and boys reported that "very thin or muscular models" made them feel insecure about themselves. Discuss with your

Good Reads for Parents

- ☞ *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls.* Joan Jacobs Brumberg. Random House, Incorporated, 1997.
- ☞ *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls.* Mary Pipher. Ballantine Publishing Group, 1995.
- ☞ *Preventing Childhood Eating Problems.* Jane Hirschman, LSW, and Lela Zaphiropolous. Gurze Books, 1993.
- ☞ *Am I Fat? Helping Young Children Accept Differences in Body Size: Suggestions for Teachers, Parents, and Other Care Providers of Children to Age 10.* Joanne Ikeda. ETR Associates, 1996.

Bodies are... **EVER-CHANGING**

children the media images they see. To play the primary role in your child's social learning, discuss your views clearly and directly, so the media doesn't "fill in the blanks." And remember, body image concerns are not just about media content. Recent evidence cites heavy television viewing as one cause of obesity in children. Limit the time they spend sitting (and snacking!) in front of a television or computer screen. Encourage them to go outside and be active.

If you focus on the concept of "fit" instead of "fat," you can teach your child that health, not appearance, is what's important. Encourage your child to take pride in developing healthy eating and exercise habits. Be aware that children who participate in activities where there is a focus on appearance are particularly at risk for feeling bad about their bodies. This includes ballet, gymnastics, running or swimming, because these are activities where much of the body is exposed or thinness is demanded. For a child not inclined toward competitive sports, there are many ways to use one's body besides what's offered in gym class—dancing, skating, going for walks or biking. Being active with your kids stresses the importance of finding physical activities

Myth:

Fat people have no self-control.

that they can enjoy for the rest of their lives.

Parents must teach children to trust and listen to their bodies. It is during these years that many children stop following their natural inclination to stop eating when they are full, leading to unhealthy eating patterns. To reinforce healthy behavior, you can praise them for starting with smaller portions and knowing when to stop (instead of for eating everything on their plate). Providing access to a wide variety of healthy foods and teaching your child that

non-nutritious foods are okay, so long as they are eaten in moderation, can also help. If you present food and nutrition in a positive light, avoiding the common negative focus on "junk food", "bad foods", "overweight" etc. it may make food and eating experiences healthy, fun, and non-threatening for your child. Perhaps you would enjoy teaching your child about cooking, or making your Sunday trip to the supermarket a "tour" to learn about different foods and nutrition. You could make a game of sampling foods from around the world at home or in your favorite restaurants. What's important is that your child learns that food and eating are natural and fun activities.

Another way parents can help shape a positive body image in a young child is by thinking in terms of

prevention. Start to talk about body changes of puberty early so he isn't surprised or confused by major events when they happen. Many adults say that they were never prepared for these changes and became scared or ashamed because there was no one to reassure them that they were normal. It helps children to know there is a wide variation in ages when these changes occur. Giving your child information ahead of time may help her maintain a positive body image when the time comes.



Showing and telling children that they are accepted and loved for reasons that have nothing to do with appearance (like intelligence, compassion, self-respect, generosity, etc.) sets a healthy example for children with your own words and actions. Avoid teasing children about their bodies or appearance. A parent can make all the difference in the world by telling their son or daughter, "Your body is where you're going to be living for the rest of your life. Make it a loved home." ☑

Good Reads—Ages 5 to 9:

Aunty Pua's Dilemma. Ann KindoCorum. Mutual Publishing LLC, 1994.

Belinda's Bouquet. Leslea Newman. Alyson Publications, 1992.



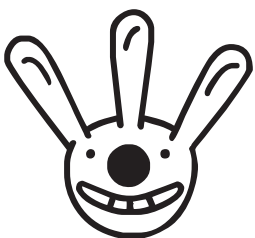
Ages 9 to 13: Really Talking

by Katherine Margarones

It's tough being a kid today, especially if you are in the in-between years of nine and thirteen. It can be an awkward time for kids because they're not children anymore, but they're also not quite teenagers. Due to this "in between" phase of their lives, nine to thirteen year olds are affectionately referred to as "tweens."

What makes it so hard being a tween? Their childhood bodies begin to grow, stretch, become round and soft, and voices become deep. Children who may have felt good about their bodies aren't prepared for the changes taking place, and it can be hard to learn to live with their new physiques.

