



celebrate EVERY Body.

# Body Positive Toolkit for Parents



Maxine Platzer Lynn Women's Center

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

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Greetings from the U.Va. Women's Center Body Positive/Eating Disorders Education Initiative!

We hope that you find this toolkit helpful in discussing body image issues with your daughters and creating a body positive environment in your home.

Since our Body Positive/Eating Disorders Education Initiative began in 2008, the Women's Center has been dedicated to transforming U.Va. into a body positive community where everyone enjoys a healthy relationship with food, exercise, and one's body. Through our efforts and the work of our many partners, we've noticed improved awareness of eating disorders on Grounds. Unfortunately, we've also noticed a growing need for student programming and services — not just for clinical eating disorders but for subclinical disordered eating, exercise, and body image concerns. These are far more prevalent and while less life-threatening, their physical and emotional impacts are severe.

Although understanding of the biological, behavioral and social causes is still emerging, we know that prevention programs work. Many of the students we talk to who are suffering from these issues also wrestle with common behavioral norms we see in many U.Va. students. These include perfectionism, competition, over-scheduled calendars, little sleep, and a desire to maintain a body ideal. To deal with the resulting stress, these students sometimes turn to unhealthy eating and exercise behaviors. The good news is that we can make a difference by reaching students using evidence-based, innovative programming that improves their lives and helps them to become healthy, productive people.

Because of this, our Body Positive Initiative works to reduce the incidence and prevalence of eating disorders. Adolescence and early adulthood is a time of rapid change and development. The transition to adulthood happens on every level from the emotional to the spiritual to the physical. Yet in today's society many young people commonly focus on what they can see—the body—as they develop their sense of who they are as a person. What we look like is not all of who we are. Healthy adulthood requires acceptance of that most basic fact of life.

Adolescence can be a loaded time for parents as well, filled with fear about how to teach our children about healthy self-concept when we may be struggling with changes in our own bodies. Advice or concerns we offer about body image, diet, or exercise can be misconstrued as criticism or lack of understanding.

There is also a lack of resources and general awareness about the social and economic costs of poor body image and disordered eating, not only among parents and youth, but also in wider society. This guide is intended to help concerned parents navigate discussions about body image and good health. It also offers resources for anyone who is concerned that someone they know may be suffering from disordered eating or exercise behaviors.

# What's the Deal with Body Image?

After a fight with my parents I was eavesdropping and I heard one of them say I was fat (even though I am definitely not considered obese or severely overweight!). It felt awful to think that someone who is supposed to love me said something so awful, even out of anger.

– Anonymous U.Va. student

## Body image can be defined as:

- How we perceive our bodies visually.
- How we feel about our physical appearance
- Our sense of how other people view our bodies.
- Our sense of our bodies in physical space.
- Our level of connectedness to our bodies.

## Body image is shaped by:

- Social feedback: Comments from family, friends and others about our, their, and other people's bodies, both positive and negative.
- Learned ideals: Ideals that we develop about physical appearance based on modeling by parents, teachers, mentors and peers.
- Monitoring behavior: The frequency with which we compare ourselves to others.
- Media: Exposure to images of idealized versus normal bodies.
- Physical experience: The experience of physical activity and sense of physical competence
- Personal history: The experience of being well cared for, versus the experience of abuse, including sexual, physical, and emotional abuse.
- Sociocultural context: The experience of belonging and being valued, versus the experience of prejudice and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, ability, sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Sensory experiences: pleasure, pain and illness.

## The Issue

“Poor body image increases the risk for extreme weight/body control behaviors. Researchers have found that increased preoccupation with appearance and body dissatisfaction put people at greater risk for engaging in dangerous practices to control weight and size. Extreme dieting, exercise compulsion, laxative abuse, vomiting, smoking and use of anabolic steroids have all been associated with negative body image.”

(Brown University Health Promotions)

Poor body image (and some of the behaviors used to try to change weight) can negatively affect a young person's academic, social, and career development. If the brain time and space that a college student should be spending on academic focus, mastery of new skills, development of interests, and new relationships goes instead into non-productive self-criticism and focus on one aspect of living (food, for example), development toward independent adulthood is delayed.

Poor body image is tied to higher anxiety, especially social anxiety, as well as greater use of substances like alcohol, tobacco or food to control that anxiety, as well as manage other feelings.

## Some Statistics

The 2011 National College Health Assessment report (in which U.Va. students participated) supports this concern. It was found that 27% of college women and 13% of men said their appearance was traumatic or difficult to handle.

