Helping Children to Eat Healthy, Be Active and Feel Good About Themselves
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1. Introduction

Healthy children (and adults) come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Many children are disappointed with their body shape and size and grow up believing that their appearance isn’t good enough. This may lead to low self-esteem, unhealthy body image and participation in unhealthy behaviours. It is estimated that 15-30% of youth (girls and boys) engage in disordered eating behaviours, which range from skipping meals, fasting and restricted eating to over exercising in order to change the shape of their body (Spears, 2006). According to the Halton Youth Survey (2006), 64% of grade 7 students indicated that they have done something to change their weight and body shape.

As a parent, family member, teacher, group facilitator or recreational leader who lives or works with children, you are a role model. Your non-verbal and verbal communication can directly affect how children feel about themselves, their bodies, their appearance and the appearances of others. It is important as a role model to encourage healthy lifestyle attitudes and behaviours in children that are not motivated by weight (child’s size or shape) but rather on achieving health. People who feel good about themselves and their bodies are more likely to have a healthy self-esteem and adopt healthy lifestyle attitudes and behaviours (Health Canada 2000).

The purpose of this resource is to provide parents and caregivers with information that can be used to promote healthy growth and development in children.
II. Body Image Development

Body image is the mental picture you have of your body. It includes your feelings and attitudes toward your physical appearance and also your perception of how others see you. People who feel good about themselves and their bodies are more likely to have a healthy self-esteem and feelings of positive self worth (Health Canada, 2000).

When does a person’s body image develop?
From a very early age, children begin to develop an image of the way they see their body and decide how they feel about it. Children learn that they are tall or short, blonde or brunette, while also learning to like, dislike, or simply feel indifferent to their various physical characteristics. Body image becomes more refined as they learn to enjoy using their bodies in recreational activities. Transition times such as puberty can make children feel more vulnerable and insecure.

What influences body image development?
Adults, family, peers and the media play important roles in the development of the image children have of themselves. These influences begin in childhood and continue throughout life. It is important that children receive positive messages about their bodies so that they learn to accept themselves as people with unique personalities and body shapes.

A. Family:
Interactions with others, positive and negative, influence how children feel about themselves. As a parent or caregiver you are a powerful role model for your child. They look to you as a model for their own behaviour. Your eating and physical activity habits or comments about your weight can strongly influence children’s body image and lifestyle behaviours. Setting a good example for your child will reinforce healthy lifestyle choices which focus on health versus a preoccupation with weight. It is also helpful to focus on a child’s internal qualities and character such as being kind or being a good sport, rather than commenting on their appearance and ability.

B. Heredity:
Differences in body shapes and sizes are influenced by heredity and genetics and are among the characteristics that make each person unique. Being comfortable with one’s body is an important step in developing a health body image and leading a healthy lifestyle.

C. Friends:
Friends can also influence how children feel about themselves by the comments they make about themselves and others’ clothes, hairstyles, body size, weight and shape. This influence increases as children approach adolescence. Pressure to fit in and comparing oneself to others often results in an unhealthy body image and low self-esteem.
D. **Media:**

The influence of media is all around us through magazines, television, movies, internet and video games. Media messages tell us what’s in fashion and how one should dress, act and look to be popular and attractive. This media imagery can affect the way we feel about ourselves. The media also promotes thinness and that a large body shape is undesirable, ignoring the fact that people come in a variety of healthy shapes and sizes. Children growing up in today’s society are exposed constantly to unhealthy messages about beauty, body shape and ways to achieve them (Dove, 2006). Advances in computer technology, for example, airbrushing, enables the media to adjust pictures of models, changing their physical features so that they conform to the “ideal body image”. Children who are not aware of these manipulations are at risk of comparing themselves to these unrealistic images and developing an unhealthy body image.
### III. Healthy Body Image

