

NUTRITION MATTERS

HELP CHILDREN AND YOUTH FEEL GOOD ABOUT THEMSELVES

Children and youth are greatly influenced by the messages they hear and see about health, appearance, body shape and size. They are especially influenced by messages from adults they trust and respect, such as parents, guardians, caregivers, educators, and coaches. Adults can positively impact how children and youth feel about themselves by ensuring their words and actions focus on being healthy and having fun, rather than appearance, body shape and/or size. Here are ideas on how to help children and youth develop a positive relationship with food, physical activity and their body, while supporting their mental well-being.

Balanced and Healthy Eating

Parents, caregivers, educators, and other adults play a significant role in shaping children and youth's eating habits and beliefs about food. Consider these tips to help children and youth develop a healthy and happy relationship with food:

- Offer and enjoy a variety of foods from [Canada's Food Guide](#); including vegetables and fruit, protein and whole grain foods
 - Know that all foods can be part of healthy eating
 - Call foods by their name rather than labelling them as 'good', 'bad', 'junk', 'healthy' or 'unhealthy'
 - Be mindful of your words; avoid any talk of diets, calories, or restricting foods
 - Encourage children to respond to internal cues for hunger and fullness
- Focus on the positive aspects of food and eating, like how it brings people together and supports mental well-being
 - Keep mealtimes pleasant and relaxed. Avoid pressuring or commenting on what or how much children eat
 - Enjoy eating with others, away from distractions like screens
 - Inspire curiosity by providing practical opportunities to explore, see, cook, smell, grow and taste a variety of foods
 - Avoid using food as a reward



PUBLIC HEALTH

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Self-esteem and Positive Body

Image

Children and youth go through major physical, cognitive, emotional and social changes that affect how they think and feel about themselves. Parents, caregivers, educators, and other adults can support children to feel good about themselves and their bodies by doing the following:

- Talk about how each person's body is different and there is no ideal body
- Teach and model that all bodies deserve to be respected and accepted, regardless of shape, size, or ability
- Be mindful of your words. Avoid making comments about your body or other people's bodies in front of children (e.g., "These pants make me look fat" or "You've lost weight, you look great")
- Listen to what children and youth say about themselves and others. Take time to address any negative comments
- Promote zero tolerance for [bullying](#). Teach children and youth how to respond if they see or experience bullying based on appearance, body size or shape
- Teach children and youth to critically evaluate the messages they see, hear, and read in the media. Discuss how social media images can be unrealistic
- Demonstrate to children and youth their self-worth is not related to how they look. Praise their positive qualities, talents, and interests rather than their appearance



Being Active

Being active has many benefits for children and youth including building self-confidence, relieving stress, improving rest and sleep, and providing a fun social activity. Consider these tips for talking about and role-modeling physical activity in a positive way:

- Place emphasis on engaging in physical activity for the purpose of having fun and feeling good
- Have children and youth reflect on how they feel when they are being active
- Try a variety of different activities so children and youth can learn new skills and find an activity they enjoy
- Encourage children and youth to focus on what their body can do
- Be mindful of your words. Avoid talking about physical activity to change your body size or appearance
- Encourage children and youth to spend time in nature and exploring the outdoors
- Discourage the use of fitness apps or trackers to monitor activity as this may lead to obsessive behaviours and disordered eating in some children and youth, and may take away from the enjoyment of the activity

For more information

For additional nutrition information and resources, visit www.york.ca/nutrition, or www.unlockfood.ca. To speak to a Registered Dietitian at no cost, call [Health Connect Ontario](#) at 8-1-1.

If you are concerned that your child or teen is having excessive body image concerns and/or disordered eating behaviours, seek professional help as soon as possible. To find supports available, visit <http://nedic.ca>.