We live in a world that sends us all sorts of messages about what the 'perfect' body looks like. We are constantly receiving image-related messages from different sources, all within the media, our surrounding environments, and on social media, indicating what society views as 'beautiful', 'ideal', and 'attractive'. It is not surprising then, that instead of embracing and celebrating diversity in all body types, we end up focusing on what can be dangerous and often physically unattainable perfection. The other reality is that these 'perfect' images to which too many aspire are typically digitally altered, using photoshop, various filters, angles, and lighting to look a certain way. They are not true or realistic images.

Body image refers to how you see yourself, how you feel about the way you look and how you think others perceive you. The reality is that every body comes in all different shapes and sizes, and it is unrealistic to represent only one body type as beautiful. Lots of people of all ages and genders can struggle with their body image. Research suggests that around 70% of Australian girls and around 60% of Australian boys are dissatisfied with their body or weight[1].

With the degree of physical and emotional changes occurring during puberty, it is normal for young people to be more self-aware. Body image was identified as one of the three top concerns of young people in Mission Australia's Youth Survey 2020[2], with concerns considerably higher among females than males.

Males are increasingly feeling this pressure to achieve or maintain an 'ideal' appearance of high levels of fitness, strength, and physical 'perfection'. The change rooms at school and sporting clubs, time at the beach or gym, and intimate experiences can be intimidating and vulnerable spaces for young men.

Tips for young people to help build their self-esteem and body confidence:

- During puberty, you will notice your body beginning to change, and perhaps become more aware of the way your body looks; this is completely normal. If you are feeling really worried about something in particular, don't be afraid to talk and ask questions about your concerns with someone you trust. This could be with your parents, teacher, school nurse or doctor.
- Comparing yourself to images you see in the media and online can be self-destructive and lead to feelings of being ashamed of your body. It's important to keep in mind that these images are likely to have been heavily edited. Highly stylised pictures of celebrities and models are an unrealistic representation of most people today.
- Social media accounts are often used as a 'highlight reel', showcasing the images with the best lighting, angles, clothes, and filters. The image that gets posted is often the most flattering of hundreds and does not reflect reality.
- When looking at images that focus on ways to alter your appearance (ads for weight loss programs, diets etc.), it's useful to think about what the image might be trying to sell, rather than picking apart your own appearance. Scroll through family photos and look at your family members at different ages and stages. You may notice that you have similar body traits to other family members and you might like to talk to someone about your body and how it relates to other body types in your family.

- Have fun finding your own style. Search out the clothes that make you feel good and fit properly. Remember, clothes are designed to fit our bodies, our bodies are not made to squeeze into clothes! It can be useful to remember sizing changes from brand to brand, so try not to focus on the size on the tag, but instead how comfortable you feel and look.
- Fashion trends can come and go quickly. It's fun to experiment with clothes and makeup, but don't let it rule your life.
- Try to look at yourself in the mirror with an uncritical eye, as if you were your best (very supportive and loving!) friend.
- When the focus is only on external appearance, it is hard to embrace the many qualities that make a human being attractive. Think about the unique (internal) attributes you have that make you special. It could be your sense of humour or that you are a really good listener.
- On days where you may be experiencing lower self-esteem, try to appreciate your body for what it can do, rather than how it appears. Acknowledge and celebrate your body for what it is able to do and its strength, rather than focusing on how it looks.
- Social media can be a wonderful source of empowerment and inspiration. However, sometimes it can also be a space that creates dislike and negative emotions towards ourselves and our bodies. It can be really useful to follow lots of different people and organizations who speak about things that are important to you and showcase bodies of different shapes and sizes.
- If someone you follow posts things that have you constantly comparing yourself and your body to others, or have you feeling badly, unfollow them.
- It is okay to look different to your friends and the people you see online. Try to acknowledge that every body is different, and diversity should be celebrated. Health, strength, and happiness looks different for everybody, so be sure to focus on what works best for you and your body.
- Ultimately, feeling good about yourself can only come from one place - inside.

Body image and the media

The media provide a necessary and valuable community service; however, unrealistic and stereotypical images of the 'perfect' body type are also common across many forms of media and advertising, including social media. Young people are more exposed to such images as a result of greater access to technology and the internet. It is important for parents and young people to think critically about the images they see in the media and understand that they may have been manipulated and are not necessarily humanly achievable looks.

It is important to understand that the people we see in the media often have access to resources (such as time, money, cosmetic surgery, personal assistants and trainers) that allows them to eat, look, train, and dress a certain way. Therefore, a lifestyle that results in an appearance similar to theirs is not attainable by most people.