When tweens' bodies begin to change, they often look to the media to find acceptance for their new bodies, and often they will try to conform to the media's image of the perfect body. Tweens often read magazines or watch TV shows that are geared toward their age group, and the images they see often represent society's view of the "ideal" body. A tween who is already self-conscious of her/his changing body sees these images every day, and often compares



herself to the 'ideal'.

What does this do to a young nine- or twelve- year-old? While a boy might try to speed up his body

growth and worry about being "manly" enough, a girl may be trying to keep her childlike size. Both may hurt their bodies by either

exercising too much, eating too little, or using clothes to hide their changing body, hoping no one will notice them. It's hard to fight the beauty industry that stares everyone in the face each day. Puberty-aged teens buy into the image more than most. They try to diet and exercise to become what only a slight percentage of women and men actually are...beautiful in the eyes of the media. Sometimes their competitive spirit is sparked and they may form a pact with their best friend to lose weight and see who can

Myth:

All boys want to be big and muscular; all girls want to be waif thin.

lose more, or who can lose it more quickly.

For some, a lifetime battle with an eating disorder may begin during these years. Tweens often feel helpless in controlling the changes their bodies are going through, but they still have control over what goes in to their bodies. Eating disorders, such as anorexia or bulimia, are ways that young teens can exert some control over their body changes and try to conform to the ideal cultural image of the slender form.

A major underlying reason that young teens are trying to conform is that they really just want to fit in.

- ☞ Don't control their diets
- ☞ Support healthy athletic activities
- ☞ Refrain from commenting about the natural body fat that accompanies early adolescence
- ☞ Help your child think about healthy food
- ☞ Express admiration for their bodies and help them see their beauty
- ☞ Encourage clothing that expresses their uniqueness but doesn't sexualize their bodies
- ☞ Continually confirm that people naturally have different shapes and looks, and that one's body is only a piece of who they are
- ☞ Introduce and acknowledge people in popular culture who don't fit the "ideal" look. Find the heroes and heroines that diminish the cultural obsession that perpetuates beauty stereotypes

Bodies are... **COMPLEX**

They wear the hippest clothes, they cut their hair in the latest style, and they listen to the latest music. Kids try to fit in to gain acceptance and belong. The key to acceptance is to look the “right” way, and young people who fit the “ideal” are most often the most popular. Those not fitting in may feel the sting of teasing, bullying, or be cast out by the group, particularly if they are overweight or don’t fit the ideal body image.

Parents may unknowingly help teens feel pressured to fit the ideal body image. Although it may be hard to admit, parents want their kids to be popular, and to fit in. In an effort to help them, parents may make comments about their child’s body changes, recommend that their son or daughter eat a little less to take off some of that “baby fa,” or even regulate the amount of fat in their diet. In addition, parents with a negative body image or an unhealthy lifestyle are more likely to raise a child with a negative body image. What can we do to make sure that our tweens grow into their adult bodies in a healthy way?

Perhaps the most important thing we can do is talk with our children. Start early by talking with them about what they see other kids going

to notice warning signs of unhealthy behaviors, including excessive exercise, limiting food intake, trying to bulk up, and hiding one’s body behind clothes clothes.

Good Websites on Body Image

Ages 5-10

- ☞ www.newmoon.org
- ☞ www.adiosbarbie.com

Ages 12-18

- ☞ www.about-face.org
- ☞ www.extrahip.com
- ☞ www.teenvoices.com

Parents:

- ☞ www.aabainc.org
- ☞ www.edap.org
- ☞ www.melpomene.org
- ☞ www.cswd.org
- ☞ www.radiancemagazine.com

Prepare your child for the changes their body will face during puberty before they happen. Offer support as your child’s body becomes awkward. Encourage the celebration of puberty as a rite of

through at school, in the neighborhood, and on television. Show them diverse bodies by having books, magazines, or movies at home that have characters or models of various sizes, shapes, and abilities. Let your children “overhear” adult conversations about the normality of body changes and having a healthy lifestyle. Point out when you see something unrealistic on television or in a magazine, and ask their opinion about it. Become familiar with what your kids watch on television, read, and what kind of music they listen to. These can be great starting points for conversations about body image. Get to know your child’s friends. One way to do that is to become involved in your child’s activities. This may help you

passage and a way to deepen your relationship with your child. Tell your children that they are exceptional. Appreciate and enjoy them as individuals and family members. ☞

Good Reads—Ages 9 to 13:

Blubber. Judy Blume. Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers, 1976.

The Pig-Out Blues. Jan Greenberg. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, LLC, 1987.

The Planet of Junior Brown. Virginia Hamilton. Simon & Schuster Children’s Publishing, 1971.