Healthy body image and self-esteem have a very close relationship. Your self-esteem has a direct effect on how you take care of yourself, emotionally, physically and spiritually. In order to feel comfortable with your body, there must be confidence and self-acceptance that only comes from a healthy self-esteem. It is hard to feel good about yourself if you dislike your body (Nedic, 2009). A healthy body image can lead to positive self-esteem, creating a well adjusted, emotionally stable and happy child who has the confidence to engage in life’s opportunities (Elementary Teachers Federation, 2003). The chart below identifies characteristics of a person with a healthy and unhealthy body image.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A person with a HEALTHY body image…</th>
<th>A person with an UNHEALTHY body image…</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believes that things other than appearance make them interesting (I am funny, smart, creative…).</td>
<td>Weighs themselves every day and depending on what the scale reads, feels happy or sad for the rest of the day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not let body shape or size stop them from participating in any activity (swimming, dance, joining clubs etc…).</td>
<td>Tries to reach the “ideal” body shape and size without believing that people come in a variety of shapes and sizes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not focus on appearance all the time.</td>
<td>Thinks it is okay to say negative things about another person’s appearance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believes that there is no such thing as a “perfect” body and does not try to change themselves.</td>
<td>Wishes they could change their appearance to look like someone else.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tries to find things they like instead of things they don’t like.</td>
<td>Relies on compliments in order to feel good about their appearance or personal achievements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believes that is it more important to focus on what you have instead of what you don’t have.</td>
<td>Compares weight and clothing size with friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepts themselves for who they are.</td>
<td>Worries all the time about what others may think about them (right clothes, hair, etc…).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can accept compliments.</td>
<td>May purposely skip meals or eat only certain foods in order to lose weight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eats all foods in moderation without worrying about gaining weight or feeling guilty.</td>
<td>Checks calories before eating any food to determine if they should eat it or not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believes “all” foods can be part of healthy eating.</td>
<td>Will not participate in activities because of how they feel about their body and their abilities.</td>
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Unhealthy Body Image: Where may it lead?
Unhealthy body image in both boys and girls can lead to a poor self-esteem, less participation in physical activities and a generalized withdrawal from other life activities. Unhealthy body image is associated with high risk behaviours such as dieting, disordered eating, obesity, perfectionism, depression, cutting (self-mutilation) and tobacco and substance abuse (Kater, Rohwer & Londre; Mcvey, Davis, Tweed & Shaw, 2004).

Children and teens may develop unhealthy behaviours for reasons such as:

- To cope with change, stress, depression, family problems and other anxieties associated with growing up.
- A fear of being fat.
- A fear of not measuring up to the images presented in the media.
- Hearing negative comments about their appearance.
- Pressure by coaches and/or parents who want to maintain a particular body shape and size e.g., sports or dance.
- Peer pressure to fit in/look like their friends, in order to avoid being teased or singled out.
IV. Healthy Lifestyles

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

A. Eat healthy.
B. Be active.
C. Feel good about yourself.

A. Helping Children to Eat Healthy

Families and caregivers play a major role in creating a positive eating environment. Taking the time to enjoy meals together makes eating more pleasurable and helps children develop a healthy attitude toward food. The frequency of shared family mealtimes has been shown to protect against the development of eating disorders, the risk of substance use and behaviour problems in adolescents (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). 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 natural for them. Focus on healthy eating, not dieting. 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”.
  www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide
- 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.
- Encourage milk and alternatives (Soya) at mealtimes. Bones grow fastest between age’s 11-14 years. This age group needs three to four servings each day to be healthy.
- Enjoy regular structured meals and snack times. Aim to eat together as a family at least 3 times a week. Eating family meals is linked with better food choices including higher intake of vegetables and fruits and healthier weights in children (Dietitians of Canada, 2007).
- Turn the television off at mealtimes.
- 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

As a parent, you are responsible for the food that is provided; your child is responsible for the amount of food eaten.
B. 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 such as running, climbing and swimming) as recommended by Canada’s Physical Activity Guides for Children and Youth. Regular physical activity can help children build greater peak bone mass, thereby reducing adult risk of osteoporosis. Physical activity also reduces risk for developing other chronic diseases including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and depression. Girls who play sports have higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of depression than girls who do not play sports (CAAWS, 2006).

