

BODY IMAGE

by Judy Lipson

When reading the title of this article, you probably thought about your body and were less than kind. Body image pertains to perception and can be discussed as what is seen, and what is thought to be seen. These are actually quite different and the result can have frightening consequences on the health and wellness of your child.

First, what is seen. The implied truth within advertising and entertainment – subtle or direct – is that the body must have a certain appearance and a specific shape. Let me remind you that when you see a visual representation (photograph, TV, movie) of a human body it is almost always misrepresented. Many actors, models and news anchors have been airbrushed or visually modified through the use of angles or special lenses.

These altered standards lead children to question whether their body has the proper proportions, shape, size, coloring, etc. They observe that their body doesn't measure up to the false image that is portrayed in the world of marketing, but they miss the fact that the image is false and that perfection isn't a realistic goal. Children need to learn that those expectations are unreachable, unfair and not real! They should be taught and encouraged to love themselves just as they are.

When other psychological or neurobiological aspects are present, a very dangerous change can occur. It is no longer just about self-esteem and wanting to meet an ideal image. Kids diet and exercise and examine their body parts closely. The irony is that as they improve their appearance, parents and peers support their efforts and congratulate them on their accomplishment and their new look. But the child is not in the same world of change that their parents and peers see. The child has stopped viewing their body accurately due to changes in brain chemistry. What is thought to be seen is not really present. When they look at their body part or look in the mirror, they see a distortion. They are not seeing reality. This is a frightening concept and is potentially very dangerous.

In a recent TV report, a respected pediatrician said that the frequency of eating disorders is increasing in children under age 12. He now routinely asks young children whether they think they are too heavy, too thin or just right. He shared that parents often project their own weight issues onto their children. Our societal focus on obesity has even led some parents to be concerned about their infants' and toddlers' normal weights.

Adolescence is also a tricky time for children. Weight gain is normal – to create female curves and to offset the growth spurts of boys or girls – but children who don't have a healthy view of their bodies see the curves and the pounds as bad. Know the warning signs and intervene at the earliest opportunity.

Does your child:

- **seem preoccupied with food – types, quantities and frequency? (This is tricky to detect because many reputable diets recommend measuring food quantities.)**
- **eat a meal and then disappear to the bathroom (potentially purging)?**
- **use diet pills or laxatives?**
- **tell you that they are not hungry because they “just ate?”**
- **exercise frequently and intensely?**
- **think that they need to lose weight even when others think they look fine (or too thin)?**
- **point to places on the body (frequently belly and thighs) and complain that they are still prominent?**
- **Does your intuition tell you that there is a problem?**

This is a frightening experience for parents and many would prefer not to acknowledge that their child might be having a problem of this magnitude. If you are seeing the signs of anorexia (restricted eating) or bulimia (binge eating and purging) and you ask your child directly, they will frequently deny it. They are afraid of losing their perceived control and of admitting that they have this disease. Yet early intervention is the key to a healthy outcome. Professional intervention by a medical doctor (often a psychiatrist) is required to assess how the weight loss, nutritional deficiencies and intense exercise impact your child's health. It is also important to seek counseling by a professional who specializes in disordered eating. I also encourage you to notify your child's classroom teacher or school counselor.

“I will appreciate my body without being directed by outer influences. I will honor and respect myself. I will teach my children that they are perfect, just the way they are.”

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