When Zachary Beaver Came to Town. Kimberly Williams. Holt, Henry, and Company, LLC, 1999.



Ages 13 to 18: Beyond It All

by Tara Messier

Teenagers today are growing up in a time of rapid cultural change. Some issues facing teens have remained constant throughout generations while others have not. Teens are still concerned with passing a test on Thursday, making the sports team or having a date for the spring formal. However, today they also need to fit into society's increasingly narrow idea of beauty. Teenagers are exposed to more television and magazine advertisements than any other generation.

The images of the men and women in these advertisements represent an unobtainable ideal. According to popular media, "real men" are tall and strong while "real women" are thin and beautiful. Advertisers would have us believe that being muscular or being beautiful are linked with success and happiness. From movies, television, and magazines teens are learning that happiness comes from beauty and success from physical strength. As a result, teens worry about how they are seen by their peers. They wonder "Am I thin enough?" "Am I man enough?"

Adolescent girls and boys are responding to an increased pressure to look a certain way. A 1991 study the American Association of University Women (AAUW) found that only 29% of girls and 49% of boys in high school felt "happy the

way I am" in relation to how their bodies looked. These numbers reflect a significant drop from those reported by elementary school children. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 90% of persons with eating disorders are women and girls. Girls and women feel enormous pressure to obtain an unrealistic ideal of beauty and perfection and often resort to frequent dieting and obsessive exercise as a result.

Myth:

Fat teens don't have sex.

Obsession around dieting has been

linked to emotional responses in girls, such as increased levels of stress and anxiety. In several studies depression in adolescent girls has been linked to negative feelings about body image. Self-worth has been associated with feelings about the attractiveness of one's body. The AAUW found that possessing a negative body image increased the risk that an adolescent girl would commit suicide.

A desire to be thin also increases the likelihood that adolescent girls will smoke cigarettes. One in four girls who smoke report that they do so as a way to curb appetite. Some girls may smoke to decrease hunger from skipped meals. Adolescent girls often give fear of weight gain as a reason for not quitting smoking.

And what about boys? Although

boys are less likely to be diagnosed with eating disorders, boys are beginning to report and demonstrate concerns over body image. This increase seems to reflect the attitude of adult men. Half of the men in a recent study conducted by researchers at Harvard and Brown Universities reported thinking about their appearance frequently and expressed an unwillingness to accept a promotion if it meant a disruption in their workout schedule. High school boys are also concerned with being strong and muscular. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2.9% of 12th graders report use of steroids to increase body muscle mass.

Concern with their physical appearance can lead to lower self-esteem, poor grades in school and social withdrawal. Boys may become increasingly violent and physically combative as a way to demonstrate strength. Some studies have linked the increase in youth violence with an increase in a need for boys to be strong and powerful. Participation in violence may be a way for boys to demonstrate power and strength. Girls who are concerned about appearance tend to withdraw from social situations if they feel physically inadequate, that is not pretty enough.



How can we help our own children?

Bodies are... **FASCINATING**


Parents can influence how teens feel about their bodies. Teenagers whose parents are critical of their bodies have a more negative body image than those whose parents compliment and accept them. An adolescent boy who gets the idea from his father that he needs to be muscular to be a man is more likely to use steroids or obsess over weightlifting to build muscle than if he were to grow up in a family where manhood was defined in other ways. Girls who are encouraged to love and accept their bodies as they are are less likely to feel badly about their appearance than girls who live in families where body image is important. Teens whose families support a healthy body image are less likely to develop obsessions with image and eating disorders.

Here are some ways to encourage a healthy body image in your teen:

- Explore how you feel about shape and weight. Parents with unresolved issues around their own shape and weight may be passing negative issues on to their kids. Watch how you verbalize negative feelings about your own body in front of your teenager and be aware of your efforts to change your appearance. What does your constant dieting tell your teenage daughter about her own weight?
- Help your teen challenge popular media images. Begin conversations about the muscular boys and thin girls seen in movies and on TV. Teach your teen to think critically about what is considered normal by advertisers and producers. Find ways to help them fight by writing letters to companies and buying products from responsible companies.
- Teach healthy eating and exercise rather than dieting. Begin to teach children at a young age to eat only when they are hungry and to stop eating when they are full. Encourage a balanced diet. Find a physical activity that your family can do together such as taking a family walk. Teach that exercise is about feeling good in your body rather than losing weight.
- Keep communication open. Since food is often tied to comfort, teens may overeat as a result of feelings of inadequacy, sadness or stress. Ask your adolescent about feelings and really listen to their answers.
- Help your teen understand biology. Some boys will never grow up to be tall and many girls will not be rail-thin. Teach your teen that biology dictates basic body structure and size. Help your teen feel good about the size of his body by finding ways to capitalize on body stature. A boy who is picked on for being short may find esteem in volunteering with younger children who look up to him.
- Encourage teens to pursue hobbies and activities of interest. Adolescents who are active in music or the school newspaper will be less

likely to spend time obsessing about their looks. Help teens to link self-worth with accomplishments rather than appearance.



