Body-Image and Self-Esteem Backgrounder for Teachers

Important Concepts

Body-image: An individual's beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes towards his/her body and body parts. Body-image includes more than just the way you feel about your weight or shape. It includes how you feel about your many physical features (e.g., height, facial features, colour, physical maturation) and abilities. When we speak about body-image, we are speaking about:

- What we believe about bodies (e.g., bodies are vulnerable; bodies show one's character).
- How we feel about the way that we look, or how parts of us look (e.g., "I think that I am attractive, but sometimes I wish that I was taller.")
- How we feel about what we can do with our bodies (e.g., "I can be adventurous because my body is strong.")
- How we think others see us (e.g., "My friends think that I am pretty.")

Self-Esteem: The opinion you have of yourself; the degree to which you like or approve of yourself in general. Self-esteem affects how you take care of yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Set-point weight: An individual's body weight – like height – is largely determined by genetics. Each person has a biologically optimal weight range. At maturation, with healthy nutrition and exercise, it fluctuates by approximately 2-7 kilograms. It is healthiest for one's weight to remain within its natural set-point; therefore, the body will fight to maintain its set-point when deviations occur (e.g., through restricted caloric intake) by slowing or increasing metabolism.

- An individual's biologically *optimal* weight may not be the person's *ideal* weight, which is strongly influenced by societal ideals.
- Weight, like height, is diverse in humans and distributed in a normal bell curve.

Disordered Eating: Eating patterns and behaviours that negatively impact a person's ability to function optimally. Examples include:

- Using food to punish or soothe oneself
- Unconscious or chaotic eating (e.g., regular mindless eating while distracted, or unpredictable eating patterns)
- Restrictive eating (dieting)
- Excessive concern/preoccupation with counting calories

Influences on body-image and self-esteem

Canadian children are growing up in a complex society that increasingly exposes them to adult concepts and concerns from a young age. In addition to familial, academic, and peer pressures, Canadian children face an over-abundance of conflicting (and often dangerous) messages from the media regarding healthy eating, appropriate exercise, and "socially desirable" standards of appearance. Although children may not consciously realize it, the media bombards them with narrow messages regarding what girls and boys should look like (e.g., girls should be thin, boys should be lean and muscular), act like (e.g., girls should be sensitive and co-operative; boys should be brave and tough) and value (e.g., girls should be highly concerned with their appearance, boys should be highly concerned with their abilities). Such messaging not only influences the ways that girls and boys view themselves, but also influences the ways in which they view and interact with each other (e.g., boys may seek power by insulting girls' appearances; girls may tease boys by querying their strength/abilities).

As they mature, students must learn how to cope with a number of changes and challenges, including transitions into new environments (e.g., new schools); establishing new social relationships (e.g., new friendship groups, dating relationships); and physical changes due to going through puberty (e.g., weight

gain on hips and thighs, breast development, growth of facial and body hair, voice changes). Students also develop heightened capacities for self-awareness and self-reflection, and as a result, become increasingly concerned about the opinions and approval of their peers.

Further complicating these matters is the fact that students must learn to cope with these changes and challenges in an environment that is complex, sexualized, and media-saturated. Through magazines, websites, film, etc., they are bombarded with problematic messages linking values and appearance, promoting thinness as the ideal for girls, and lean, athletic bodies as the ideal for boys. These narrow beauty ideals are promoted as the keys to confidence, success, health and happiness in life. Although they may not consciously realize it, by adolescence, many students have internalized societal expectations of how boys and girls should look, behave, and what they should value as masculine or feminine. Such internalized ideals can quickly become problematic when they conflict with one's natural self and appearance *or one's perceived self and appearance* (e.g., adolescents often feel like they must lose weight, regardless of physical appearance), are used to reinforce power in social relationships (e.g., body-based harassment), and/or ostracize individuals who do not conform to gender stereotypes (e.g., boys who enjoy art, and are uninterested in sports). In addition, most students are engaging with new media and communication devices such as social networking sites, blogs, and cell phones, which bring a host of new issues, such as cyberbullying, and false self-representation to the forefront.

