Body image and the pitfalls for all ages

Tracey Wade

BODY image relates to how people think and feel about their own body. Negative body image occurs when we develop negative feelings about our bodies. While most of us have had negative feelings about our body at some stage of our lives, this problem is not limited to adults. Children also experience poor body image. In Australians aged 11 to 24, body image was identified as a major concern for the fourth consecutive year in the Mission Australia 2009 National Survey of Young Australians.

Body dissatisfaction starts at an early age, as young as six years. In Australia, by the time adolescence arrives, 50 per cent of girls and 33 per cent of boys in the healthy weight range believe they are overweight.

What causes this poor body image? Studies of 8 to 12-year-old Australian children suggest that TV viewing can be a contributing factor. Watching appearance-focused television programs appears to cause particular harm in children as young as five.

Participating in sports that focus on body size and type, such as gymnastics, figure-skating, some forms of dance, and rowing, can also be associated with a poor body image. Being encouraged to lose weight or being teased about weight, or a lack of muscle by parents and friends can also lead to a poor body image.

So what can be done to protect children against developing a poor body image? In the School of Psychology at Flinders University, Dr Simon Willems and I have been examining the use of a media literacy program with 13-year-olds. Media literacy is not an effort to restrict media use, but to encourage mindful and critical media consumption. In our program, Media Smart, we examined stereotypes in the media (for example, happiness in life equates to a thin shape for females and a lean, muscular shape for males), showed how airbrushing is used in magazine pictures, explored strategies for standing up to pressure to conform to stereotypes, and looked at ways to accept our own unique contribution in the world. We evaluated Media Smart with 540 students (boys and girls) and found that almost three years after the program finished, students who didn't do the program had a steadily increasing concern about weight and shape, but those who did the program did not show any increase.

In our families, we can monitor TV viewing and discuss helpful and unhelpful stereotypes in the media, and avoid teasing about weight or shape. Focus on the personal rather than physical characteristics of your children when you praise them. Help your children celebrate their uniqueness or, in the words of Oscar Wilde, “Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken”. Don’t have family conversations that criticise the way people look. Emphasise health, not weight. Involve your children in sports that emphasise enjoyment and what their body can do, rather than sports that emphasise a particular shape or weight. Encourage your children to talk about any episodes of teasing at school or with friends and discuss helpful ways of responding to this pressure.

When children have negative feelings about their bodies, it can lead to the development of serious psychological and physical concerns, including eating disorders, depression and low self-esteem. A poor body image can be prevented and families, schools and the media can all play a role in achieving this. Tracey Wade is a professor at the School of Psychology, Flinders University.