

Ways to Promote a Healthy Body Image in Your Classroom

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What is a Healthy Body Image?

A teen values his/her body and what it does, not just how it looks. People who are positive about their bodies do not feel awkward in their clothes, or attempt to hide aspects of their body. Their activities are not limited by the type of clothing necessary (i.e., they do not avoid swimming because of fear of wearing a swimsuit). People who do not like their bodies are preoccupied with wishing away their perceived defects. They wrongly assume that changing their body in some way will lead to more happiness. They closely observe the bodies of others and envy others' shapes. Researchers have found that as little as 12 minutes of exposure to commercials promoting the necessity of thinness can result in weight dissatisfaction, depressed mood and anger in college women (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). The finding for male college students exposed to muscular men in commercials vs. regular sized men is virtually the same (Tantleff-Dunn, 2004).

Messages about weight and appearance are too numerous to count. If you want to help the students in your classroom develop a healthy body image despite these messages, consider the following suggestions:

- Try to eliminate images that emphasize how a person looks. Seek out images that represent the gamut of sizes and shapes that teens come in.
- Consider a consciousness-raising discussion of all the ways that girls and boys are pressured to be thin. Use commercials on TV and magazine pictures to make your point. You can have students bring in the most emaciated models they can find. Or the most unrealistically muscular men they can find.
- Limit your discussion of “the beautiful people” such as movie stars and entertainers to their work and talent. Avoid saying that this or that star is “hot.”
- Do not comment on the weight or size of others. This could include commenting on someone’s weight loss in a positive way. Consider establishing a “weight free” or “weightless” classroom where students and teachers notice only the qualities and deeds of those around them. Make the word “fat” a dirty word. Ban talking about how nice others’ clothing looks. Students could put a coin in a jar every time they talk about weight and size.
- Model a positive body image by avoiding slams at your own weight and body. Model how to accept a compliment. Daughters watch their mothers. Sons watch their fathers.
- Limit talk about food –do not glorify sweets and chocolate. Consider avoiding food as a class reward. Most kids are bombarded by competing messages that tasty food is necessary for happiness, but that being thin is also necessary for true happiness. The ultimate lie is that we should all be able to eat *anything we want and be thin*.
- Don’t support reality shows that emphasize total body makeovers as the route to happiness. These shows take the focus off what is most valuable about people and, again, give the lie that perpetuates poor body image: that if we change our bodies, we will be happier.

References:

- Thompson, J.K. & Heinberg, L.J. (1999). The media influence on body image disturbance and eating disorders: We’ve reviled them, now can we rehabilitate them? *Journal of Social Sciences*, (55), 339-353.
- Tantleff-Dunn, Stacey. University of Central Florida. Article found in EurekAlert, May 4, 2004.

Site for Promoting Positive Body Image in Children and Teens: www.bodypositive.com

Link to Eating Disorder Support Organizations: www.mirror-mirror.org

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