



Young people, body image and food



Parents are the most important influence in their child's life. They can help young people develop healthy habits, routines and ways of thinking about themselves. A confident body image supports young people's self-esteem and healthy living behaviours.

As children develop into young adults they establish eating and lifestyle patterns for their future. Adolescence, or the pre-teen and teenage years, is a time marked by many physical, emotional and social changes. It is also when young people work out their own identity and what is important to them, form peer groups and move towards independence.

Body image

How we feel about the way we look develops over time and is influenced by many things. This includes family attitudes, peer groups, advertising, media and social norms and expectations.

Body image isn't about how our body looks – it is about how we see ourselves, how we feel about the way we look, and how we think others see us. Studies show that our ideas about bodies and appearance develop from an early age. Pre-schoolers understand that society judges people by their looks. Even young children can feel unhappy about their bodies and appearance which may affect their relationship with food, their engagement in school, physical activity and social events. Body image becomes even more important in the teen years as young people develop their identity.

Many people assume it is mostly girls who are unhappy with their bodies. Studies now show that young people of all genders are concerned about their bodies and appearance. Young people of all backgrounds and cultures experience body image issues. It can be particularly challenging for those young people whose body differs from society's stereotypes.

When young people have a poor body image they are at risk of developing mental health problems and harmful eating behaviours.

The influence of media

Media has more influence on our body image and lifestyle choices than ever before due to the growing reach of digital media and advertising. Social media has many benefits for young people including helping them create their identity, express themselves and communicate with others. But there can also be an unhealthy focus on looks as the most important thing about us. Being aware of what your child is looking at on social media apps and online is important.

Many social media sites now use photos more than words to communicate. Celebrity culture has become a modern-day trend. Children and young people can be impressed by the glamorous looks and lifestyles of social media influencers, musicians, actors.

There is a lot of pressure on young people to consume the 'right' things, wear the 'right' clothes and look the 'right' way to be 'cool' and popular.



Images of 'perfect' bodies create added pressure for young people, especially when they are going through puberty. This is a time when children's physical and sexual characteristics start to mature and they can feel more self-conscious and insecure about their bodies. During puberty transgender youth can be at high-risk of serious harm due to concerns about physical characteristics not aligning with their gender identity.

Studies show food, drink and exercise choices of children and young people can be influenced by celebrity-endorsed products, many of which are linked with unhealthy choices. Young people can also be influenced by the unrealistic lifestyle, body weight and shape expectations created by media images, advertising and celebrity culture.

Social media content that shows body change strategies such as weight loss, muscle building and 'fitspiration' is particularly tricky for young people. Some social media apps have content specifically focussed on eating disorders.

Studies show that seeing bodies of different types, shapes, sizes and colours on social media helps young people challenge the 'perfect body' and appearance stereotypes.

It is important that young people are encouraged to take control of their social media feed by changing settings, preferences and unfollowing content that focuses on food, weight loss, and any accounts that make them feel bad about themselves. There are many things young people can do so their time online is positive and balanced. Some of the services listed at the back of this Guide have this information.

What is healthy eating?

Parents play a crucial role in helping their children eat nutritious foods. During adolescence a young person's brain and body are going through important stages of development and need enough nutrition to complete these processes. Young people have a positive attitude towards food and eating if most of the time they eat when hungry, stop when full and don't feel guilty about eating. It is usual for them to:

- eat different amounts on different days, to eat more of the foods they like and less of what they don't like
- eat more when having a 'growth spurt' and then cut back or return to their usual way of eating when things settle down again
- try new ways of eating.

Eating behaviours such as skipping meals, restricting intake and overeating are only a problem if your child does these things often or if these behaviours have become a pattern.

What about dieting?

Studies show young people should not be encouraged to diet. It can restrict growth, lead to disordered eating and the development of eating disorders. Weight is largely determined by genetics. It's more important to focus on being healthy at any size and encouraging a healthy lifestyle. If you are concerned about your child's growth and development seek support from a health professional.

For most young people dieting doesn't last long and they soon return to their usual way of eating. For some, it can lead to a cycle of dieting, disordered eating or an eating disorder.

What parents can do

There are many ways parents can support their young person to develop self-esteem, a healthy relationship with eating and physical activity and a positive body image.

Build a strong relationship

Building a strong relationship with your child from the start will make it easier to talk about sensitive things.

- Spend time with your child and really listen to what they say. Ask them to explain things from their point of view and accept they may have different views from yours. Let them teach you things.
- Find out what makes them feel good and not so good about themselves. Encourage the things that are positive and involve them in finding solutions to manage the negative things.



- Learn what stresses them and involve them in problem solving to find solutions.
- If things break down because there have been upsets, anger or harsh words be active in reconnecting with your child.

For more tips see Parent Easy Guides 'Positive approaches to guiding behaviour: 2-12 years' and 'Living with young people'.