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.

Helpful Hints:

• Provide opportunities for being active. Look for same gender programs that teach the basics, emphasize participation over skill and are non-competitive. Helping children learn basic skills can increase their confidence and self esteem.

• Help your child enjoy a wide variety of activities beyond 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, playing catch.

• Be an active role model. Walk whenever you can, use the stairs instead of the elevator etc.

• Limit screen time (e.g., computer use, playing video games, watching television) to no more than two hours a day (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2008). Encourage active play instead.

C. Helping Children to Feel Good About Themselves

The normal weight gain during puberty can worry girls as it is socially undesirable for girls to gain weight. This is especially true if their bodies are changing sooner or later than their peers. Growth spurts in boys occur later than in girls, but they may also worry if they see themselves as too short or small. Boys and girls who are dissatisfied with their body shape and size may develop unhealthy habits in an effort to achieve a “perfect body” or weight. Parent and caregivers can help children feel good about their bodies and make healthy choices.
Helpful Hints:

- Help your child understand that:
  - Genetics plays a role in determining body shape and size.
  - Healthy bodies come in a variety of shapes 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, 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).

- Build self-confidence and self-esteem through a range of activities, both physical and non-physical.

- Encourage your child to express their feelings; listen actively and talk about what your child experiences at school e.g., teasing.

- Celebrate the uniqueness of all people.

- 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.
C.1 What Messages Are You Sending?

The following questions are meant to help you to reflect on your thoughts and feelings about body image issues and identify messages you may be sending to children (Ikeda and Naworski, 1992; Davison and Birch, 2001; Elementary Teachers Federation, 2003).

Answer the following questions honestly:

☐ Am I dissatisfied with my shape or size?

☐ Do I talk about this? Who do I talk to? Who can overhear?

☐ Am I always on, or going on a diet? Who knows this?

☐ Do I express guilt when I eat certain food?

☐ Am I prejudiced against overweight or underweight children/adults?

☐ Do I control my child’s food intake?

☐ Do I tell my child that healthy food choices and exercise will lead to a specific body weight and shape?

☐ How many times have I heard or said “Oh, you have lost weight, you look wonderful”!

☐ How many times have I associated the word “fat” with other words such as “stupid”, “lazy”, “dumb”, or made the opposite association with “nice and skinny”? 
C.2 Things I Am Besides a Body

This is an activity you can complete yourself or with your child. This activity can help to identify the many assets, skills and abilities we all have beyond our appearance.

Some things I like about myself……………..

Some things that make me interesting……..

Some things that I am interested in…………

Some things that I am good at……………

Some things that are important to me……

Different roles that I play in life
(i.e., sister/brother/friend)…………………..

How I want others to view me…………….
The Body Image Building Blocks

- People become unhappy trying to control something that is not in their power to control. As for looks, it's best to make the most of who we were born to be.
- Hardly anyone looks as perfect as the models in advertisements. I will be careful not to compare myself or others to them.
- It helps to support each other in having a healthy body image, in eating well, and in being active.
- The way we look is only one part of us. We need to pay attention to all of who we are.
- Satisfy hunger completely with enough wholesome food at regular meals and snacks.
- It's important not to sit too much in our free time. Being active is one of the best things we can do for our health and self-confidence.
- Choose role models you admire for things deep inside and who make you feel good about who you are.
- The way we look will change as we grow up.
- There are many different normal ways for looks to change in puberty. Sooner or later, most girls and boys gain weight and fill out.
- Most of the way we look is determined before we are even born: taller, shorter, fatter, thinner—all are normal, all built in!
- Each person’s body works to grow and maintain a weight that is natural for him or her.
- Weight-loss diets are not a good idea. We can hold back hunger for a while but will eat more to make up for it later.

