

PROMOTING POSITIVE BODY IMAGES AMONG STUDENTS TIP SHEET FOR TEACHERS

What is Body Image?

Body image is defined as an individual's beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes towards their 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 attractive.")

Research shows that a positive body image can lead to better self-esteem, emotional stability, happiness, and confidence among children. In contrast, a negative body image is associated with a number of physical and emotional difficulties, including academic problems, disordered eating, poor self-esteem, withdrawal from physical and social activities, and depression. Thus, it is important to build resilience and educate children about the importance of appreciating and taking care of our bodies. This tip sheet provides a number of strategies that teachers and students themselves can use to promote the development of healthy body images.

How Teachers Can Help Promote Positive Body Images among Students

- Be a positive role model who is accepting of your own body, and who models adaptive ways of eating and being active (i.e., neither regularly excessive nor insufficient to support health and wellbeing).
- Avoid making comments about your appearance or the appearance of others.
- Help students understand the role of genetics and biology in determining a person's natural height, weight, and size.
- Talk to students in simple and supportive ways about the realities of puberty and adolescence (e.g., weight gain and breast development in females; voice and testes changes and increased production of testosterone in males; emphasize individual differences in the timing and look of puberty).

- Continually reinforce the message that bodies naturally come in a range of shapes, sizes, weights, and colours, and that all bodies are to be respected.
- Help students understand that what they feel is not necessarily the truth (e.g., just because I feel like everyone is staring at me doesn't make it true).
- Encourage physical activity and eating well as means of supporting physical and mental well-being and enjoyment, rather than weight manipulation.
- If talking about food, avoid labeling certain foods as "good" or "bad", or even "healthy" or "unhealthy", as this can make students feel guilty, ashamed, or anxious if they eat a "bad" or "unhealthy" food.
 - Instead, try to refer to foods by their actual names (e.g., apple, bread, cookie, vegetables, dairy products).
 - Remember that healthy eating includes regularly eating a variety of foods and allowing yourself to choose foods that you enjoy.
- Avoid commenting on students' lunches or snacks (e.g., "Is that what you're eating?") and encourage students to refrain from making comments as well.
 - Not all students have equal access to nutrient-dense snacks or food.
 - Students do not necessarily have much or any control over what ends up in their lunch box.
- Teach students how to recognize signs of hunger and satiety, as well as how to distinguish between hunger and feelings of stress and anxiety.
- Engage students in discussions that challenge media messages regarding "socially desirable" physical appearances.
- Challenge body-based put-downs and teach students how to challenge body-based bullying (see "*Confronting Body-Based Harassment: Tip Sheet for Teachers*").
- Frequently expose students to non-dieting, weight-acceptance, and body-acceptance messages.
 - Display images that celebrate individuals who defy gender stereotypes (e.g. from www.syracuseculturalworkers.com).
 - Discuss novels, movies and TV programs in which girls and women, boys and men are portrayed in positive counter-culture ways (e.g., Bend It Like Beckham).
 - Check out the messages on www.about-face.org and look at their gallery of winners and offenders.
- Compliment students on their abilities, character, behaviour and other areas in which they excel, rather than their appearance.