Create good eating habits

- Build a positive attitude to food and healthy eating in your family. Encourage this as a normal and enjoyable part of life and avoid talking about anyone's need to restrict what they eat.
- Instead of naming foods 'good'/'everyday' foods or 'bad'/'sometimes' foods just call food what it is - strawberries, chips, ice cream, yoghurt. Encourage young people to listen to their body and know to stop eating when they feel full.
- Provide a range of nutritious foods, the best you can afford, and let your child decide what and how much to eat. Regular eating (every 2-3 hours) is important.
- Share meals together as often as you can. Turn TVs, phones and other screens off so you can focus on talking and connecting as a family.
- Foods are an important part of celebration and social times. Encourage young people to listen to their bodies. Use the opportunity to teach them about the signs their bodies are sending them about having enough rather than using guilt or shame to suggest they have eaten 'too much'.

Build a positive body image and self-esteem

- Educate yourself about mental health, disordered eating, body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. The more you learn the easier it will be to understand your child/young person and increase self-awareness and compassion for your own body.
- Support your child to accept their own unique shape and size and to resist pressure to fit the 'ideal' body.
- Talk to extended family members about the importance of not commenting on people's weight or shape.

- Encourage your young person to view their body changes as a normal and positive part of growing up.
- Actively value things other than looks in your child. Focus on what their body can do rather than what it looks like. Comment on their qualities and skills rather than their appearance. Let them know you love them just as they are and never tease them about their looks.
- Try to reduce the amount of time you talk about people's appearance. Be conscious of your language and talk about what bodies can do not what they look like.
- Talk with them about how most people post images of an 'ideal self' on social media. Many phones have built-in filters and special effects that can make even the worst selfie look good. Help them see the tricks and tools advertisers use to create unrealistic images, eg digital airbrushing and photo editing. It can be fun to play 'Spot the Photoshop' and see who can find the most digital enhancements.
- If you are not sure how different social media sites work, eg Instagram or TikTok ask your child to show you around. Become familiar with the controls and wellbeing functions of different platforms. Discuss whether viewing these platforms makes them feel better or worse about themselves.

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When your child uses social media encourage them to post constructive comments that support their friends for who they are, not what they look like.

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- Encourage your child to follow a diversity of people with different interests and body shapes.
- If your young person or one of their friends is being bullied or food shamed make sure they know to discuss this with you or another trusted adult. You can help them work out what steps to take (see Parent Easy Guides 'Cyber safety', 'Bullying').

Encourage physical activity

Physical activity contributes to good mental health, physical health, self-esteem and a positive attitude towards the body. Encourage a balanced approach to physical activity. It's good to do for fun as well as fitness. When you can exercise together as a family, eg going for bush walks or walk around your neighbourhood.



Be aware there can be an increased risk of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in sports where there is a focus on a particular body type.

Share the kitchen

When young people leave home many have limited cooking skills or experience of meal planning and wise food shopping. This can lead them to rely on fast foods which are often low in nutrients.

Regularly involve young people in planning, shopping and making a meal of their own choice for the whole family. Expect everyone regardless of gender to help prepare meals.

When eating and body image become a problem

Signs to look out for

It can be hard to tell what is 'normal' eating when your young person is making lots of changes and experimenting with different choices. Talking openly as a family about food and sharing preparation and mealtimes makes it easier to notice changes in the way they eat.

It can be a problem if your young person develops rigid eating habits that continue over time or have a negative effect on their life.

Emotional and social changes

You may notice them:

- not being as happy as usual
- not wanting to mix with friends or family
- being moody, less confident or unmotivated
- not doing as well at school
- sleeping a lot.

Behaviour

They may be:

- restricting the amount or types of food eaten
- engaging in 'clean eating' - with an obsessive focus on healthy eating, food quality and purity
- preoccupied with food, cooking shows and collecting recipes
- obsessed with counting calories
- following rules about how to eat, eg eating food in a certain order, no food after 6pm, cutting food into small pieces
- frequently dieting
- binge eating
- not wanting to eat dinner with the family
- eating in secret or lying about their eating, eg "I ate earlier"
- always weighing themselves or looking in the mirror
- comparing themselves to others or frequently asking if they look fat
- exercising to extreme, even if injured or sick. Boys in particular may become obsessed with body building, weightlifting or muscle toning and get anxious about missing workouts
- using muscle building supplements
- compensating for eating by vomiting after meals, taking diet pills or frequently using laxatives.

Disordered eating

Disordered eating is when someone's eating is disturbed and unhealthy. Young people with disordered eating may restrict their eating, eat compulsively or irregularly, or have inflexible eating patterns. Disordered eating and dieting can develop into an eating disorder.





Eating disorders

Eating disorders are not a choice. They are complex and potentially life-threatening mental illnesses that can affect a young person's physical, mental and social health.

Any person of any shape, size or weight can experience an eating disorder. Studies show teenagers and young adults are more likely to develop an eating disorder. More girls than boys, and more gender non-binary and transgender youth than cisgender peers are affected.

