

Encouraging a Healthy Body Image

Body Image and Appearance

Preteens and teens often compare their looks with others' or with media images of the “right” way to look. In cultures in which looks seem to matter so much — and ideal images are so unrealistic — it's all too common to be dissatisfied with some aspect of appearance.

But feeling too self-critical about appearance can interfere with body image. And poor body image can hurt a teen's overall self-image, too.

Beyond Appearances

As teens mature mentally and emotionally, they will develop a more complex self-image — one that incorporates their interests, talents, unique qualities, values, aspirations, and relationships. But during the early teen years, the image they see in the mirror makes up a big part of their self-image.

And while it's true that appearance isn't everything, feeling satisfied with appearance means a lot. If you're wondering why your child suddenly seems so focused on appearance, keep in mind that preteens are:

- **Adapting to a new reflection.** Spending extra time grooming, making comparisons with friends and celebrities, and experimenting with clothing, hair, and makeup can be ways of getting to know and like the new self reflected in the mirror.
- **Making a fashion statement.** When preteens and teens express their taste in clothes and hairstyles, they're making statements about themselves. Experimenting with and defining their styles is one way to express their interests, personality, independence, and identity.
- **Finding a way to belong.** Peers, groups, and cliques — which take center stage during the teen years — can also play a role in heightening young teens' concerns about appearances. Dressing a certain way might be a way of feeling included, fitting in, standing out, or belonging to a group of peers.

Boys and Body Image

It's not just girls who become focused on appearance. Boys might not be as vocal about it, but they can worry just as much about their looks. They may spend the same amount of time in front of the mirror, weighing where to part their hair, what kind of product to use, assessing acne, and deciding whether or not to shave. And when your son emerges wearing pants that sag as if he hasn't quite finished getting dressed, he may in fact have spent hours getting them to hang at that exact angle.

Self-Critical Feelings

You might hear your son or daughter fret about anything from height and hair to the shape of their nose or the size of their ears — any aspect that doesn't match the “ideal.”

Body shape and size can concern them, too. It's important for preteens or teens to eat nutritious foods, limit junk foods, and get plenty of physical activity, but it's not advisable for them to diet. Being overly concerned about weight, restricting food, or exercising excessively can be signs of an eating disorder. Talk to your doctor if you notice any of these signs in your kids.



Boosting Body Image

As preteens try on different looks, parents can help by being accepting and supportive, providing positive messages, and encouraging other qualities that keep looks in perspective. Be sure to:

- **Accept and understand.**
- **Give lots of compliments.**
- **Compliment what's inside too.**
- **Talk about what appearances mean.**
- **Set reasonable boundaries.**
- **Be a good role model.**

Having a healthy and positive body image means liking your body, appreciating it, and being grateful for its qualities and capabilities. When parents care for and appreciate their own bodies, they teach their kids to do the same.