We also know from other data sources that:

- 91% of women surveyed on a college campus had attempted to control their weight through dieting; 22% dieted "often" or "always." (1)
- 67% of women ages 15-64 withdraw from life-engaging activities such as giving an opinion, going to school, and going to the doctor because they feel badly about their bodies.
- 74% of women choose an ideal body shape that is 10-20% underweight. (2)
- Over one-half of teenage girls and nearly one-third of teenage boys use unhealthy weight control behaviors such as skipping meals, fasting, smoking cigarettes, vomiting, and taking laxatives. (3)

## Tips for Promoting Healthy Body Image

- Listen to your child and express concern in a loving way. Reflect their feelings, not the negative body talk. Reflect and note any positive and accepting things they have to say in their self-assessments.
- Model healthy self-talk. Consider your own assumptions and values about weight, health, and body image issues.
- Become media literate (see Part 3). Openly question media depictions of what constitutes a meaningful, healthy life.

- Eat intuitively yourself. Don't rely on external guides like charts, formulas, and tables to determine how you care for yourself. Instead, listen to your body, eat intuitively with balanced meals full of nutritious foods, and enjoy regular, moderate exercise. Encourage your family to do the same.
- Resist the pressure to judge yourself and others based on weight, shape, or size. Chances are your children are aware of your feelings. Because you are the most important role model to your child, it's important to consider that children may internalize your body image comments and behaviors.
- Respect people based on the qualities of their character and accomplishments, rather than just because of their appearance. Send your own kids positive messages about these things, rather than focusing on appearance-related talk.

## SCENARIO

Here is a common situation parents have asked us about. We have some suggestions for response but use the ones that fit with your parenting style and with the type of communication style that works best for you.

***Your daughter says that she feels fat after going swim suit shopping with her friends. How might you respond?***

Consider the following options:

- Reflect with a feeling word. Or ask her about what she was feeling when the thought occurred that she is fat? (Fat is not a feeling. Sad, angry, frustrated, left out, anxious, etc., are feelings. Those are the feelings you want to help her acknowledge.) Explore what happens when she thinks and then focuses on "fat" self-talk.
- Talk about how everyone has a different body shape and that our bodies change over time.
- You can ask if this is the first time she has felt this, or when it started. If it is a new feeling, what caused it? Is it a reaction to a friend's comment, i.e., situational? Or, has she been feeling bad for a while? How much does she think about it, and how much does it affect what she does day-to-day? Constant focus, or avoidance of activities she likes, may indicate that further intervention is needed.

### *Other Resources on this Topic*

- NEDA General Information
- Brown University Body Image Information
- National Association for Males with Eating Disorders, Inc. (N.A.M.E.D.)
- GirlsHealth.gov - Information for Girls, ages 10 to 16

# Communication: Words Can Hurt!

“Every time I call home, the first thing my mother asks is,  
‘Have you gained weight?’”  
– Anonymous U.Va. student

## The Issue

We all grew up with the motto “sticks and stones can break your bones but words can never hurt you.” If only that were true. In fact, it’s often words that hurt the most.

Body image can be vulnerable during college for many reasons including the cultural messages that fuel dissatisfaction, your child’s still changing appearance, and the appearance-focused comments we hear and say on a daily basis. Being criticized about appearance can be very hurtful emotionally. They also can affect a person’s ability to focus on the other aspects of living critical to the maturation process.

“Fat talk” is any statement focused on appearance, size and weight that may contribute to dis-satisfaction with one’s body or reinforcement of the “ideal” body. You may be surprised to learn that even positive statements can be considered fat talk, resulting

## Some Statistics

- Researchers from the University of Arizona surveyed 85 women and 33 men and found that people who often make comments about their weight are more likely to have a poor body image and to suffer from depression. (4)
- Results from one study indicate that hurtful weight-related comments from family members and significant others are commonly experienced during young adulthood by both young men and young women and that this type of talk tends to persist over time. In addition, the prevalence of this experience was significantly higher among Hispanic young men and Asian young men and women, which is consistent with other literature suggesting that social norms around weight issues differ across racial and ethnic communities. (6)

## Considerations

In communicating with your children and others, consider the following:

