

10 Tips for Teaching Your Kids to BE Body POSITIVE

Eating disorders are complicated, and there is no way to know for certain that your child will or will not struggle with one at some point. However, what we do know is that parents can play a large role in shaping their child's attitudes, beliefs, and self-esteem by being a positive role model and working to impart certain values to their children. Here is a list of 10 things you can do to promote health, body positivity, and self-esteem in your child:

Be Bully-Free – Talk to your children, their teachers, and other parents about bullying. Remind them that it is never okay to tease other kids about size, appearance, or anything else, and that they should always speak up if they hear someone else being a bully.

Encourage Expression – Be sure you always allow and provide space for your children to express their emotions. It is so important for kids to learn to identify and cope with their feelings. Ask them about their friends, about school, and about how they are feeling. Disordered eating behaviors frequently emerge when children use food to help them cope with difficult emotions. Creating an open space for those feelings will help them learn to cope appropriately.

Preach Health at Every Size – Teach your kids that weight is independent from health. You can never tell by looking at someone whether they are healthy. Health is a function of lifestyle habits and behaviors, not of the numbers on the scale.

Open yourself up to all foods! Refrain from labeling foods as “good” and “bad” or “healthy” and “unhealthy.” Dieting is much more dangerous to you and your child's health than an occasional candy bar or bag of potato chips. All foods fit in moderation – restricting just sets you up for cravings and binges.

Say nice things about your own body! When you make disparaging comments about your own weight, size, body, or diet, you are teaching your child that it is normal and appropriate to be dissatisfied with your body. Celebrate the wonderful things your body allows you to do.

Investigate your media sources – Are your kids consuming media that shows diversity in a positive light? Does it reinforce gender stereotypes? Call out harmful messages when you see them. Teach your kids to be media literate – help them identify images and advertisements that are unrealistic or portray only a narrow definition of “beauty.”

Together – Eat family meals together. This is a great opportunity for you to model healthy behaviors. Instead of having “food rules” (e.g., you must clean your plate before leaving the table; if you vacuum your room, you can have ice cream; if you fail a test, you cannot have dessert for a week), teach your children to listen to their internal hunger and fullness cues. This will give them a much healthier relationship with food.

Include diversity in body type and size in discussions about appreciating and respecting diversity. Teach your children that it is wrong and inappropriate to judge people by their size the same way it is wrong to judge someone based on skin color. Instead, we should celebrate the things that make us unique.

Value Virtues like integrity, honesty, and kindness. Emphasize individuals' strengths and talents. This goes for your children, yourself, celebrities, and fictional characters. Teach them that what's on the inside matters more than how someone looks. Looks, size, and shape are immaterial. Never tease or make otherwise negative comments about someone's appearance!

Exercise for Enjoyment – promote physical activity as something that should be enjoyable and pursued for the positive benefits it has on how you feel. Be physically active as a family because it's a fun way to spend time together – not to lose weight or compensate for things you've eaten!