

Body image: pre-teens and teenagers

Key points

- **Healthy body image is feeling happy and satisfied with your body.**
- **Help pre-teens and teenagers develop healthy body image by talking, focusing on the whole person, and being a positive role model.**
- **If pre-teens and teenagers have unhealthy body image, they might be self-critical, compare themselves with others, and feel unhappy with their appearance.**
- **Speak to a GP or other health professional if you're concerned about your child's body image.**

What is body image?

Your body image is how and what you think and feel about your body. It includes the picture of your body that you have in your mind, which might or might not match your body's actual shape and size.

A positive or **healthy body image** is feeling happy and satisfied with your body, as well as being comfortable with and accepting the way you look.

A negative or **unhealthy body image** is feeling unhappy with the way you look. People who feel like this might want to change their body weight or shape.

Body image can change through your lifetime.

A healthy body image is important. When you feel good about your body, you're more likely to have good self-esteem and mental health as well as a balanced attitude to eating and physical activity.



A healthy body image in childhood can lay the foundations for good physical and mental health later in life. An unhealthy body image in childhood can have long-lasting consequences.

Body image in pre-teens and teenagers: influences

Your child's body image is **influenced by many factors**.

These factors include family environment, ability or disability, the attitudes of peers, social media, cultural background and more.

Puberty (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/development/puberty-sexual-development/puberty-helping-your-child>) is also a big influence. During puberty, your child's body is going through many changes. But at the same time, fitting in and looking the same as other people becomes more important.

You have an influence on your child's body image too. There's a lot you can do to help your child develop a positive body image, including:

- talking and listening with your child

- focusing on your child as a whole person
- being a positive body image role model.

Talking about bodies and body image with pre-teens and teenagers

Your child needs your help to sort through and understand messages about their body.

Sometimes you can help just by actively listening (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/communicating-relationships/communicating/active-listening>) to how your child is feeling about the physical changes of puberty (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/development/puberty-sexual-development/physical-changes-in-puberty>). This means really paying attention to your child's concerns and showing that you care and are interested in what they're saying. If your child is feeling confused, you can reassure them that the changes are a natural part of growing up.

It's also good to talk with your child about **images on social and other media**. Some images set unrealistic ideals for pre-teens and teenagers. But you can help by explaining how the images are often digitally manipulated so that people look more 'beautiful' than they really are.

If your child isn't talking or opening up to you, they might like to talk with another trusted adult. They could also:

- contact an anonymous service like Kids Helpline – phone **1800 551 800**
- use Kids Helpline web counselling (<http://kidshelpline.com.au/teens/get-help/webchat-counselling/>) or Kids Helpline email counselling (<https://kidshelpline.com.au/get-help/email-counselling/>) services.

Focusing on the whole person

This is about praising your child for who they are and what they can do, rather than their size or shape.

You can let your child know that you're **proud of them for things that aren't related to appearance**. This might include your child's sense of humour, effort at school, helpfulness or other special skills.

You can also help your child spend time on interests and activities that make them feel good.

And you can send your child positive messages about themselves by **focusing on what their body can do**, rather than how their body looks. For example, you can say, 'Wow, you hit that ball a long way', rather than 'Gosh, you've got strong arm muscles'.

Being a positive body image role model

If you show that you feel positive about your own body, it'll be easier for your child to be positive about their body. A positive attitude includes:

- making healthy eating and physical activity part of your everyday family life
- avoiding fad or crash diets
- accepting your genetics and talking about how this influences body size and shape
- appreciating your own body for what it can do, not just how it looks
- being proud of things in yourself that aren't related to appearance
- accepting and valuing people for what they do, and not commenting on how people look.

Sometimes unhelpful body attitudes can show up in **subtle comments and messages** without us really being aware of it. For example, we might see a friend and say something like, 'You look great – you've lost so much weight!' Comments like these can add up and influence the way children feel about their bodies.