These behaviors keep us strong.
These are facts we must accept.
This advice is wise to follow.

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V. List of Appendices

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- B Does your Child Have a Healthy Body Image?
- C What You Should Know About Body Image
- D Role Modelling
- E The Big “P” Word
- F Sexuality Questions

The Articles for Reproduction can be used to develop newspaper articles, parent bulletins, school announcements and bookmarks. These articles can also be used to generate discussions with children about body image.
Appendix 1

Community Resources for Body Image
This resource list is for parents, teachers, group leaders, coaches and community partners. It includes a variety of websites that host an assortment of information about body image, self-esteem, eating disorders, healthy eating, empowerment, media awareness and physical activity.

Body Image Coalition of Peel
www.bodyimagecoalition.org
The purpose of this website is to share information about the work of the Body Image Coalition of Peel and resources such as the Directory of Resources and Services, and Everybody is a Somebody manual.

Danielle’s Place Eating Disorder and Resource Centre
http://www.daniellesplace.org/
Committed to providing a non-judgmental, caring and supportive community to any individual whose life has been touched by an eating disorder. Their mandate is to provide care that is complementary to the medical model. A holistic and self-directed approach to healing is promoted for families and individuals to begin, maintain or resume their healing journeys.

Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario
www.etfo.ca
This website displays a variety of resources for teachers, specifically the Reflections on Body Image project, which is a comprehensive educational project for children and youth in grades 1-8 to address the complex issue of body image.

Equality Rules
The goal of this website is to help educate students about the importance of healthy, equal relationships. Through interactive scenarios and quizzes, students will learn the importance of respecting themselves and others, as well as ways in which they can stand up for their friends in various situations.

Body Positive Organization
www.body-positive.com
This website offers an assortment of activities related to promoting positive body image. Body Positive looks at ways to help people feel good in their bodies.

Eat Right Ontario
www.ontario.ca/eatright
Registered Dieticians are now on hand at 1-877-510-510-2 to answer questions on a nutrition related information. The website can be used to submit nutrition and healthy eating questions to a Registered Dietitian online. The Eat Right Ontario hotline hours are 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., EST Monday to Friday, and the answers provided are free-of-charge.

Eating Well with Canada’s Food Guide
www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide
This website has a variety of healthy eating resources such as Eating Well with Canada’s Food Guide and related literature.

Girls Inc.
www.girlsinc.org
Girls Incorporated is a national non-profit youth organization dedicated to inspiring all girls to be strong, smart and bold. Innovative programs help girls confront subtle societal messages about their value and potential, and prepare them to lead successful, independent, and fulfilling lives.

Healthy Living, Healthy Children
Helping Children to Eat Healthy, Be Active and Feel Good About Themselves
Girl Power
www.girlpower.gov
Girl Power is a national public education campaign that helps to encourage and motivate 9 to 13 year-old girls to make the most of their lives.

Health Canada
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/nutrition/weights-poids/leaders_image-chefs_image_e.html
This website promotes acceptance of a wide range of healthy body shapes and sizes and encourages people to celebrate their own uniqueness.

Halton Region
www.halton.ca/Health/services/mentalhealth/body_image.htm
This website contains information and resources about body image including important tips for parents and caregivers.

National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC)
www.nedic.ca
NEDIC is a Canadian, non-profit organization established in 1985 to provide information and resources on eating disorders and weight preoccupation. The goal is to promote healthy lifestyles that allow people to be fully engaged in their lives.

Media Awareness Network
www.media-awareness.ca
This website provides practical teaching units and classroom activities for media education. It is also a forum for teachers to share ideas with other teachers.

Ontario Women’s Dictorate – Beauty Marks: Coping with Body Image, a Resource for Girls
http://www.citizenship.gov.on.ca/owd/english/youth/bodyimage.htm
This website displays a variety of information and resources related to girls/women and body image.

