

TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT MEDIA AND BODY IMAGE

Children are exposed to many unrealistic images of both men's and women's bodies through media. TV shows, music videos, ads, movies, video games, and social networks can communicate ideas about what their bodies "should" look like. Techniques for manipulating images – from old-fashioned techniques like airbrushing to modern technologies like filters – even make it possible for media images to go beyond what's possible in reality.

As a parent, it can be hard to know what to do about these images. This tip sheet provides some advice on how to manage your children's exposure to them and how to talk to them about what they see.

GENERAL TIPS

1. Whenever possible, **co-view** media with your children. This means sitting down with them and watching, playing or reading the media they enjoy. Don't criticize the media they enjoy, but look for opportunities for **teachable moments** where you can model the skills and attitudes you want your kids to develop and start them down the path of asking questions about the media they consume.
2. The most important ideas you want your children to understand are a) that **media are constructions** – things that somebody made – **that don't necessarily reflect reality**; b) that most media products are made so **the people who make them can make money**; c) that **people at different times and in different places have different ideas of what is a "good" body shape**; and d) that **social media encourage us to compare ourselves to others**, which makes us critical of our own faces and bodies.
3. Help your children to consume media mindfully and selectively. When they're young, you can curate their media use to limit their exposure to exaggerated body shapes. As they get older, encourage them to plan their media time and use media as an activity, not just something in the background. Help them curate their social media by filtering out certain words, phrases or hashtags, as well as by unfollowing accounts that post body-critical content and seeking out body-positive or body-neutral accounts. The more they think of media as something they choose, rather than something that's "just there," the more conscious they'll be about what media they choose to consume.
4. Think carefully about the messages you send about weight and appearance. Encourage kids to avoid the "comparison trap" (comparing themselves to others) and to practice self-compassion about their bodies. Emphasize being healthy and active over trying to be a certain weight or have a certain body shape, and make sure kids understand that health and weight are not the same thing. Try not to promote weight stigma through how we talk about bodies (including our own), and don't tolerate weight-based bullying.
5. If you think your child might have an eating disorder, talk to your family doctor. You can also consult the National Eating Disorder Information Centre (nedic.ca/general-information/) for information and resources.

TALKING ABOUT BODY IMAGE WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

BOYS:

From very early on, boys take a lot of their cues about what an adult man should look like from the media they consume: TV shows, video games, and even action figures and toys. All of these are likely to teach boys that it's important to have large muscles and not be either too thin or too heavy. This pressure has increased a lot in recent years, as cartoon and video game characters and action figures have become much more muscular. Boys also learn from the characters in their media that they need to be tough and aggressive and to never show weakness.

Here are some teachable moments that could help raise awareness to your child and how they perceive male body image:

1. If your child receives or shows interest in playing with an action figure whose body is very exaggerated, ask the following questions while playing with them:
 - Is this how you or your friends, or the grown-up men you know, look like?
 - Why do you think the people who make action figures make them look like this?
 - Do you have to have big muscles to be a hero?
 - Can you think of people who are heroes who don't necessarily use their muscles to do good things?
2. If you notice your child watching a television show or movie, playing a video game or wanting a video game that promotes hyper-masculinity through large bodies and tough attitudes, ask these questions while playing with them:
 - What's the difference between how the good

guys and the bad guys are portrayed?

- Do other boys/men you know look and act like this?
- What is the difference between the video game world and the real world?
- Does the game make you solve problems by hurting people? What might be some other ways of solving the problems in the game that don't involve violence?

GIRLS:

Even very young girls may have the desire to conform to the 'thin ideal'. Research has shown that dolls and cartoon characters can influence how young girls perceive their appearance and bodies and how important they think it is to be attractive and sexual. Young girls also often have an interest in celebrities or influencers on social media. They and may want to look just like them, both in terms of their body shape and their sexualized clothing. They also get messages early on from media that it's more important for girls to be popular and attractive than to be active or good at what they do. Here are some teachable moments that could help your child understand the media's beauty ideal vs. reality:

1. If your child enjoys playing with sexualized dolls or shows a great interest in these types of dolls/toys, ask them the following questions while playing with them:
 - What do you like best about the doll?
 - Are the skinnier, more attractive dolls shown as being more popular? Are there any dolls who aren't skinny or don't wear revealing clothing?