It's important to let everyone in your family know that **teasing about weight or appearance is not OK**. Teasing can have a negative influence on body image and can also lead to bullying (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/behaviour/bullying/teen-bullying>).

Pre-teen and teenage body image concerns: signs to watch out for

It's common for pre-teens and teenagers to be conscious of their bodies and want to lead a healthy lifestyle.

But there are signs that your child is focusing too much on their body, including stress (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/mental-health-physical-health/stress-anxiety-depression/stress-in-teens>) and anxiety (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/mental-health-physical-health/stress-anxiety-depression/anxiety>), about how they look. Your child might show this by:

- criticising their body – for example, they might say they're fat or ugly
- continually comparing their body with others
- not wanting to leave the house because of the way they look
- not doing activities or trying new things because of the way they feel about their body
- obsessing about weight or about specific parts of their body, like their face, stomach or legs
- talking about wanting to have surgery or other cosmetic procedures
- spending a lot of time looking in the mirror or taking photos and looking for changes or imperfections
- covering their body up with loose and baggy clothes
- linking food with feelings of guilt, shame or blame.

If you think your child is experiencing any of these signs, start by talking with them about your concerns. If things don't change and you're still worried, talk to your GP or another health professional.



If your child wants to eat differently or do more exercise, that's OK – but make sure it's for healthy reasons, and that their eating or exercising doesn't become extreme. Let your child know that healthy eating and physical activity aren't just for weight control – they're vital for physical health, now and in the future.

Effects of unhealthy body image in pre-teens and teenagers

Unhealthy pre-teen and teenage body image is directly related to low self-esteem, which can lead to anxiety, anger and low mood.

Young people who are feeling down are more likely to focus on the negative messages around them and make negative comparisons between their bodies and what they see as 'ideal' bodies. Low self-esteem and poor body image are risk factors for the development of risky weight loss strategies, eating disorders (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/mental-health-physical-health/mental-health-disorders/eating-disorders>) and mental health disorders like depression (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/mental-health-physical-health/stress-anxiety-depression/depression>).

Some pre-teens and teenagers with unhealthy body image might talk about wanting to have cosmetic surgery to change their body. If this sounds like your child, it's a good idea to talk with them about why. If you're concerned about your child's interest in cosmetic surgery, talk with your GP or another health professional.



People of all genders can be affected by body image issues but in different ways. For example, teenage girls who don't like their bodies often want to lose weight and be thinner. Teenage boys often want to tone their body, be taller or have more muscles.

Negative body image: risk factors for pre-teens and teenagers

Some children are more likely than others to feel unhappy about their bodies. Pre-teens and teenagers might be more at risk of developing unhealthy body image if they:

- feel pressure from family, peers or media to fit into narrow ideas of beauty
- have a different body shape or weight from their peers
- get ideas about 'ideal' bodies from media images and influencers
- feel the need to be perfect
- focus too much on appearance and how others see them
- compare themselves with others
- have low self-esteem or symptoms of depression
- belong to a friendship, sport or dance group that emphasises a certain body type
- have physical disabilities.

Teenage children in general, teenage girls in particular and young people who are overweight are also more likely to feel negative about their bodies or have an unhealthy body image.

Body image for pre-teens and teenagers with special needs

Developing a healthy body image can be harder for pre-teens and teenagers with special needs, especially if they have a physical disability or their bodies cause them pain and difficulty. Your child might also feel left out of discussions about body image because people with their body type aren't often seen in the media.

Not everyone gets a 'standard' body. You can talk about healthy body image with your child and emphasise that it includes all types of bodies, even ones that don't fit popular ideals.

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External links

- [Butterfly Foundation – Body Image Tips for Young People \(PDF: 328kb\)](https://butterfly.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/BodyImageTips-YoungPeople.pdf) (<https://butterfly.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/BodyImageTips-YoungPeople.pdf>).
- [Reach Out – Body dysmorphic disorder](https://au.reachout.com/articles/body-dysmorphic-disorder) (<https://au.reachout.com/articles/body-dysmorphic-disorder>).

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