

# Families Are Talking

This issue of *Families Are Talking* focuses on body image and self-esteem. It includes tips and messages for parents and caregivers to share with their children, activities to raise awareness, and resources for more information about these important topics.

## What Are Body Image and Self-esteem?

**B**ody image is the picture that you have of your physical appearance in your mind. Self-esteem is how you feel about yourself as a person. They both include positive and negative feelings and can be influenced by society, cultural background, and life experiences. Body image and self-esteem are connected, because the way that you feel about your body can affect the way you feel about yourself as a whole.

As parents and caregivers, your children look to you for guidance and support, and they want to hear what you have to say. Talk with your children about body image and self-esteem, give them age-appropriate positive messages that will help them feel better about themselves. Discuss that every individual is unique, that there are behaviors related to body image that are healthy and unhealthy, and that the ways in which the media portrays body image can be unrealistic in real life. Most importantly, help them celebrate and appreciate the person that they are and all they have to offer.

## Body Image Inventory

As you think about the messages that you want to share with your children about body image and self-esteem, it's helpful to get in touch with your feelings about your body and the messages that you learned growing up. As you answer these questions, make a mental note of any negative thought patterns you may have.

- ? What's the first positive message that you remember receiving about your body? Negative message? How old were you? How have these messages impacted you?
- ? What messages do you wish you received about body image and self-esteem as you were growing up?
- ? What do you like best about your body?
- ? What about your body, if anything, do you compare to an "ideal" that the media portrays? Do you find yourself trying to alter your body to meet this ideal? If so, how?
- ? What are your thoughts about dieting, eating, exercising, or having plastic surgery? How do these thoughts influence your behaviors and your own body image? In what ways do you express these thoughts to others?

Think about your answers to the questions, considering the verbal and non-verbal messages about body image and self-esteem that you give your children. Are these the messages that you want to be giving to your kids? If not, what are the messages about body image and self-esteem that you want to share with your kids?



# Sharing Messages with Your Children During “Teachable Moments”

## Tips to Help Parents and Caregivers Talk with Their Children about Body Image and Self-esteem

- Do not wait until your children ask questions
- Know and practice the messages that you want to share
- Seek “teachable moments”—daily opportunities that occur when you are with your children—that make it easy to share your messages and values
- Let your children know that you are open to talking with them about these important issues
- Listen
- Try to understand your children’s point of view
- If you don’t know how to answer your children’s questions, offer to find the answers or look them up together
- Provide pamphlets, books, and other age-appropriate and medically accurate materials
- Find out what your children’s schools are teaching about these topics
- Stay actively involved in your children’s lives

**B**eginning to talk with your children when they are young will help lay the foundation for them to develop positive body image and self-esteem. If your children are already in their adolescent years and you never had these conversations, realize that it’s never too late to start.

Before talking with your children, it’s helpful to consider the messages you want to share. Perhaps you want to share the following using simple, clear, age-appropriate language.

### 5–8 Messages for Young People Ages Five through Eight:

- Individual bodies are different sizes, shapes, and colors
- Male and female bodies are equally special
- Differences make us unique
- All bodies are special, including those that are disabled
- Good health habits, such as eating nutritiously and exercising, can improve the way a person looks and feels
- Each person can be proud of the special qualities of his/her body

### 9–12 Messages for Young People Ages Nine through 12:

- A person’s appearance is determined by heredity, environment, and health habits
- The way a body looks is mainly determined by the genes inherited from parents and grandparents
- Bodies grow and change during puberty
- The media portray “beautiful” people but most people do not fit these images
- Standards of beauty change over time and differ among cultures
- The value of a person is not determined by their appearance
- Eating disorders are one result of poor body image

### 12–15 Messages for Young People Ages 12 through 15:

- The size and shape of the penis or breasts does not affect reproductive ability or ability to be a sexual partner
- The size and shape of a person’s body may affect how others feel about and behave toward that person
- People with physical disabilities have the same feelings, needs, and desires as people without disabilities

### 15–18 Messages for Young People Ages 15 through 18:

- Physical appearance is only one factor that attracts one person to another
- A person who accepts and feels good about his or her body will seem more likeable and attractive to others
- People are attracted to different physical qualities

**F**or messages about other  
sexuality-related topics,  
download the  
*Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education:  
Kindergarten—12th Grade*  
at  
[www.siecus.org/pubs/guidelines/guidelines.pdf](http://www.siecus.org/pubs/guidelines/guidelines.pdf)

## Talking about Body Image and Self-esteem:

### **An Activity for Parents and Caregivers to Communicate with Young Children (Ages Five through Eight)**

As young children begin to socialize, they may start to point out similarities and differences—including physical and personality characteristics—among people that they encounter. And, they may compare themselves to others, both positively and negatively. As a parent or caregiver, you can help your children build confidence, acceptance, and understanding by sharing stories or reading books together that address body image, self-esteem, and the importance of diversity. The following resources and follow-up questions can help parents and caregivers create “teachable moments” to begin to have conversations about body image and self-esteem and to help children embrace the characteristics and qualities that make them unique.

#### **No Mirrors in My Nana’s House**

Ysaye M. Barnwell

Paintings by Synthia Saint James

This book, for children four to seven years of age, tells the story of a young girl who learns about beauty—in both herself and the world—by looking into her grandmother’s eyes. A musical CD is included.

1998; \$18; ISBN 0-15-201825-5; Harcourt Trade;  
Phone: 800/543-1918; Web site: [www.harcourtbooks.com](http://www.harcourtbooks.com)

After reading the story together, you can address these questions:

- What is this book about?
- What would it be like to never look into a mirror?
- What do you love about yourself?

