

Body Image

This discussion guide will help you facilitate a conversation with parents about the impact of media on kids' body image. Use the following questions and stories to get parents thinking and talking about this issue. You may also want to show the Body Image parent tip video and hand out the Body Image parent tip sheet to help spark the discussion.

What's going on with your kids?

Questions to encourage parents to share experiences, concerns, and solutions:

1. What are some examples of positive and negative messages about body image that come from media?
2. What forms of media and entertainment do you think are the most influential on girls' body image? Boys' body image?
3. What are ways you can help your daughter or son have a "reality check" about the many images they see in the media that are unrealistic and unhealthy?
4. How do you think kids' body image is affected by new media and technology like digital cameras, social networking, and more?

What would you do?

Stories to discuss, role play, and deepen conversation

Elementary school child

Debbie decides to surprise her ten-year-old daughter's soccer team by bringing homemade brownies to their last game of the season. Only two girls don't wait in line for treats: her daughter, Hannah, and her best friend Julia.

This concerns Debbie because she knows that brownies are Hannah's all-time favorite dessert. During the car ride home, Debbie asks Hannah if she is feeling well. Hannah tells her that she and Julia made a pact to diet together before going to theater camp in two weeks. "It's a super healthy diet we found in a magazine. We just can't eat any carbs or sugar for two weeks. It's supposed to help you get skinny fast." Debbie is shocked. Hannah is a healthy, athletic kid who just finished 4th grade.

- » What are some different sources of "thinspiration" for today's youth?
- » How might Debbie explain the difference between healthy eating and dieting to her daughter?
- » How can parents boost their children's body esteem at an early age?
- » Do you think it's important to deemphasize the importance of appearance to your kids? Why or why not?

Middle school preteen or teen

Since her body began going through changes at puberty, thirteen-year-old Carmen has increasingly become concerned with her appearance. When shopping with her mom, she wants to buy name-brand clothing, and some of it is too revealing. “But it’s sooo cute!” she says. Her parents have started allowing her to wear a little makeup. On the walls of her bedroom are posters of girl celebrities such as Miley Cyrus and Taylor Swift. She loves keeping up with celebrity gossip by watching TV and flipping through fashion magazines with friends. Her parents are worried that she has become too concerned with her appearance.

- » How can Carmen’s parents help her choose media that send a positive message about young women? Where can they find out about media that emphasizes health and achievement rather than appearance?
- » What kinds of activities should her parents urge her to participate in to promote a positive, healthy self-image?

Middle school preteen or teen

Fourteen-year-old Mallory invited her closest girlfriends to sleep over after a school dance. When Mallory’s mother Susan checked in on the girls, she was surprised to see them taking pictures of themselves in the mirror, posing like models with seductive facial expressions. After taking a photo, the girls crowded around Mallory’s digital camera to evaluate the photo. “Profile pic material!” exclaimed one of the girls. “I look so ugly in that one. Can we take it again?” pleaded another. “Shut up, you look skinny and gorgeous. What are you talking about?” Mallory said to her friend. As the girls posed once more, Susan noticed that they were all sucking in their stomachs and sticking out their chests.

- » In what ways have new media innovations impacted kids’ preoccupation with their appearance? (Consider digital cameras, social networking sites, YouTube, etc.)
- » In terms of kids’ body esteem and self-confidence, what are some benefits and drawbacks to being able to post personal photos online?
- » Should Susan talk to the girls as a group? Speak to her daughter in private? Speak to the girls’ parents?

Middle / high school teen

Fourteen-year-old Beth is increasingly voicing dissatisfaction with her body. She often says “I wish I had...” (fill in the blank with “straight hair,” “flat abs,” or “a smaller nose”). Her mom says, “Honey, you are so beautiful as you are! Be happy with what you’ve got!” but she feels she’s running out of ways to convince her daughter to accept her appearance.

Once Beth announced to her mom, “As soon as I turn 16, I want a nose job for my birthday!” Her mom said, “What? Where’d you get that idea?” “The girl on My Super Sweet Sixteen got one,” she said. Beth’s mom believes her daughter’s obsession with appearance stems from media images of celebrities and models. She is worried about Beth’s focus on looks and plastic surgery.

- » What can mothers do and say to help their daughters be comfortable with their bodies?
- » How do you think the increased visibility and normalization of plastic surgery and quick fixes (diet pills, exercise equipment, etc.) in the media influence young women?

High school teen

Max, a junior in high school, has been a star of the wrestling team for the past two years. His parents understand that wrestling involves weigh-ins and strength training, but lately Max has been changing. Sometimes he refuses to eat altogether, while other times he eats a lot in one sitting, or pigs out on junk food. His body seems to have swelled up with strength. He likes to work out while watching ultimate fighting competition shows, which include “no holds barred” fighting. His dad senses something might be wrong because of Max’s eating habits and body change, but he sometimes wonders if it’s just a combination of wrestling with adolescent hormones and growth spurts.

- » How can Max’s dad approach him about his eating behaviors?
- » Who else can Max talk to about his eating habits and self-image?
- » How might Max’s media consumption play a role in his body image and behavior?

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