

Body image and primary school children

Body image is a broad concept that refers to the way people think and feel about their appearance¹. It encompasses ideas about size and shape, skin colour, birthmarks, scars, facial features, clothing and adornments related to personal religious beliefs, physical disabilities, and the use of equipment and aids like prostheses or wheelchairs. There are a range of factors that contribute to a person's body image, and messages from family members, other important adults, peers and the media all play a significant role².

Why is positive body image important?

Positive body image helps children to feel good about themselves and supports their mental health and wellbeing in childhood and beyond. Children with a positive body image are comfortable with their physical appearance and are more likely to think about their body in terms of its functionality rather than its form – that is, they focus mostly on the way their body helps them to do the things they want to do like playing sport, climbing trees or walking the dog, rather than how their body looks. Children with positive body image might not be completely satisfied with their appearance, but they concentrate on assets rather than flaws. This way of thinking contributes to a positive sense of self-worth. It helps children to detect and fulfil the body's needs, which means they might be more likely to appreciate the value of exercise and make healthy food choices that help the body to perform well.

Unfortunately, it is common for both boys and girls to experience negative thoughts or feelings about their appearance or dissatisfaction with the way their bodies look³. When children have issues with self-worth and body image, they are at an increased risk for developing unhealthy attitudes to eating and issues with dieting⁴ as well as low mood⁵. Evidence suggests that low self-worth and body dissatisfaction might play a role in the development of serious mental health issues like depression and eating disorders in adolescence and beyond⁶.



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Why should primary schools be involved in promoting positive body image?

Body image has traditionally been seen as the domain of secondary schools, but there are many reasons why primary schools should be involved in promoting a positive body image.

- **Children are already developing ideas about body image.** Research suggests that girls as young as five years old who are exposed to music videos or women's magazines are more likely to be aware of diet practices and cultural pressures to be thin⁷. Concerns about personal appearance seem to emerge around the age of six or seven years old⁸.
- **During primary school, friendships are very important.** Peer relationships can have a strong influence on how children feel about their body. Ideas about how other primary school girls feel about their bodies inform girls' own body image⁸.
- **Acting early might be the best approach.** It has been suggested that programs targeting younger children that increase a healthy sense of self-worth and reduce or prevent body image concerns might be more effective because beliefs become more entrenched in adolescence⁹.
- **Issues with body image might have more serious consequences for younger children.** If body dissatisfaction results in dieting or other eating issues, it might cause significant harm to children's growth and development during a critical period¹⁰.

What can primary schools do to promote positive body image?

Primary schools might like to use these strategies to help build positive body image in children.

- Develop effective policy and practices that proscribe appearance-related teasing and bullying, and support children who are teased or bullied as a result of their appearance, body size or shape, or ethnicity.
- Support children to develop a strong sense of self and skills to buffer unhelpful messages about body image.
- Display posters and other materials that reflect the diversity of students in terms of body shape, size and ethnicity – that is, ensuring the school environment is welcoming to children and families, regardless of appearance.
- Provide education on fitness and nutrition that has a positive focus on energy, fun, social connection and health, rather than a negative focus on weight and dietary control.
- Ensure food served in schools is nutritious and balanced, including meals and snacks served within school facilities like tuckshops or vending machines, as well as at events such as fundraisers and sports days.
- Provide information for families in the school newsletter or on the website that looks at how to support children to develop a positive body image and a strong sense of self.
- Learn to recognise the early signs of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating and refer children and their families to health professionals accordingly.

How does KidsMatter Primary help?

KidsMatter Primary supports schools to promote mental health and wellbeing among children. The four components of KidsMatter Primary support the efforts of schools to promote a healthy body image in children.

Component 1: Positive school community

supports schools to focus on building a positive school culture that provides safety and security for children, promotes a sense of belonging and supports the development of positive relationships. Positive communities celebrate diversity, ensure everyone feels welcome and make people feel special and valued for qualities, talents and skills that are unrelated to appearance.

Component 2: Social and emotional learning for students

helps schools to think about how to embed the teaching of social and emotional skills into the curriculum, with opportunities for children to practise these skills across a range of contexts. Skills to help children cope with difficult emotions and develop a strong self-concept can help buffer negative messages about body image. Teaching children to see others' perspectives and cultivate compassion for others can reduce appearance-related teasing and bullying.

Component 3: Working with parents and carers

encourages schools to build strong relationships with the families in their community and create opportunities for families to get involved. The attitudes of parents and other significant adults about their own appearance and related issues like dieting have a strong bearing on children's body image. The most effective efforts to promote positive body image will involve a collaborative effort between schools and families.

Component 4: Helping children with mental health difficulties

supports school staff to recognise signs that a child might be experiencing social or emotional difficulties and take appropriate action. Given its links with mental health concerns like low mood, poor self-esteem and disordered eating, body dissatisfaction can grow into a serious issue. Knowing what to look for and how to respond allows school staff to act early.



What can you do at your school?

There are a number of strategies that schools can employ to promote a positive body image in children. Some involve a policy response, while others involve action at the individual level. This work can be integrated into the work schools are already doing to support children's mental and physical health. The following questions might present a starting point for your school to think about body image.

- What is your school currently doing to promote healthy self-worth and positive body image among children?
- What are the opportunities and challenges associated with promoting positive body image among children at your school?
- What messages about body image are conveyed in the physical environment of the school – for example, in the classrooms, hallways, tuckshop and office?
- What policies and procedures protect children who are teased or bullied about their appearance? Do these policies and procedures protect children in the online arena as well?
- How are body image issues (including healthy eating, exercise, identifying and managing emotions, and self-esteem) addressed in the curriculum at your school?
- What information does your school provide for families about supporting children to develop positive body image?
- How does your behaviour communicate a 'body image friendly' message to children?
- What signs might indicate that a child needs help with issues of self-worth or body image?



For more information

- **Conversation starters for school leaders**
A resource prepared by the Australian Government Office for Youth that provides teachers and other school staff with conversation starters which focus on promoting positive body image within the school environment.
www.youth.gov.au/sites/Youth/bodyImage/Documents/ConversationStarters_SchoolLeaders.pdf
- **Body image information sheets**
Resources for young people and their families prepared by Deakin University for the Australian Government.
www.youth.gov.au/sites/Youth/bodyImage/information sheets
- **An Eating Disorders Resource for Schools**
A manual prepared by Eating Disorders Victoria to promote early intervention and prevention of eating disorders in schools. It provides information for secondary schools and some information also applies to a primary school context.
www.eatingdisorders.org.au/component/docman/doc_download/118-eating-disorder-resource-for-schools



References

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There are a number of strategies that schools can employ to promote a positive body image in children.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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