Did you know…

Many children are disappointed with their body shape and size and grow up believing that their appearance isn’t good enough. According to the Halton Youth Survey (2006) 64% of grades 7’s have done something to change their weight or body shape. These thoughts and behaviours can lead to an unhealthy body image and low self-esteem.

In a society that places a lot of importance on how we look, we need to help children understand that healthy bodies come in a variety of shapes and sizes.

It’s what’s inside that counts!

What can you do?

Health Canada’s Vitality message recommends focusing on the following key areas to help children achieve the best health.

1. Eat healthy
2. Be active
3. Feel good about yourself

As a parent or caregiver you are a powerful role model for your child. Your child looks to you as a model for their own behaviour. Setting a good example will encourage your child to develop healthy attitudes and behaviours and reinforce healthy lifestyle choices.
Helping children to eat healthy

Families and caregivers play a major role in creating a positive eating environment. Taking time to eat meals together makes eating more enjoyable and helps children develop a healthy attitude toward food. Teaching children healthy eating habits regardless of their shape and size will promote healthy growth and development and a body size and shape that is right for them.

Remember that as a parent you are responsible for the food that is provided and your child is responsible for the amount of food eaten. Diets are not recommended for children as their bodies and brains are still developing.

Helpful hints:

• Enjoy a wide variety of foods; use "Eating Well with Canada’s Food Guide".
• Prepare meals that include a variety of foods from each of the four food groups.
• Involving children in meal planning and preparation helps teach skills necessary to make healthy choices.
• Enjoy regular structured meals and snack times. Aim to eat together as a family at least three times a week.
• Encourage your child to listen to their body; eat when they are hungry, stop when they are full. Healthy eating means enjoying all kinds of food in moderation without feeling guilty.

Helping children to be active

To remain healthy children need to be active everyday. Most children do not participate in the 90 minutes per day of moderate activity (e.g., walking) or vigorous activity (running, climbing, swimming) as recommended by Canada’s Physical Activity Guide for Children and Youth. Your child relies on you to provide opportunities to be active. Being active with your child in fun ways will help your child be more active and healthy.

Here are some other ideas...

• Provide opportunities for being active. Look for programs that teach the basics, focus on participation over skill and are non-competitive. Helping children learn basic skills can increase their confidence and self-esteem.
• Help your child enjoy different types of activities besides organized sport. Unstructured play promotes creativity, social skills, coordination, balance, muscle development and strength.
• Promote activities that can be done as a family and can be enjoyed lifelong such as walking, cycling, swimming, hiking and playing catch.
• Be an active role model. Walk whenever you can – use the stairs instead of the elevator.
• Limit screen time to no more than two hours a day (e.g., computer use, playing video games and watching television). Encourage active play instead.

Helping children to feel good about their bodies

Children grow and develop at different rates. Your child may be taller or shorter, lighter or heavier than other children the same age. These differences in growth rates can sometimes make children worry about their own bodies. Boys and girls who are unhappy with their body shape and size may develop unhealthy habits in an effort to achieve a "perfect body" or weight. Parents and caregivers can help children feel good about their bodies and make healthy choices.

Here are some ideas...

• Help your child understand that:
  - Genetics plays a role in determining body shape and size.
  - Healthy bodies come in a variety of shape and sizes.
• Talk about how the media and stereotypes can affect how they feel about their bodies.
• Encourage your child to choose role models based on their internal qualities (athletic ability, kind and artistic) rather than on appearance.
• Be aware of the non-verbal and verbal messages you send (e.g., the comments you make on the appearance of yourself and others).
• Don’t weigh your child. A child’s weight should be compared to his or her own pattern of growth over a long period of time.
• Encourage healthy eating and physical activity for the entire family. Praise your child for the healthy choices they make.

Resources

For more information on physical activity, healthy eating and feeling good about yourself go to:

www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide
www.paguide.com
www.halton.ca/health/resources
www.dietitians.ca
www.halton.ca/SCS/childrenshealth

The Children’s Health Information Line
Help is a call away...

Public health nurses provide free information and advice on child health issues.

How can you reach us?
8:30 a.m-4:30p.m., Monday through Friday
Dialing 311/211 or 905-825-6000 ext.7877
TTY:905-827-9833
www.halton.ca