

## **ENCOURAGING CHILDREN TO DEVELOP A POSITIVE BODY IMAGE**

Body image is about how you feel about how your body looks and how you treat your body accordingly. It can also be about how we value ourselves and our ability to separate that value from how we look. Positive body image refers to being able to appreciate your body for what it allows you to do, respecting it, looking after it, accepting it regardless of whether it matches the societal ideal or not. Negative body image is about being dissatisfied with the way your body looks and trying to change it as a result of being overly critical of your appearance.

Sadly, as a society, we still lack public awareness of how body image is linked to mental health and the impact these feelings can have on the way we interact with people around us and how we perform at school and work. Research evidence is very clear though: the better we feel about our bodies (regardless of what they look like), the more likely we are to do things that feel good for our bodies and improve our health. This goes against the dominant media narrative that health only looks a certain way. There are practical implications to challenging this dominant narrative: helping children feel good about their bodies right now, as it is, will have a direct impact on how they treat their bodies. "Body shaming" makes children feel bad which in turn can lead them to not wanting to take part in any kind of sport creating a vicious circle. Statistics on this is concerning: in 2016 in the UK, children as young as 3 were found to have body issues, while 2019 report found that a quarter of a million children are unhappy with their appearance and they list this as one of the key things they worry about. This trend seems to be present in both boys and girls.

### **When does body image begin?**

We are not born hating our bodies. So, when and how those thoughts of "Something is wrong with my body" develop? We start to build a sense of self-concept between the ages of 18 and 30 months. This is the time when we start to identify different genders, age, to recognise physical characteristics and start to become aware of people's reactions. This is also the time when we begin to compare ourselves with others which is a big deal for body image. Research tells us that very young children can already demonstrate anti-fat bias and compare their bodies to others and that these feelings are having an impact on them, making them unhappy. A learning point for us adults - don't put body image off as a subject until children are older because by that time the foundations might have already been laid.

**Why does body image matter?** Body image can affect how/what children eat, what they wear (they might want to be covered all the time), it can trigger mental health concerns and increase children's chances to display "risk taking" behaviours (dieting, considering cosmetic surgery, taking steroids...). Body image can also limit children's social engagements, influence how much they take part in sports and affect children's education with regards to how confident they are in class and even whether they attend school at all.

## What can we do?

<b>Cancel diet culture around children</b>	Diet culture is a dominant system of beliefs that tells us that one body type is better/healthier than another. Re-evaluate how much diet-culture is present in your families: do you talk about “going on a diet”, or eating only “healthy foods”? Are you overly critical of your own body? We need to teach our children that healthy doesn’t mean looking a certain way because these ideas can lead to issues with both mental and physical health.
<b>Talk to children about bodies</b>	Don’t be reluctant to have these conversations with young children – they need to hear the message that “all bodies are good bodies” as much as the older ones. Teach them that we can’t tell much about others from the shape of their body and that we need to look beyond.
<b>Affirmations</b>	By repeating certain sentences on a regular basis, we can rewire our brains and counterbalance the impact of diet culture. Engage your children in regular practice of repeating affirmations (such as “I love me” or “I am grateful to my body for working so hard for me”) – before bed or on waking up seems to work best for most.
<b>Attitudes to food</b>	Avoid referring to food as healthy or unhealthy. Teach your children about balanced diets and the need to eat all sorts of foods because our bodies need that and not because of how that will make us look. Make sure that your children’s diet includes high fat and sugar to help children learn to moderate consumption in a supportive environment.
<b>Make moving fun again</b>	Encourage children to move not to “fix” their body or to achieve the current “ideal” but because it feels good. Expose them to a wide representation of diverse athletes to help them understand that movement is for everyone (for example research Louise Green <a href="#">BIG FIT GIRL – by Louise Green</a> and Mirna Valerio <a href="#">Home - The Mirnavator</a> ). Use any opportunity to move: from bike rides, adventure walks to kitchen discos. You don’t have to spend a lot of time in the gym to be physically fit and support your body.
<b>Teach children to be critical and not accept things at face value</b>	Look at some magazine photos or youtube videos together and ask some of these questions: Are there before and after pictures? Do all people really look like that? How important is it to look a certain way? Be open to your children’s thoughts and feelings and encourage discussion.

If this topic is something that is causing issues in your family and you feel that you might benefit from talking to me about this, please contact me on [marijana@move-more.org](mailto:marijana@move-more.org) - I am more than happy to help! I also recommend visiting Molly Forbes' website [The Body Happy Org](#) – You'll find lots of useful resources there.