New Moon Publishing
www.newmoon.org
This website offers curricula and learning activities to go with each issue of New Moon Magazine. Each curriculum includes activities and resources for different grade groups (up to fourth grade, grades 5-8, and grades 9-12).

Registered Dietitians of Dairy Farmers for Ontario Teachers
www.teachnutrition.org
This website displays a selection of curriculum resources related to healthy eating.

Sheena’s Place
http://www.sheenasplace.org/
A centre offering services in a welcoming, non-institutionalized environment. Sheena’s place serves as a link between people with eating disorders and hospital based programs, schools, agencies, therapists and families.

Student Body
http://research.aboutkidshealth.ca/thestudentbody/home.asp
The Student Body is a teacher training module designed to help alert teachers and parents to the factors that can trigger unhealthy dieting among children and ways to prevent it. This website sheds light on several areas of concern.
Women’s Health Council of Ontario – Bodysense
www.bodysense.ca

BodySense is an education and outreach initiative dedicated to the promotion of positive body image in athletes.

Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity
http://www.caaws.ca/
Encourages women and girls to participate in sports and physical activity. Provides a variety of resources and links to helpful sites.

The Dove Self-Esteem Fund
www.campaignforrealbeauty.com

Educates and inspires all young people on a wider definition of beauty. Teacher resources are available (Real Beauty School Program).

Central West: Eating Disorder Program
www.cwedp.ca

Online eating disorder resources and support.

Dads and daughters
www.dadsanddaughters.org-
Provides tools for fathers to strengthen relationships with their daughters and to transform messages that value young women more for how they look than who they are.

Recommended Reading:


Additional resources can be found at [www.parentbooks.ca](http://www.parentbooks.ca)

**Information Booklets and Manuals:**


**Videos:**


What is Body Image and How Does it Develop?

Body image is a person’s mental picture of himself/herself. It includes a person’s feelings and attitudes toward his or her physical appearance and also his or her perception of how others see him or her.

Body image develops as individuals interact with the people and the world around them. Children, from a very early age, begin to develop a body image in the way they see their body and in deciding how they feel about it. Children learn that they are tall or short, blonde or brunette, while also learning to like, dislike or simply feel indifferent to these various physical characteristics.

Fostering a positive body image in the developing years and trying to encourage self acceptance is very important for the long term mental and physical health of a child.

We live in a society that values one ideal body shape for women and one ideal body shape for men. This value and focus has resulted in unhealthy and unrealistic expectations among girls and boys. Girls most often strive for thinness and boys most often strive for large and defined muscles.

Unfortunately there is also a strong message in our society that tells girls and boys that the ideal body “can be achieved by anyone willing to work hard enough for it”. This message is untrue and does not consider a young person’s genetic realities. Often people who do not “fit” this ideal are blamed for making the wrong choices and therefore are treated with disrespect and inferiority. For example, if a person is “overweight”, it is a common misbelief that the “overweight” person must not work out or must be eating too much fat.

Adults can help children learn to understand and accept their own body size and shape, feel good about themselves and tolerate physical differences in others. To do this effectively parents must first examine their own attitudes for possible prejudices. Children should be assured they are loved and respected as they are. They should be encouraged to develop personal attributes and skills that make them feel good about themselves.

Parents are powerful role models for children. Setting a good example will encourage children to develop healthy attitudes and behaviours and reinforce healthy lifestyle choices.

“If I have a child, I would help her to see the things she can do and the things she is good at. I wouldn’t want my daughter to think she is only worth something if she is pretty.” Grade 6, girl.
Appendix 2: B
Articles for Reproduction

Does Your Child Have a Healthy Body Image?

Body image is a person’s mental picture of himself/herself. If this picture is accurate and their feelings and relationships with their body are positive, they will probably have a positive body image.

There are a number of signs and behaviours which may help you to identify a body image problem in your child. Children may have some concerns with their bodies because their bodies grow and change so fast.

