

Helpful language and behaviour to support body confident children and communities



HELPFUL

Act as a positive body image role model. This means comments about the body should be limited to what our bodies can do rather than comments about appearance or weight.

Compliment people on non-appearance or weight attributes (e.g., abilities, consideration for others).

Encourage a healthy scepticism of media messages – most of the images we see are selective and heavily manipulated, and not representative of most humans! This includes both traditional media (TV, movies, print etc) and social media.

Challenge the idea that only thin or muscular is beautiful. Acknowledge the diversity of the human ideal over the centuries – and focus on the inherent worth of the person, not what they look like.

Encourage the development of a range of life domains, (e.g., friendships, school work, family, sport, music, other talents) to contribute to a broad base for a young person's feelings of self-worth. Social connectedness is especially important.

Understand that healthy eating, exercise and body image can be achieved without an overt focus on food and exercise in class. Evidence shows that targeting underlying risk factors is much more effective and safer than class discussions about body image. Addressing risk factors includes learning to critique media messages; curating social media away from an appearance focus; and challenging perfectionism and all or nothing goals.

Protective factors include adopting self-compassion rather than self-criticism to achieve goals more effectively; and learning skills in the areas of identifying, accepting and regulating emotions. These skills are protective for body image and mental health in general.

Ensure weight- or appearance-based teasing is not acceptable in our school and our homes. Schools need specific policies on this topic to make young people feel safe to come forward with any such experiences.

Trust your gut instinct and take action quickly if you're concerned about a young person. School staff, have a chat with the student, suggest they might talk to the counsellor, and discuss with their parents. Parents, encourage a GP appointment, find a support person the child can trust, ring one of the available helplines for support:

Butterfly 1800 33 4673, Lifeline 13 11 44, Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636 or Youthline 0800 376 633

NOT HELPFUL

Avoid acting as a negative body image role model. This means avoiding negative comments about your own appearance or weight.

Avoid comments on other people's appearance or weight.

Avoid a focus on weight (or body mass index) as an indicator of health – it is much more accurate to consider the big picture, including lifestyle factors (e.g., smoking, physical activity, a balanced intake of food, stress levels, blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels).

Ensure that we are not giving messages that could make children more worried about their food intake, exercise or weight. Avoid asking students to measure their weight or food intake in classroom activities. Avoid labelling foods as “no-no” or “forbidden” foods. Instead, embrace diversity of the food groups and prescribe one “fun food” per day. Avoidance of such food can lead to preoccupation and binge eating.

Discourage excessive focus on any one domain of life, including weight and appearance, or achievement. Having a balance of domains that matter – spread across achievement and enjoyment – is protective against a range of problems, including eating disorders, but also perfectionism, anxiety and similar concerns.

Don't think that we are encouraging people to not care about food intake or exercise. The focus needs to be on teaching children to treat themselves (and others) with respect – encouraging youth to identify and express their opinion, as well as listening to and being open to hearing others. This helps set healthier priorities across a number of life domains.

Don't forget how life was in your own earlier years (e.g., late childhood, teenage). These are times of great change and uncertainty in a young person's life that can be very hard. Keeping a sense of compassion for our young people is very important.

Restorative justice approaches are unlikely to be suitable for managing appearance-based teasing. Students need to know there are confidential options to express their experiences and concerns.

Don't hope it will just go away or the young person will grow out of it. Being proactive can help avoid lengthy periods of poor mental health down the track.