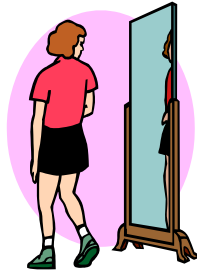


Nutrition Matters

Nutrition Services, Community and Health Services

Helping teens develop a positive body image

Adolescence is a time when growth spurts and a developing body can make teens question whether their weight and body shape are normal. At some point, most teens will struggle with the way their bodies look. The size of the body does not always reflect the health of the body. Every shape can be healthy if physical activity and healthy eating are part of a daily routine. Be aware of stereotypes and prejudices. Societal attitudes will take time to change in order for people to recognize that unhealthy eating or exercising behaviours should not be adopted in order to be thin. As a parent, teacher or a coach, you can help teens grow up with a healthy body image by promoting healthy eating, physical activity and a healthy self-esteem by using the following strategies.



Help usher in the change.

Talk to teens about how their body is changing and growing. Changes will begin to occur during the preteen years. It's natural for girls to accumulate fat and boys to gain more muscle as they move through puberty. The timing of the physical changes during adolescence is different for everyone. If the teen is not aware that this is completely normal, it can have social and emotional effects.

Be a positive role model.

Your actions and words can influence a teenager's self-image. Start by examining your own feelings about your body. Be aware of the messages you send about your body and the comments you make about the appearance of others. Constant dieting and comments like "you'll get fat if you eat that" send a strong

message to teens that appearance is very important. Teens may become more critical of their own appearance and the appearance of others as a result of your actions and words.

Banish teasing.

Let teens know that judging people by their weight or the way they look is unacceptable. Teach teens to treat others with respect and not to comment about people's weight, shape or size.

Encourage teens to advocate for themselves.

Teach them strategies to deal with put-downs and negative comments. Teens may not have the skills or the self-esteem to deal with teasing. Role-play and help them find ways of ignoring comments or responding to comments in a way that doesn't put the other person down.

Show teens that your love for them is unconditional.

Let teens know that you love and respect them no matter what they weigh. Help teens by discussing what qualities make up a good friend, neighbour or student. Weight and appearance shouldn't come up as an issue.

Talk about their insides not their outsides.

Making comments about a teen's clothes, hairstyle, body shape or features can affect how they feel about themselves. Avoid using words such as "big", "small", "short", "fat", "skinny", "clumsy", or "hippy". Even when mentioned with the best intentions, these words can hurt. Encourage teens to focus on their abilities rather than on their appearance. Help them identify things they are good at and things they like about themselves. Emphasize the qualities of intellect, creativity, physical



capabilities, character and personality.

Read between the lines.

If a teen says, "I feel fat", stop and listen. Telling them that they aren't fat will get you nowhere. Many teens find it hard to express their true feelings directly, so they encode these feelings in the language of fat. Sometimes these comments are a signal that they have had a bad day or are worried about something. Encourage teens to express their feelings and talk about what they have to deal with in school (e.g. teasing). Listen to what teens say about themselves and others, and use these opportunities to talk about their feelings.

Watch the pitch.

Teach teens to be critical of the media and advertising. Help them to challenge misleading media messages and understand the power of advertising. The media and societal views influence body image development when one "ideal" body is used as an example for how all people should look. Make a commitment to help teens appreciate and resist the ways in which television, magazines and other media distort body images.

Make mealtimes pleasant and encourage healthy eating.

Making food fun will ensure teens grow up with positive feelings about eating. Encourage teens to trust their bodies to tell them when they should eat and to stop when they are full. Encourage teens to make healthy food choices by eating vegetables, fruit, whole grain breads, cereals, pasta and rice more often and a variety of lower fat milk products and meat and meat alternatives. There are no good or bad foods and no one food or food group will make you fat.

All foods, including treats, can be part of a healthy diet. Balance and moderation is the key to healthy eating.

Discourage teens from weighing themselves. Scales measure gravity's pull on your body, not your health.



Resist the temptation to put teens on a diet.

The urge to do something about a teen's weight can be overwhelming. Instead, encourage teens to eat a variety of foods from all food groups. This includes choosing low-to-moderate fat foods most of the time. Encourage physical activity. If you are concerned about a teen's weight, contact your doctor or a registered dietitian for information.

Explore different types of physical activities.

Teens don't have to be part of a sports team to enjoy the benefits of active living. Find out what kind of physical activity they enjoy and be physically active yourself. Encourage teens to try different activities such as hiking, biking, cross-country skiing, yoga and dancing.

Recognize the signs of a poor body image or an eating disorder by educating yourself, and know when you need to ask for help.