



# Parents Make A Difference!

## Promoting a Healthy Body Image

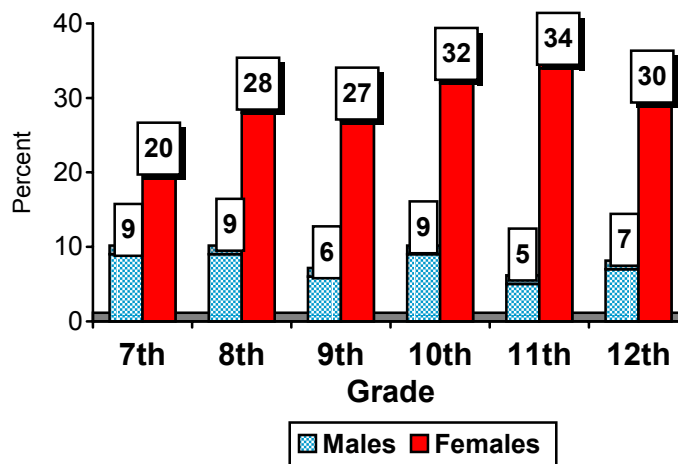
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Teens are bombarded daily with media messages that undermine the development of a healthy body image. Television, movies, magazines, music videos - all of these media promote the idea that you are not "cool" unless you are "hot". It is normal and healthy for teens to want to appear attractive and we should encourage them to develop a healthy lifestyle. But, teens that do not fit the currently popular beauty ideal may begin to worry too much about their appearance and resort to fad diets, potentially dangerous nutritional supplements or diet pills, excessive exercise, provocative clothing, or other unhealthy behaviors in order to achieve the ideal.

### Do teens here worry about being too fat or too thin?

The Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS) conducted in the fall of 2001 asked 7<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> graders in 19 school districts in southwest Wisconsin how much, if at all, they worry about being too fat or too thin. Overall, twenty-five percent (25%) of the teens surveyed reported they worry 'a little' about being too fat or too thin. Another 17% said they worry 'some' about this issue and 18% reported they worry 'quite a bit'. Figure 1 focuses on those teens that worry 'quite a bit' about being too fat or too thin

Figure 1: Teens who respond "Quite a bit" to the question, "How much do you worry about being too fat or too thin?"



### Why should we be concerned about teens worrying about being too fat or too thin?

When comparing those teens who report worrying 'quite a bit' about being too fat or too thin vs. those who do not worry at all about this issue, SWYS found the following startling trends.

#### *Teens who worry 'quite a bit' about being too fat or too thin are...*

- 2 times as likely to report using nutritional supplements daily
- 3 times more likely to report using "uppers" like diet pills daily
- 4 times more likely to report feeling depressed most or all of the time
- 2.5 times more likely to report having thought about suicide in the month prior to the survey
- 3 times more likely to strongly disagree that their family loves them and supports them when they need it
- 6 times more likely to have very low self esteem
- 5 times more likely to have moderately low self esteem

*...than those teens who do not worry about this issue at all.*

## What can parents do to help teens feel good about their bodies?

The media is not the only way teens get the message that they have to look a certain way to be valued. Unfortunately, some teens get this message at home, too. **Have your teens ever heard you make fun of people for being too fat or too thin? Do they see you placing too much emphasis on your appearance or criticizing your own shape?**

The first thing parents can do is model a healthy body image for their children, emphasizing that no matter what your body looks like you are loveable, capable, and valuable as a human being. The next thing is to set the example of giving others the respect they deserve regardless of how they look.

### Tips for Promoting a Healthy Body Image in Teens

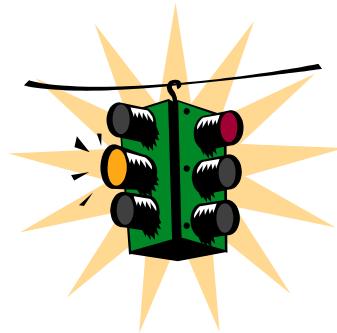
- Model a healthy body image yourself.
- Instill in teens that weight and appearance are not as important as character.
- Teach teens to think critically about the messages they see in the media.
- Help teens appreciate and enjoy how wonderfully made their bodies are and what they can do. Encourage physical activity!!
- Build your teen's self-esteem.
- Encourage an appreciation for diversity - people come in all sizes, shapes, and colors!

## Helping a Teen who is Overweight

Parents want what is best for their children. You want them to be healthy and happy, and you never want anything or anyone to hurt them. For this reason, many parents try very hard to keep their teens from becoming overweight or to help an already overweight teen to lose weight. It is very important to focus not on the weight, but on being healthy.

- Avoid nagging an overweight teen about what he or she eats - this just invites a power struggle!
- Encourage physical activity and healthy eating for the whole family, not just for your overweight teen.
- Teach your teen about eating in response to hunger rather than to satisfy an emotional need or cure boredom.
- Don't set weight loss goals based on trying to look "good" for an important event - this places too much emphasis on appearance and will discourage your teen from having a good time if he or she doesn't reach the goal.
- Also, remember that teens are still growing and developing so good nutrition should not be sacrificed by restricting calories.

Consult your teen's physician about healthy approaches to weight loss. But most of all continue to show your love and support for your teen.



### Watch for signs of eating disorders!!!

- Skipping meals
- Sneaking food
- Irritability and depression
- Frequent comments like "I am too fat."
- Clothes shopping becomes a stressful experience
- Withdrawal from friends
- Excessive exercise
- Extreme dieting, bingeing, or purging
- Frequent use of laxatives

## Remember: Parents Make a Difference!!!

"Parents Make a Difference" is a product of the Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS), a program of the University of Wisconsin-Extension, local school districts and UW-Platteville. This series is adapted from the UW-Extension "Whose Kids?...Our Kids!" series. This issue was written by Christina Kenney, UW-Extension Grant County, and edited by Ruth Schriefer and Deb Ivey, UW-Extension Iowa County, and Tom Schmitz, UW-Extension Grant and Lafayette County. Thanks are extended to the 5,704 7th to 12th graders from southwest Wisconsin who participated in the 2001 SWYS survey and to Bethany R. Schweisthal for researching this newsletter topic on the National Eating Disorders website. Contact UW-Extension for further information: Grant County (608) 723-2125; Lafayette County (608) 776-4820; and Iowa County (608) 935-0391. Or visit us on the web at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/grant/tap/2001surveyresults.html>.