

Family Focus: How to Help Your Child Develop a Healthy Body Image (Part 1)

By Margie Ryerson, MFT

In my last column we looked at how a child's distorted body image can have serious consequences. As with so many issues, the earlier we can help instill certain values and perceptions, the more our children are likely to benefit. By the time many teens and adults come in for therapy, they report having struggled with their feelings ever since they were children. (There are increasing numbers of boys with distorted body images. but for our purposes we will use the pronoun "she.")

Here are a few brief suggestions for helping your child develop a healthy body image:

Provide unconditional love and acceptance: As parents, we know it is important to provide unconditional love and acceptance for our children. One of my patients, "Cara," remarked how her parents seemed to care more about what others thought than what she thought and felt. Her parents wanted her to always look her best, to achieve her best, and to make her family proud. Cara did not feel that she could be herself and still receive her family's approval. Her feelings of resentment, anger, guilt, and self-disgust provided fertile ground for Cara to develop both a dislike of her body and an eating disorder.

Offer encouragement instead of criticism: Of course our kids are going to make mistakes and act up at times. It is our challenge to figure out ways to help them through these tough times by providing positive caring and encouragement rather than blame and criticism. Even if they don't admit it, they are probably already feeling bad about themselves when they mess up, so

it is important not to add to their burden. It may not seem likely at times, but our children are highly responsive to our opinions, words, and actions.

Help your child develop reasonable expectations of herself: Some children are so ambitious or eager to please that they begin to expect too much from themselves. They may compare themselves too much to others in our highly accomplished community and become dissatisfied with themselves. Again, when children are self-critical, they often transfer these feelings to their perception of their body.

Parents need to be able to walk the fine line between having certain expectations of their child and being flexible and realistic. For example, if your child is used to excelling in school, but suddenly finds the workload overwhelming and difficult, you need to help her adjust her expectations, and also modify yours as well. This does not mean that you won't try to find ways to help her continue to excel; only that you will prepare for and accept the possibility, calmly and lovingly, that her grades may fluctuate. Your attitude of acceptance and encouragement will help influence how your child is able to handle challenging situations.

In the next Family Focus column we will discuss more ideas for helping your child form a healthy body image.

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