- Learn all you can. Genuine awareness will help you avoid judgmental or mistaken attitudes about food, weight, body shape, and eating disorders.
- Discourage the idea that a particular diet, weight, or body size will automatically lead to happiness and fulfillment.
- Avoid categorizing foods as “good/safe” vs. “bad/dangerous.” Very few are, by themselves, inherently dangerous, unsafe or bad.
- Pay attention to the thoughts that go through your mind (called self talk) when you size up another person. Are you making assumptions that are based purely on appearance? If so, take a moment and stop yourself.
- Stand up for others. Next time you hear someone make a snarky comment about someone’s weight, don’t laugh along or stay silent.
- Give thoughtful compliments. Provide lots of reassurance about kids’ looks and about all their other important qualities. As much as they may seem not to notice or care, simple statements like “you’ve got the most beautiful smile,” or “you worked so hard on your school project, tell me more about it” really do matter. Compliment them on physical and non-physical attributes. When you hear “I hate my hair” or “I’m so dumb” provide a valuable counterpoint. Reflect the feeling, and listen, rather than arguing or agreeing with them.
- Accept our body’s genetic predisposition and understand all bodies change developmentally in ways that are not in our control through healthy means. Educate your children on this topic. We may positively influence our body’s appearance and functioning by making healthy lifestyle choices, but no one can fully “control” physical body change over time. Attempts at full control often lead to just the opposite – feeling out of control.
- Be a model of healthy self-esteem and body image. Constantly complaining about your appearance teaches kids to cast the same critical eye on themselves. Talk instead about what your body can do, not just how it looks. Instead of griping about how big your legs are, talk about how they’re strong enough to help you hike up a mountain. Having a healthy and positive body image means liking your body, appreciating it, and being grateful for its qualities and capabilities. It stands to reason that when parents care for and appreciate their own bodies, they help teach their kids to do the same.

Whether you hear your child, a friend, or yourself saying these statements, consider your intention and its likely effect.

### Fat Talk Statements

- You'd be prettier if you lost weight.
- He has gained a lot of weight since I saw him last.
- She's too fat to be wearing those pants.
- Why is he dating her? She's chubby.
- Wow, that girl has a big butt!
- Did you gain the freshman 15?

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- Do I look fat in this?
  - I need to lose 10 lbs.
  - You think you're fat? Look at me.
  - I'm too fat to wear a swimsuit.
  - I can't eat that, it will make me fat.

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- You look great! Have you lost weight?
  - How are you so thin?

#### *Other Resources on this topic*

- Confidence Coalition
- Operation Beautiful
- AED Guidelines for Childhood Obesity Prevention Programs

### Considerations & Responses

- Focusing on health as a value instead of weight as a goal.
- Resist mentioning weight gain/loss, or comments about one's size. Focus on accomplishments, non-physical qualities.
- Young men and women are still growing and their bodies are changing.

#### Alternatives:

- I love my strong legs because they allow me to hike in the woods.
- I can't wait to lie on the beach, read a book, and go swimming. It's my favorite summer trip!
- I want to stop watching so much TV after work and instead try a dance class. It will help me improve my health and reduce stress.

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- These comments seem positive but are deceptive. They still focus on appearance instead of health. These comments can still have a negative effect.
  - Comment on positive aspects – Stop at the "You look great!" Better yet, just say "Wow, it is great to see you! How have you been?"

## SCENARIO

Here is a common situation parents have asked us about. We have some suggestions for response but use the ones that fit with your parenting style and with the type of communication style that works best for you.

***You overhear your daughter and her boyfriend having a discussion in your home. He says to her: "You need to work out more and tone up because I don't date fat girls".***

How do you respond?

You have a choice between talking with both of them together or asking to speak to your daughter alone.

- If you talk with your daughter alone, you can ask her how that comment affected her. Ask if this is a pattern in their relationship, and what she thinks

about it. Explain to her that threatening to leave a partner as coercion to lose weight (or do anything else to change her appearance) is emotionally abusive. If it is a one-time occurrence, then you can coach her in different ways she can respond to him to let him know it is not okay to talk to her this way. If it has happened before, coach her through her choices about staying or leaving a relationship that is hurtful.

- If you choose to talk with them together, set a tone that is non-judgmental and non-confrontational. You can talk in general about the fact that people who care about each other communicate in caring ways and not in the way you heard him speaking. Ask him what judgments he is making about a girl he thinks is fat. Ask him what he wants in a girlfriend. Ask him what qualities he has that he brings to the relationship and what qualities your daughter has that he admires. Ask your daughter the same question, as well as, what she needs to feel safe in a relationship. This models a different way to think and communicate.