Body-image dissatisfaction and problematic food and weight management can emerge at any time in an individual's life; however, these issues are most likely to arise when one is experiencing several challenges all at once. As discussed above, adolescence is a period of development that is characterized by change, and is therefore experienced as a time of vulnerability and stress by many boys and girls. Thus, in the context of incessant messaging that our worth is determined by our appearance, it is not surprising that many adolescents, especially girls, displace their concerns onto their bodies, feel dissatisfied with their appearance, and begin to demonstrate disordered eating attitudes (e.g., certain foods are "bad" and if eaten illustrate that they themselves are "bad") and behaviours (e.g., dieting, over-exercising) during their adolescent years.

How one feels about one's body influences the way one takes care of, and feels about oneself. Research has shown has shown that a positive body-image is crucial for the development of good self-esteem, emotional stability, healthy eating habits, and happiness among adolescents. Conversely, a negative body-image is associated with a number of physical and emotional difficulties, including:

- Poor self-esteem
- Withdrawal from physical, scholastic/career and social activities
- Academic difficulties
- Extreme weight and shape manipulation
- Disordered eating (e.g., binge eating or dieting)
- Anxiety and depression

Between the ages of 12 and 18, approximately one in three Canadian girls demonstrates disordered eating attitudes and behaviours. In fact, eating disorders are the third most common chronic illness among adolescent girls. Although body-image dissatisfaction and disordered eating patterns are most prevalent among girls, it is a fallacy to assume that boys do not have their own body-image issues and concerns. By grade seven, many boys become preoccupied with attaining a lean and muscular physique, and may go to extreme measures (e.g., over-exercising, taking supplements or steroids, restricting food intake, bingeing) in attempts to fit the societal ideal of attractiveness for males.

Quick Facts on Body-Image and Disordered Eating in Adolescence

- Physical changes associated with puberty (e.g., weight gain, breast development, growth of body hair) can amplify adolescents' feelings of self-consciousness and body-image concerns.
    - Generally, early pubertal development in girls and late pubertal development in boys is associated with increased body-image dissatisfaction and low self-esteem.

- o **However**, any individual who feels like he/she is outside of the norm (e.g., early or late developer, minority group member) may experience body-image dissatisfaction and low self-esteem.
- Friendship groups exert an important influence on the body-image and weight manipulation behaviours of adolescents (especially among girls).
  - o Members of friendship groups tend to share body-image attitudes and dieting practices.
  - o Girls are more likely to have a negative body-image and attempt to lose weight when they think that their friends are dieting, and when their friends act as a source of dieting information; 52% of girls begin to diet before the age of 14 years.

Important Note for Teachers:

- Current research shows that teaching students about eating disorders is ineffective in changing their current eating attitudes and behaviours, and may in fact do more harm than good, as it can lead some students to glamorize eating disordered behaviours.
- When planning lessons or projects, consider some of the following topics instead:
  - o The importance of healthy lifestyles (e.g., nurturing physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing, accepting ourselves and embracing diversity)
  - o Media literacy (e.g., deconstructing and critically analyzing media messages and stereotypes)
  - o Positive life skills (e.g., assertiveness, effective problem solving strategies)
  - o Addressing and coping with body-based harassment and teasing
  - o Encourage your school to adopt school-wide practices that:
  - o Promote the development of positive body-images and self-esteem
  - o Provide sensitivity training to teachers and parents to raise awareness and recognition of body-image concerns among youth
  - o Protect students against weight-based discrimination
  - o Provide opportunities for physical activity for all students, regardless of their weight, shape, size, or abilities

In order to promote positive body-images and self-esteem within the school setting, it is important to be informed about the factors affecting body-image and self-esteem among youth, as well as how to facilitate healthy development in these domains. The tip sheets, "**Promoting Positive Body-Images among Students: Tip Sheet for Teachers,**" and **Feeling Good About Our Bodies: Tip Sheet for Students (Intermediate),**" provide a number of strategies that teachers and students can themselves use to promote the development of healthy body-images among students.

See www.nedic.ca for statistics and references.