- If the doll is supposed to be an adult, do the women you know look like this doll? If not, why might the people who made it not have made it look like real-life women?
 - If the doll is supposed to be a child or teenager, do the girls you know look like this doll? If not, why might the people who made it not have made it look like real-life girls?
 - Why do you think the people who made this doll chose to make it so thin or give it such revealing clothing?
2. If you notice your child talking about celebrities/ influencers or models with their friends or even to you, ask them the following questions:
- Do you compare how you look to celebrities and influencers?
 - Does seeing or reading about celebrities make you feel differently about the way you look?
 - What do you like the most about how celebrities look? Do you feel like you should look like that?
3. If your child enjoys watching TV shows or movies that promote certain body types and suggests that it's most important for girls to be popular and attractive, you may ask them the following questions while watching with them:
- Do all women look like the main character in this?
 - Is the most important thing about a person how they look? What other things might be important about a person?
 - What do the 'good' characters in this look like? What do the 'bad' characters usually look like? Why do you think they're different?
 - Which character would you want to be friends with and why?

TALKING ABOUT BODY IMAGE WITH TWEENS AND TEENS

BOYS:

During this age boys become more familiar with masculine traits and often try to look like the body image they see in media. Tween boys tend to feel pressured if they are 'undersized' and feel the need to gain muscle mass to their bodies. As their bodies start to mature, the differences between their body shapes increase, which can put a lot of pressure on teens to avoid being either too heavy or too thin. They also tend to consume media – especially video games – with highly over-muscular and very tough, violent characters. Here are some teachable moments that

may help your child with body acceptance:

1. If your tween is interested in weight training to build muscle or taking body supplements like protein shakes or bars, ask them the following questions:
 - What made you want to do this?
 - What are the male heroes like in the media you watch, read and play? How are they different from the men you know in the real world?
 - How do the heroes in the media you watch,

read and play solve problems? What are some other ways of solving problems or being a hero? You can encourage boys to read about real-life heroes who embody the same values of courage and perseverance but who didn't use violence to achieve their goals.

2. Talk to your child about the images of men's bodies they see in social media. Boys often are not aware that hyper-muscled bodies are typically not just the result of hard work and exercise, but of performance-enhancing drugs.

GIRLS:

Tween and teen girls take a large interest in social networks. They're especially interested in taking photos of themselves and posting them online – and commenting on others' photos – and viewing their friends profiles. This has been shown to influence their body perception and satisfaction. Reading celebrity gossip magazines, watching the latest teen TV show series, or listening to pop music can also influence how a tween views their body and wishes to alter it. Here are some teachable moments to help teach your child media literacy and the truths behind the beauty ideal:

1. If you notice your tween taking interest in pop culture magazines, music videos, or films that negatively depict women and their bodies, you may want to ask them the following questions:
 - What's your favourite part of this? What do you like the most about it?
 - Do you think it's good for girls to want to look or act like the women in these? What are some things about them that might be good or bad for girls to imitate?
 - Is this how the women you know in real life look or act?
2. You can ask them these questions about social media:
 - Which accounts share content that make you feel better about yourself? Which ones make you feel worse?
 - What makes a picture look good? What things about a picture make it likely to get more "likes" or get shared more often?
 - What makes an influencer popular? Does her appearance make a large difference to her following?
 - What are some of the tricks you or your friends use for making pictures look good? What are things you can do with just the camera and what are things you can do with editing software or with tools the social network gives you (filters, etc.)?
 - Do you think your friends change their photos before posting them? Why do you think people post them?
 - How do you feel when you see a photo of yourself or one of your friends that's been changed? If the photo looks thinner, sexier, or otherwise more attractive than you think you are in real life, does that make you feel better or worse?
 - Do you or your friends rate, comment on or talk about each other's photos? How does it feel to get a low rating or a negative comment? How does it feel to get a high rating or a positive comment?
 - Do you think influencers change their photos before posting them? Is it their job to look a certain way?
 - How do an app's features (the ways you can post, interact with and share content)

encourage us to compare ourselves to other people? How can we avoid the “comparison trap”?

- What is the culture or the “unwritten rules” of the social networks your child uses? (For example, Instagram is sometimes described as having a “highlight reel” culture, where you are expected to always look your best and present a positive view of your life and yourself.) How might those encourage you to post certain kinds of content, or to compare yourself to others?
- How do you think the social network’s algorithm decides what to show or suggest to you? What can you do to make it show you more body-neutral or body-positive content?