Eating disorders are characterised by distorted thinking and feelings about food and the body. They include:

- Anorexia Nervosa – when a young person restricts food intake, loses a lot of weight, fears gaining weight and has a distorted view of their body
- Bulimia Nervosa – when a young person eats very large amounts of food in a short space of time and then makes themselves vomit or does excessive exercise to avoid weight gain
- Binge Eating Disorder (BED) – when a young person's eating becomes out of control at times. People with BED have times when they eat a large amount of food at one time and there is a lack of control over their eating during this time. Significant feelings of shame, guilt and distress are associated with these episodes
- Other Specified Feeding and Eating Disorders (OSFED) – when a young person engages in fasting, vomiting, excessive exercise or uncontrolled eating. They also have overwhelming concerns about their weight, shape or eating. OSFED is the most common disorder diagnosed for both young people and adults and is just as dangerous as other eating disorders.

Getting help

Eating disorders can have serious physical, emotional and social effects on you, your young person and everyone around them. Studies show that early identification can help reduce the length and severity of illness.

Young people can go to great lengths to hide their eating disorder behaviours. Studies indicate parents' awareness of their children's eating habits is critical for early intervention.

If you are worried about your young person trust your judgement - don't watch and wait. Getting help early can make a significant difference to their recovery.

If your young person is diagnosed with an eating disorder they are likely to need a team of health professionals to help them deal with the emotional, psychological and eating aspects of the illness. Recovery from an eating disorder is possible. You and other family members will also need support.

Looking after yourself

Finding out your child or young person has a negative body image or an eating disorder can be very distressing. Remember, you are not to blame. Body image and eating disorders are complex and there are many factors that contribute. While it's important to be actively involved your health and wellbeing are a priority too.

- Build a support network for yourself and your family. Joining a carers group can also be helpful.
- Take time to do things you enjoy.
- Find ways to relax and recharge.
- Acknowledge the support you are giving to your child and others.
- Be kind to yourself if you feel overwhelmed at times.
- Ask for help and support, eg family, friends, school, services.
- Seek professional help for your own mental health.

Note: The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.





Want more information?

Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 55 1800 or chat online 24 hours, 7 days a week for anyone aged 5 to 25
www.kidshelpline.com.au

Headspace

Phone 1800 650 890 or chat online at www.eHeadSpace.org.au
To talk face to face find your local centre at <https://headspace.org.au/headspace-centres/>
Information and free, confidential support for anyone aged 12-25

Specialist Eating Disorder Services

Butterfly Foundation

Phone 1800 33 4673, email or chat online www.butterfly.org.au Information and support for all those impacted by eating disorders and body image issues

Statewide Eating Disorder Service (SEDS)

Phone (08) 7117 8800, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri
Specialist mental health service to support people living with an eating disorder, their family or carer
www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/SEDS

PACE (Centacare) Program

Phone (08) 8303 6600
Support services for eating disorders or disordered eating, body image concerns and/or unhelpful relationships with food www.centacare.org.au/services/mental-health/eating-disorders/

CAMHS Connect

Phone 1300 222 647, 9am-5pm, Mon-Fri
The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) provides services for children and young people with severe or complex mental health needs. They also have a specific eating disorder service
www.wchn.sa.gov.au/our-network/camhs

Information and support

The Embrace Hub

Body image information and support for parents and children. Evidence-based information to support body appreciation www.theembracehub.com

Body Kind Families

Free resources for parents of teens to support a positive body image and respond to body image concerns www.butterfly.org.au/bodykindfamilies

Eating Disorders Families Australia

Information, support, education and advocacy for families www.edfa.org.au

F.E.A.S.T

A global community offering support, education and empowerment to families of people affected by eating disorders www.feast-ed.org

ReachOut

Online information, support and resources for parents and teenagers aged 12-18
www.reachout.com/mental-health-issues/eating-disorders

Carer Gateway

Phone 1800 422 737, 8am-5pm, Mon-Fri
Free services and support for carers www.carergateway.gov.au

Eat for Health Information about eating well www.eatforhealth.gov.au

Physical activity and exercise Find ideas on helping children and young people be active
www.health.gov.au/topics/physical-activity-and-exercise

Healthy Living - Healthy Eating / Be Active Tips to help children and teens develop healthy eating habits and be active www.sahealth.sa.gov.au

Balanced Diet Information and tips for parents www.healthdirect.gov.au/healthy-eating-for-children

National Eating Disorders Collaboration www.nedc.com.au

InsideOut - Institute for Eating Disorders www.insideoutinstitute.org.au

Parenting

Raising Children Network

Parenting information for children 0-18, including on eating disorders www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Living with young people', 'Young people, feelings and depression', 'Young people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual', 'Transgender and gender diverse children and young people', 'Cyber safety' and 'Bullying' www.parenting.sa.gov.au



**Government of
South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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