## Some Statistics

- 54% of women would rather be hit by a truck than be fat. 67% of women would rather be mean or stupid than be fat. (5)
- Negative comments and teasing about weight and shape contribute to the development of excessive weight and shape concerns, which is a risk factor for the development of eating disorders. (7)
- Family criticism about weight and shape, even only a few negative comments, can result in long-lasting, negative effects. In fact, in otherwise or generally supportive families, a few negative comments may have a detrimental impact, because they stand out against patterns of little or no criticism. The harmful effects of negative comments are substantiated in the data, which showed that higher emotional abuse scores were associated with poorer self-esteem and lower perceived social support. (8)



# Influence of Others and Society: Media Literacy

“I often think of anorexia as a loaded gun that someone pulled the trigger on. I would never blame my body image on someone else, but at the same time, I know that society really affects the way I view my body. When I first started viewing my body negatively, I was 14 or so. I remember reading a lot of women’s magazines (Allure, Self, Cosmo, etc.) and thinking that I didn’t look like the women in them. I also think that my mom put a lot of emphasis on appearance, and I had an abusive boyfriend who would constantly tell me things about my body and appearance that I needed to ‘work on.’”

– Anonymous U.Va. student

## The Issue

It’s not surprising to say that our society has an unhealthy obsession with unrealistic standards of beauty and perfection. We see it constantly through media sources - television, Internet, movies, and print.

Although cultural ideals have always shaped the public’s perception of the ideal female body type, today’s culture is unique in that the media is a far more powerful presence than ever before. (Academic Psychiatry)

## Considerations

- Become media literate! One way to protect our self esteem and body image from the media’s definitions of beauty and acceptability is to become a critical viewer of the media messages. When we recognize and analyze the media messages that influence us, we remember that the media’s definitions of beauty and success do not have to define our self-image. All media images and messages are constructions! Advertisements and other messages have been carefully crafted with the intent to send a specific message and convince us to buy or support a specific product.

- Share your knowledge with others, especially your children. Discuss this information with your family and friends. Point out unrealistic images on TV and in magazines and ask your child about them.
- Speak up and use your purchasing power. Be a Media Watchdog. When you see a TV show or an advertisement that creates negative weight-based assumptions, contact the producers with your thoughts. They will listen!
- Focus on other activities that don’t promote appearance such as taking a walk or playing a board game.

## Some Statistics

- 70% of young women say they want to look like a character from TV. 69% of TV characters are underweight. (9)
- 42% of 1st-3rd grade girls want to be thinner. (11)
- 81% of 10 year olds are afraid of being fat. (12)
- A 1996 study found that the amount of time an adolescent watches soaps, movies and music videos is associated with their degree of body dissatisfaction and desire to be thin.
- One study reports that at age thirteen, 53% of American girls are “unhappy with their bodies.” This grows to 78% by the time girls reach seventeen. (13)
- 58 percent of female characters in movies had comments made about their looks, as did 28 percent in television shows and 26 percent of the female models in the accompanying commercials. Mens’ and boys’ appearance is talked about significantly less often in all three media: a quarter (24%) of male characters in the movies, and 10 percent and 7 percent, respectively, in television shows and commercials. (14)
- One in every three (37%) articles in leading teen girl magazines also included a focus on appearance, and most of the advertisements (50%) used an appeal to beauty to sell their products. (15)
- Commercials aimed at female viewers during television shows most often watched by teen girls frequently used beauty as a product appeal (56% of commercials). By comparison, this is true of just 3 percent of television commercials aimed at men. (16)

# What about guys?

Although fewer men meet criteria for eating disorders than women, more men are becoming concerned with shape and weight. While some of the signs are similar to the disordered eating found in women, there are important differences. Men concerned with weight and shape are more likely to focus on building bulk and muscle mass, which can lead to over-exercise, dietary restriction, and abuse of anabolic steroids.

Men too are bombarded by media pressure. Pictures of thin, muscular, and perfectly coiffed models appear in men's magazines, TV, and movies. Duggan and McCreary found that reading muscle and fitness magazines correlated with levels of body dissatisfaction in both gay and straight men. Additionally, action figures have become increasingly muscular and devoid of body fat. (Academic Psychiatry)

## Media Impact – Fiji

No discussion of body image and the media would be complete without referencing Anne Becker's landmark study comparing rates of eating disorders before and after the arrival of television in Fiji in 1995. Ethnic Fijians have traditionally encouraged healthy appetites and have preferred a rotund body type, which signified wealth and the ability to care for one's family. Strong cultural identity is thought to be protective against eating disorders; there was only one case of anorexia nervosa reported on the island prior to 1995. However, in 1998, rates of dieting skyrocketed from 0 to 69%, and young people routinely cited the appearance of the attractive actors on shows like "Beverly Hills 90210" and "Melrose Place" as the inspiration for their weight loss. For the first time, inhabitants of the island began to exhibit disordered eating. (Academic Psychiatry)

## SCENARIO

Here is a common situation parents have asked us about. We have some suggestions for response but use the ones that fit with your parenting style and with the type of communication style that works best for you.