#### **It’s Okay to Be Different**

Todd Parr

This book, for children four to eight years of age, helps children embrace their individuality.

2001; \$14.95; ISBN 0-316-66603-3; Time Warner Book Group;  
Phone: 800/759-0190; Web site: [www.twbookmark.com](http://www.twbookmark.com)

After reading the story together, you can address these questions:

- What is this book about?
- What makes you special?
- How do you treat people that may be different from you?

## How I See Myself:

### **A Creative Project for Parents, Caregivers, and their Tweens (Ages Nine through 12)**

In an effort to build positive body image and self-esteem, help your child create a self-portrait, allowing them to express how they see themselves through their own eyes. They can draw themselves with crayons, colored pencils, markers, or paint; use magazines to make a collage-style picture; or make a life-size likeness that can be drawn on newsprint or other large paper, using art supplies to complete their image (you can help them start this project by having them lie down on newsprint and tracing the outline of their body).

To initiate conversation about body image and self-esteem while completing this project, you can ask your child these questions:

- What do you like best about yourself?
- Are there parts of your body that you worry about?
- Do you think that other people see you the same or different than you see yourself? Why?
- How do you think your body will change by the time you reach high school?

## Trends Throughout History:

### **An Activity for Parents, Caregivers, and Teens to Communicate about Sexuality-related Issues**

#### **(Ages 13 through 18)**

Throughout world history there have been “ideal” body types and clothing trends for both women and men. Spending time together, research how body image has changed from ancient Greece and Rome; Elizabethan times; Pre-revolutionary France; to the early, mid, and late 1900’s. You can visit your local public library, bookstore, or use the Internet to gather information.

Choosing several time periods for comparison, take notes about the country or place you are researching and the “ideal” body types and styles of these places and times. Then, answer these questions:

- What was the “ideal” body type of that time period for both women and men?
- What was the style of clothing for both women and men?
- What do you notice when you compare time periods to each other?

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## FAMILIES ARE TALKING

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*Families Are Talking* is a quarterly newsletter published by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1964 to affirm that sexuality is a natural and healthy part of living. SIECUS develops, collects, and disseminates information; promotes comprehensive education about sexuality; and advocates the right of individuals to make responsible sexual choices. To find out more information about SIECUS, visit [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org).

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After you answer the questions, gather different types of current magazines. Choose a wide variety of magazines that cover different topics (home design, news, sports, and fashion) and are targeted at different audiences (teens, men, and women). As you flip through the pages, cut out the various photos of body image and style that are common in today's society and arrange them in a collage.

Then, answer the following questions:

- Which photos represent the "ideal" body image and/or style in today's society?
- Does this "ideal" represent people from a range of cultures and ethnicities?

- What are the similarities and differences of today's "ideal" body image and style compared to a historical perspective (refer to your notes)?
- Why do you think men and women want to conform to these images?
- Do you find yourself wanting to look like the people in the pictures?
- How do these images influence the way that you feel about your body?
- How is your style affected by these images?
- Have these types of images ever made you try to change or consider changing the way you look? If so, how?
- What can you do to improve your self-esteem and body image?

### Organizations for More Information about Body Image and Self-esteem

#### Largely Positive Inc.

This organization promotes health and self-esteem for people of all shapes and sizes.

P.O. Box 170223  
Milwaukee, WI 53217-8021  
[www.largelypositive.com](http://www.largelypositive.com)

#### Mediascope

This national, nonprofit research and policy organization works to promote issues of social relevance within the entertainment industry.

100 Universal City Plaza, Building 6159  
Universal City, CA 91608  
818/733-3180  
[www.mediascope.org](http://www.mediascope.org)

#### National Eating Disorders Association

This national nonprofit organization works to prevent eating disorders and provide treatment referrals to those suffering from anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating disorder as well as those concerned with body image and weight issues.

603 Stewart Street, Suite 803  
Seattle, WA 98101  
206/382-3587  
[www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)

### Search for Information about Body Image and Self-esteem on these Web Sites

#### Advocates for Youth

Provides information on sexuality and sexual health and has areas specifically for youth and parents.  
[www.advocatesforyouth.org](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org)

#### Go Ask Alice!

Q & A Internet service that addresses sexuality and health-related issues.  
[www.goaskalice.columbia.edu](http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu)

#### gURL

Provides stories, games, and interactive content for an online community of teenage girls.  
[www.gurl.com](http://www.gurl.com)

#### Kids Health

Provides parents, kids, and teens with age-appropriate health and sexuality information.  
[www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)

#### Scarleteen

Provides sexuality and sexual health information to teens, supplementing the information that young people learn at home and in school-based programs.  
[www.scarleteen.com](http://www.scarleteen.com)

#### Sex, Etc.

Provides information by and for teens on a variety of sexual health issues.  
[www.sexetc.org](http://www.sexetc.org)

#### Teenwire

Provides teens with sexuality and sexual health information.  
[www.teenwire.com](http://www.teenwire.com)



**F**or a list of books and other resources that address body image, self-esteem, and other issues, check out *Facts on Sexuality-Related Issues for Young People: A SIECUS Annotated Bibliography*. For a free copy, go to [www.siecus.org/pubs/fact/FS\\_sexuality\\_related\\_issues\\_youth.pdf](http://www.siecus.org/pubs/fact/FS_sexuality_related_issues_youth.pdf) or call SIECUS at 212/819-9770, extension 303.