The media also reinforces the many gender role expectations of society and often portrays these gender roles stereotypically. Gender role stereotypes that exist in society can be insulting and discriminatory. Some of these include:

- Men are sexual initiators and aggressors while women submit.
- A man's aggressive nature does not allow him to be sensitive to, or to respect, a woman’s sexual attitudes or needs.
- Men do not need affection, touch or comfort from others and should not offer it to anyone other than their sexual partner.
- Women assess themselves by their appearance and men assess themselves by how they perform. Men are not interested in their own appearance.
- Once a man is sexually aroused he cannot control his arousal.
- In a sexual relationship, the woman should take contraceptive precautions.
- Men do not express feelings verbally but can express them through violence.

Eating disorders

As already outlined, it is normal that some people might not always feel positive about their body shape and size, particularly when their body is going through a number of changes. It is normal to have days where you experience lower self-esteem or poorer body image, every now and then. However, for some, a more constant preoccupation with the way their body looks can lead to severe and dangerous behaviours which can affect their quality of life; such as developing an eating disorder.

A common misconception about eating disorders is that they stem from a desire to look more beautiful. In actual fact, an eating disorder is a serious and complex mental illness that can arise out of a person's severely low self-esteem and negative view of the way their body looks. Eating disorders can affect people of any gender and age, with any body shape or size. The reasons behind why someone may develop an eating disorder are highly complex, there is no one single cause.

If you suspect that a student may have an eating disorder, then it is important that you express your care and concern for the student, suggest that they seek help, and involve their family where possible and appropriate. Have a look at the Eating Disorders in Schools resource for teachers, for more information about what to do.

Performance and Image Enhancing Drugs (PIEDs)

Performance and Image Enhancing Drugs (PIEDs) such as steroids are substances taken by people to improve their physical appearance and/or their athletic performance. For many people who use PIEDs, changing their body image is the main motivation for use.

In Australia, it is illegal to use steroids without a prescription from a doctor. Using steroids can have numerous physical and psychological health effects such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, decreased immune function and kidney damage. People who inject any kind of PIEDs are also at risk of contracting a blood-borne virus. There are a number of treatment pathways available for people who may have a steroid related problem and this treatment needs to be done in consultation with an alcohol and other drug counsellor.

Teaching tips

Schools have a role in providing a supportive, safe and body image-friendly environment[3]. Direct support for students about body image should be available, with a focus on building resilience towards negative body image messages, in a way that is appropriate for their age and gender[4].

The National Advisory Group on Body Image's 'Checklist for Body Image Friendly Schools' suggests that schools give attention to:

- policies and guidelines which address issues related to positive body image
- curriculum which addresses positive body image and associated issues of student wellbeing, resilience, values, healthy lives and relationships, food and nutrition
- activities which promote body image friendly physical activity
- policies and processes which address healthy eating that focusses on health-related outcomes, rather than weight-related outcomes, ensuring they adhere to the traffic light system.
- policies and processes which support values such as honesty, respect, empathy and inclusion
- communication which encourages peers to look out for the safety and well-being of other students, with emphasis on reducing bullying.
- the use of positive language inclusive of diversity.

Below is a summary of principles for education programs supporting positive body image[5].

Essential elements for teaching about body image

- Body image activities that meet the needs of all genders and a variety of cultural backgrounds.
- Activities that promote students' self-identity and self-esteem.
- Media literacy education that assists students in becoming more critical consumers of the media.
- Body image-friendly language that is used between teachers and students, and between students.
- Focus on teaching students about positive behaviours for maintaining good physical and mental health.
- Evidence-based programs that develop positive body image.
- Use of a whole school approach that includes students, teaching staff and parents.

Approaches NOT recommended for teaching about body image

- Using guest speakers, books, videos of those who have suffered/recovered from eating disorders.
- Using pictures of 'ideal' bodies without proper media literacy education as an introduction.
- Exploring body types using 'ectomorph', 'endomorph' and 'mesomorph'.
- Asking students to record food intake.
- Weighing students.

Related resources

Websites

The Butterfly Foundation

The Butterfly Foundation represents all people affected by eating disorders and negative body image – a person with the illness, their family and their friends.

The truth about body image, Kids Helpline

Completely Gorgeous

A website and classroom resource for students and teachers from upper primary school to secondary school. It includes excerpts from the book Real Gorgeous by Kaz Cooke, an animated video, and games and learning activities relating to body image.

Information for Teachers and Schools, National Eating Disorders Collaboration

Lists programs and resources available to schools for the prevention, identification, early intervention, management or care of eating disorders.

Eating disorders information website for young people

Created by the NEDC for young people

"Is it normal for people to shave/wax their pubic hair?", GDHR students FAQ

Fact sheets/booklets/videos

Body image, Get the Facts

Body image fact sheets, Butterfly Foundation

Stay Beautiful: Ugly Truth In Beauty Magazines, YouTube video

Social media can damage body image – here's how to counteract it, The Conversation

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This Background Note relates to the following Learning Activities:

- Body image
- Messages about body image

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