- Compliment your teen. Acknowledge their successes and pay attention to their lives.
 - Encourage sports. A healthy attitude about sports and physical activities can increase the likelihood that your teen will have a positive body image. Pay attention to the attitudes that leaders and coaches of sports and activities have about diet, exercise, and body image. Discourage teens from joining teams where the coach or leader puts too much emphasis on weight and diet.
- Growing up is tough. Parents can be influential in the way a young person feels about her or his body. By spending time with your teenager and being open to them, parents can have an enormous impact on the self-esteem and body image of their adolescent. 

Good Reads—Ages 12 to 16:

The Best Little Girl in the World. Steven Levonkron. Contemporary Books, Incorporated, 1985.

Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes. Chris Crutcher. HarperCollins Children's Book Group, 1993.

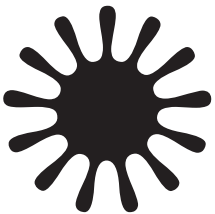
Nell's Quilt. Susan Terris. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, LLC, 1996.



—continued from page 1

Other adults give young kids messages early on about how they are supposed to look. Family friends, and even strangers, will tell girls they look pretty and boys that they are strong, but usually only when the child fits this image. Children begin to see that the only attention they get is focused on how they look, not on how smart or fun they are.

So what can you do to help your children feel good about their bodies? Here are some tips:



- Tell your kids that it's important to take care of their bodies by eating healthy food, getting plenty of sleep, and exercising. Tell your kids to listen to their bodies to know if they are hungry and to stop eating when they feel full.
- Tell your kids that their body shape and size is just right for them. Explain that everyone is given a certain body, and that just as some people have straight hair and some people have curly hair, some people are short or tall, fat or thin. Tell them that as long as they take care of your body, it'll do what it needs to do.
- Role model a healthy body image and take care of your body. Eat well,

sleep, exercise and don't put your body down.

- Be aware of the TV and toy images your young children are exposed to. Talk about these images and try to provide alternative images. Talk about how your child's action figure toy looks very muscular and tell him that it's okay to look different. You can also talk about how the action figure's body is unrealistic. You can say, "isn't this silly, have you ever seen anyone with a body like that? That's not how real people look."
- Notice if you are focused on how your children look rather than how smart they are or kind they are. Try using other words to discuss your kid like "lovable, sweet, thoughtful, creative, smart. Do you only tell little boys and girls that fit the "ideal" body type that they look pretty or handsome and don't say anything to the little kids who are chubby or overweight??"
- Parents of kids this age often have more control over what kids eat because the children are sitting in high chairs or parents send a lunch to day care or preschool. Notice how your own body image and relationship to food may be passed onto your child. Do you restrict your child's food intake

because you're afraid she will become overweight? Do you find yourself constantly handing your child food when he is crying, which might teach him to eat when he is upset?

- Lastly, tell your kid that bodies are great. Bodies help us run, skip, go sledding, and dance. They are a positive part of us, and something to appreciate and to love.

Even young people need help developing a healthy body image, which leads to high self-esteem. We can help our young children develop a healthy body image by being aware of our own body image and relationship to food. We also need to find ways to give kids positive, healthy messages that counter some of the negative body messages that exist in our culture. Our kids need us in so many ways, and we can help our young children accept the bodies they are given, feel good about them, take care of them, and enjoy them! ☑

Bodies are...
OURS TO OWN

Good Reads—Ages 0 to 5:

The Whale Who Wanted to be Small. Gill McBarnet. Ruwanga Trading, 1985.

ABC I Like Me. Nancy Carlson. Viking Penguin, 1997.



GULP! is a newsletter designed to help parents talk with their children about sexuality. It is published twice a year by Planned Parenthood of Northern New England (PPNNE). PPNNE provides reproductive health and education services to women, men, and teens throughout Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. Call **1.800.488.9638**.