Below are some signs that may indicate that a child is experiencing body image dissatisfaction:

- Over or underestimate the size of his/her body.
- Talk about feeling “fat” or “ugly”.
- Talk negatively about body parts.
- Worry about being “too small”, “too big”, “too tall”, “too short”.
- Feel ashamed or embarrassed by their appearance, size, height or physical maturity.
- Over exercise, or exercise as a means to lose weight.
- Skips meals, not eating when hungry, diets, limits the amount of food eaten.
- Choose not to participate in physical activities.

It can be difficult to acknowledge that someone you care about and are responsible for may have a problem with body image. But if you approach your child with understanding and concern it will encourage honest discussion. At first, some children may not welcome your concern and may react with anger, fear or denial. If this happens your child will need support and understanding to face the issues.

Parents and caregivers can provide:

- **Education** (i.e. help your child understand that people come in a variety of shapes and sizes)
- **Validation** (you could say "I know it can hurt to admit that you don't like the way you look")
- **Acceptance** (you could say "I care about you just the way you are")
- **Reassurance** (you could say "I will help you anyway I can")

Responding to the needs and feelings of a child demonstrates that he/she is cared for and valued and this lays the ground work for the child to develop a clear and healthy picture of who they are.
What You Should Know About Body Image

Alexandra and Jake are in Grade 6. They have a lot on their minds. Alexandra worries about what her friends will think about the clothes her mom bought her for her birthday. She is also nervous about going to the co-ed birthday party this weekend…sometimes the boys tease her about her breasts that are starting to develop, they even pull her bra strap.

Jake worries about his height, he is shorter than most of the guys in his class and all of the girls are taller. He is also going to the co-ed birthday party this weekend…sometimes the boys and the girls (his supposed friends) call him names and make fun of his size. He is also pretty nervous about high school next year!

These worries may seem like ordinary worries. Every kid deals with thoughts like these right? Probably, but these worries and concerns take up a lot of time. When children compare themselves to others or worry about their appearance, it can become preoccupying and can get in the way of more enjoyable things like school, sports, hobbies and socializing with friends and family.

You can help your child feel better about their changing bodies by trying some of these ideas:

• Ask your child what they "deal with" at school and after school (e.g., put-downs, negative comments, uncomfortable situations).

• Help your child deal with put downs and negative comments (e.g., role-play; help them find ways of ignoring comments or responding to comments that don't put the other person down).

• Help your child focus on what her body does well and remind her of all the things she is besides a body (e.g., athletic, good musician, friendly, caring, funny).

• Focus on your child’s strengths and abilities rather than on her appearance. Help them identify things they like about themselves.

Puberty can be a very confusing time for children as their bodies develop, grow and change. The importance of helping children relax and enjoy the special qualities they have is a life-long skill that will help them through many challenging times.

Healthy bodies come in a variety of shapes and sizes.
Appendix 2: D
Articles for Reproduction

Role Modelling

You are being watched... someone can hear you. You are a parent or an adult children trust. You are a role model even when you least expect it. As a parent, teacher, caregiver, aunt or uncle, a child's self-image can be influenced by your actions, words and messages.

A positive message adults can send to children is that healthy bodies come in a range of weights, shapes and sizes and that there is NOT one "ideal" body shape or weight. Ask yourself the following questions to see if you are sending positive messages to children.

- Am I dissatisfied with my shape, size or weight? Do I talk about this? Who can overhear?
- Am I always on, or going on, a diet? Who knows this?
- Do I express guilt when I eat certain food?
- Do I make negative comments about the way other people look?
- Do I think "overweight" people have made bad choices about what they eat and therefore deserve to look the way they do?
- How many times have I heard or said "You've lost weight, you look great!"
- Do I tell my child that healthy food choices and exercise will lead to a specific body weight and shape?
- Do I control my child’s food intake?

