

Promoting Positive Body Image in Children & Adolescents: Tips for Parents

- Provide regular family meals. Meals reassure children that they will be fed and creates consistency. Offer a wide variety of foods, and try to always have at least one food that each member of the family will eat.
- Promote positive self-esteem in your child. Tell them you love them often and unconditionally. Remind your child you love them for who they are inside, not because of external appearances.
- Include your children in the preparation and cooking of food so they can get excited and feel empowered about what they are eating.
- Model healthy eating and exercise by eating a variety of different foods, listening to your body's own physical hunger, exercising for fun and not to "punish yourself for eating" and keeping active as a family. Make it fun! *Limit screen time (computer, TV, phone, etc.).*
- Compliment your child when they do kind things for themselves and others and encourage them to speak positively about themselves.
- Teach your child to be assertive - to ask for what they need. Remember to model this behavior whenever possible. Discuss with your child the difference between assertiveness and aggressiveness.
- Promote the diversity of all body types. Remind your child that everyone is born a different shape and size. Talk to your child about the genetic differences in body types. Go through a family photo album and look at the pictures of relatives in your own family. See and discuss the different body types of each family member.
- Help your child remember that what they see on TV and in magazines is not "real life," and that the most important thing to focus on is enjoying life and gratitude for our bodies, not simply attaining a "perfect" image.

AVOID:

- Using food as a reward or punishment. This will ultimately lead to control battles in the future regarding certain foods. In addition, if food is given as a reward/punishment, it is ultimately creating an emotional feeling to be associated with the food, i.e., “If I am good, I can eat ice cream, if I am bad, I do not get ice cream.” Don’t ever deprive a child of food because of behavior problems.
- Dieting in your house. Model for your family that diets don’t work. They are associated with moodiness, binge eating, depression, fatigue, and ultimately long term weight gain. If you are worried about your weight or your child’s weight speak with your physician or meet with a nutritionist. Diets change your eating for a short time; changing your eating routine lasts a lifetime.
- Limiting your child’s diet unless a physician says to for a specific health reason. Reducing soda and processed foods is a simple choice that promotes lifelong healthy habits, as well as encouraging whole and simple foods like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
- Breaking food into “good” vs. “bad” categories. This will lead a child to ultimately equate what he/she’s eaten, with who he/she is morally. i.e., “I’ve been so good lately. I’ve only eaten low fat foods, or I’ve been so bad lately, I’ve eaten all high fat foods.”
- Commenting on your child’s body shape or weight. Model this behavior by not commenting on anyone’s body, i.e. friends, spouse, television personality. Don’t ever compare your child’s body to one of his/her friend’s bodies. Avoid giving your child the impression that one type of body is better than another.
- Continuing the “myths” i.e., “the clean plate club”- let your child determine when he/she is physically full - don’t use guilt as a tactic for your child to eat more or less.
- Eating in front of the TV or in the car. By focusing on what you are eating, you are less likely to overeat and lose focus on what your body is telling you.
- Using mealtimes to discuss unpleasant topics such as discipline problems, financial problems or other stressful issues. It is important to keep conversations during meals pleasant and relaxing.