

helping your child develop a healthy body image

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What is Body Image?

Body image is defined as how a person thinks and feels about his or her own physical appearance. We all have our own likes and dislikes about our looks. It is important to remember that body image is subjective and personal—how we see ourselves can be very different from how others see us. Thoughts, feelings, and behaviors about appearance are often linked together (e.g., negative thoughts about appearance can give rise to negative feelings such as sadness or anxiety, which, in turn, may lead to behaviors like avoiding activities).

Where Does Body Image Come From?

Many different factors can affect how we think and feel about our looks. For example, comments and compliments about our appearance (e.g., “You have your father’s eyes,” or “You have a beautiful smile!”) can influence our self-perceptions about appearance. Teasing or bullying about appearance can also affect how we think and feel about ourselves. Societal ideals about how we are “supposed” to look can impact our body image particularly since these ideals are often featured repeatedly on television, social media, and in magazines. Even children’s toys often reflect societal ideals for appearance. Unfortunately, there can be a lack of diversity in the images and ideals presented (related to race, ethnicity, body shapes and sizes, facial appearance, disability status). It is easy to feel “different” when there are few examples in the media of people that represent the beautiful variations in appearance that exist in the world. Not surprisingly, some dissatisfaction with appearance is common among children and adults alike, particularly given society’s emphasis on appearance and the tendency to compare ourselves to these ideals.

Why is it important?

How we think and feel about appearance can affect our self-esteem and quality of life on a daily basis. Body

image dissatisfaction can cause problems with daily activities such as going to school, participating in social activities, or even things like having pictures taken for family events, school, or for social media. It can also be a risk factor for other problems like depression, social anxiety, and eating disorders.

Can Body Image Change?

It is common for body image to change as our bodies grow and change over the course of our lives. For example, adolescence is a time when most, if not all, people become more aware of their appearance and attractiveness, particularly as interest in dating increases. It is not uncommon for teenagers to feel especially self-conscious about their appearance, owing in part to changes related to puberty and physical growth. As teens grow into adulthood, they may feel less self-conscious and more accepting of their appearance.

Because body image is subjective and really about thoughts and feelings, it is possible to change your body image without actually changing how you look through surgery, weight loss, or other appearance-changing strategies (e.g., wearing make-up). Changing thoughts or self-talk about appearance can help improve body image concerns.

Children and adolescents with craniofacial conditions often undergo reconstructive surgery to address aesthetic and functional problems related to their conditions. Surgery can change their physical appearance and be influential in changing their body images. However, some children or teens may express disinterest in surgery because they are satisfied with their appearance. Others may have surgery that significantly changes how they look, yet still report feeling dissatisfied with their appearance. It is important to keep in mind that surgery may not be the only answer to improving body image and to keep the individual child’s perspective in mind when making decisions about surgery, particularly during adolescence and beyond.

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What Can Parents or Caregivers Do to Support a Healthy Body Image in Their Child?

When children are born with facial differences, parents often worry about how their child will think and feel about themselves as they grow up and how other people may treat them. These are valid concerns. The good news is that parents can help children develop a healthy body image from an early age.

- Prepare and rehearse an age-appropriate response to appearance-related questions. This can help children with craniofacial conditions feel more comfortable responding to questions and also increase their self-confidence and understanding of their facial difference.
- Help your child develop a positive body image by modelling one yourself (e.g., don't put yourself or others down because of appearance in front of your child).
- Validate your child's feelings and remind them that everybody has something about their appearance that they don't like.
- Encourage children to focus on what their body can *do* as opposed to how it *looks*, and to think about what they like about their appearance.
- Compliment your child's abilities, talents, and other characteristics, as well as their appearance.
- Teach your child to think critically about media images of appearance ideals. Are the images real? Have they been air-brushed or photo-shopped to look more perfect? What are advertisements really selling?
- Discuss qualities that make people attractive *beyond* physical appearance (e.g., humor, confidence, kindness).
- Be mindful of the language you use to talk about differences. Avoid using terms like "deformity" or "anomaly" when talking about your child's craniofacial condition or appearance differences. "Facial differences" or the name of the craniofacial condition are more appropriate terms to use.
- When talking about differences, encourage and model using neutral descriptors ("small ear" or "wide set eyes," "pink cleft scar") rather than making criticisms or judgments about features ("ugly").
- Encourage and model confident body language—making eye contact when talking with people, good posture (e.g., standing up straight), and smiling. Body

language can go a long way towards increasing confidence and encouraging positive responses from other people. The more your child practices confidence, the more confident he or she will begin to feel.

- Help your child become aware of his/her own inner critic about appearance, and develop ways to talk back to it—"Okay, so I'm not a super model, but I have a lot of features that I like about my appearance." If you catch your child saying something negative about his/her appearance, ask "Would you say this to a friend? To your mother or sister? Then why is it OK to say it to yourself?"

When to Seek Additional Support

Psychologists or other mental health professionals with training in cognitive-behavioral therapy can help children or adolescents struggling with body image concerns. Cognitive-behavioral therapy is a type of treatment supported by research that can help your child learn skills to change thoughts and behaviors that may be contributing to appearance-related distress and related social difficulties. Consider consulting a psychologist or other mental health professional if your child experiences any of the following:

- Your child makes frequent, negative statements about his/her appearance or is spending a lot of time thinking or worrying about his/her appearance.
- Your child becomes upset or seems depressed (sad, withdrawn) because of worries about his/her appearance.
- Your child avoids social activities, family events, or school because of his/her appearance concerns.
- You and your child disagree about the need for additional reconstructive surgery.

Resources

- Changing Faces: changingfaces.org.uk/
- Dove Self-Esteem Project: elfesteem.dove.us
- Book: *Your Body is Awesome: Body Respect for Children* by Sigrun Danielsdottir

Inspirational Figures

- Lizzie Velasquez: lizzievelasquezofficial.com/
- Carly Findlay: carlyfindlay.com.au/