***Your daughter calls to talk and tells you that she and a group of friends from her dorm watched the Victoria's Secret fashion show on TV together last night and then felt so bad about their weight and body image afterwards that they went as a group to the gym to run on the treadmill for over an hour.***

- You ask her how she feels about the experience of watching the fashion show.
- You share information about the media and fashion industry and let her know that the vast majority of women at their healthy weight will never meet this unattainable beauty ideal.
- Ask her what about the models' life appeals to her and why, as well as how sustainable she thinks that life would be over 60-70 years.
- You suggest a fun, positive movie or TV show that you think they would enjoy.
- You know of body positive resources at U.Va. and suggest that your daughter and her friends contact these organizations to learn more.

## Conclusion

While you are an extremely influential figure in your child's life, they are exposed to media, peers, significant others, and society daily. It is important that at home your child feels comfortable in their own skin because often times these other influences simply promote an ideal body type that is completely unachievable.

### *Other Resources on this Topic*

- Parent Further
- National Eating Disorders Association

# What You Can Do: Be a Body Activist!

“Be good role models for healthy eating habits. Don’t let your kids see you restricting or dieting regularly. Focus on your children’s accomplishments and strengths that are unrelated to appearance as much as possible.

Teach media literacy!”

– Anonymous U.Va. student

## Considerations

To improve body image culture inside and outside of your home.

- Make your child aware that everyone has unique physical characteristics that don’t need to be seen negatively.
- Express value of thoughts and accomplishments over physical values – instead of saying “you look great today” it’s often more reassuring to a child to hear “you did great on your test” or “we are proud of you.”
- Help your child recognize how unrealistically the media represents the ideal person – make sure she realizes how much airbrushing is used. You can even ask how these images make her feel about herself.
- Remember that health should be the goal, not weight. While it’s important to encourage your child to be active and eat well, it will be much more effective if you come from a health standpoint (after all that is what matters) instead of making your child feel that they must weigh a certain amount.
- It’s important not to get down on yourself for past mistakes, but instead focus on how you can change the home environment to ensure your child has a healthier mindset about their body in the future. Have a mistake positive attitude. Not only will it be beneficial for you, but your child will notice that you aren’t beating yourself up over your own mistakes and will be more likely to follow suit.
- Allow your child to express their thoughts and feelings with you and share some of your own. This will greatly reduce the likelihood of your child bottling up emotions that could cause them to use body image as a way to cope.

- Set a body positive standard for your child. If you are constantly worrying about your weight not your health, your child will be too. Instead, focus on making sure your child sees you eating nutritious meals and being active on a regular basis because, after all, you are her biggest role model.
- Don’t compare your child to other people (especially other family members). Comparisons are often the most difficult thing to get over because each person is so individual and one will never look exactly like another.

## **Ways to Start a Discussion with a Loved One who Might have an Eating Disorder**

- Learn all you can about eating disorders. Then, prepare yourself to listen with compassion and no judgment.
- Plan a private, uninterrupted time and place to start a discussion. Be calm, caring, and non-judgmental. Directly express, in a caring way, your observations and concerns about the person’s behavior.
- Explain the reasons for your concerns, without mentioning eating behavior. The person may deny the situation because of overwhelming feelings, such as shame and guilt. Avoid expressing frustration with the person. Stay calm.
- Ask if he/she is willing to explore these concerns with a healthcare professional who understands eating disorders.
- Remind your loved one that many people have successfully recovered from an eating disorder.
- Take a break if your loved one continues to deny the problem. Revisit the subject again soon, but not in a confrontational way.
- Lastly, being a good support means that you also have to take good care of yourself and attend to the stresses you feel from the situation.
- For detailed steps, visit the National Eating Disorders Association Parent Toolkit.

### *Other Resources on this Topic*

- Health At Every Size (HAES)
- Proud2BMe
- U.Va. Department of Student Health Medical Guidelines for Outpatient Treatment of Eating Disorders



For more information about the Maxine Platzer Lynn Women's Center Eating Disorders Education Initiative visit:

[womenscenter.virginia.edu/body-positive-eating-disorders](http://womenscenter.virginia.edu/body-positive-eating-disorders)

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