Asking yourself these important questions is the first step in becoming more aware of the messages you are sending to children. The second step is to learn how you can help children develop healthy self-images. Here are some hints:

- Try to be aware of the messages you send about your body and the comments you make about other peoples' bodies.
- Help children focus on their abilities rather than on their appearance.
- Discourage children from weighing themselves, the scale focuses on numbers and not on a range of healthy weights.
- Help children understand that their bodies will be changing and growing especially during puberty.
- Help children understand that there is NOT one "ideal" body shape for women or men.
- Help children to eat healthy and be active.

Children who have positive role models around them are on their way to developing healthy self-images, something that will last a lifetime.

There is not one “ideal” body shape or weight for girls, boys, women or men
The Big “P” Word

Puberty, the big "P" word, can be very scary. Not only is it scary for the kids going through it but also for the adults, parents and caregivers. If children and caregivers are aware of the expected changes and know how to keep informed about the changes and situations that may pop up because of them, puberty can be smooth, easy and even exciting!

Bodies come in many shapes and sizes. Everyone develops at a time that is right for their own body. For girls, puberty can begin at around the age of eight and last until about 18, for boys, puberty can begin at around the age of ten and last until about 18. Many changes are common to both boys and girls including an increase in height and weight, more active oil and sweat glands, the development of pubic and body hair, an increase in sexual feelings and voice changes. The development of girls and boys differs as well. Girls will experience breast growth and menstruation, boys will experience testicular and penis growth, wet dreams and spontaneous erections.

Talking to your children about puberty can be difficult. Here are some hints:

- Choose a time that is convenient for both of you (during their favourite TV show is not the best time).
- Choose a place that is comfortable and private.
- Use an opener such as “what are you learning in health these days?”
- Use appropriate words that are easy to understand.
- Use teaching aids such as books or videos from the library or school.
- Answer only the questions your child asks. Many times adults give their children too much information. Once you help them out with one question, chances are they will keep coming back for more.
- Try not to comment on your child’s appearance. Children are quite aware of how they look and how they are changing.
- Avoid using words such as “big”, “small”, “short”, “fat”, “skinny”, “clumsy”, “hippy”, even when mentioned with the best intentions these words can hurt.
Sexuality Questions & Answers

Talking to children about various life issues is part of parenting. Parents are considered the most important educators about sexuality. Discussions about sexuality and questions from children can start as early as the pre-school years.

Body image and sexuality go hand in hand. As children enter the pre-teen years, discussion around the issue of sex might intensify. When children enter puberty, they will experience various physical and emotional changes. How children feel about these changes and the understanding they receive will affect how children feel about their bodies. If parents get involved in talks with their children, it can create opportunities to help them feel good about themselves, their changing appearance and their relationships with others.

Some suggestions are listed below to assist parents in talking to their children about sexuality:

- Make sure you are clear about what your child really wants to know. Then find out how much she/he already knows. This way you can clear up any misunderstandings your child may have and move on to providing the information needed and wanted.

- Questions should be answered with factual answers. For example, if your child wonders if there is something wrong with her because she is the only girl in her class who is "flat chested", you may want to respond with "sometimes people call other people "flat chested" when their breasts haven't developed yet. Everyone grows at their own rate. You shouldn't be ashamed of your size."

- Children need to know your feelings and values about what has been asked. For example, with the above concern, you may want to add "I don't believe that people should call each other names."

- Not every child will go to a parent with questions. Therefore, you may want to start the conversations. For example, when you have some quiet time, you may want to say "you have been taking health for about two weeks now, do you have any questions?"

- It is okay to say "I don't know." This encourages finding the answer together.

Puberty can be a very confusing time for children as their bodies develop, grow and change. Parents can play a very important role in helping children develop a healthy self image.
VI. References


Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity. Retrieved February, 2009 from http://www.caaws.ca


Healthy Living, Healthy Children
Helping Children to Eat Healthy, Be Active and Feel Good About Themselves


For more information, contact
Halton Region
Dial 311 or 905-825-6000
Toll free 1-866-4HALTON (1-866-442-5866)
TTY 905-827-9833
www.halton.ca