

# How to Talk to Kids (And Other Humans) About Body Image

By Suzannah Neufeld, MFT

There are 3 components of what we call “body image”:

PERCEPTION  
IDEALS  
SENSE OF SELF

## Before you talk, first listen.

**Ask kids questions** to understand what they think. Here are some questions to ask about each component of body image:

- 1. Perception:** How do you really know what you look like? Do we see ourselves like others see us? What happens when we focus up close on one part of our body? What happens when we see our bodies as a whole?
- 2. Ideals:** Do you like how you look? What do you think is beautiful or attractive? Do others have the same ideas about beauty as we do? How realistic are our ideas about what we should look like?
- 3. Sense of self:** How much of who we are depends on what we look like? How much do our perceptions and ideals define how we feel about ourselves? How upset are we when our perceptions don't match our ideal? What do we value about ourselves besides our looks?



## Be a great example!

Young ones idolize their parents/teachers/caregivers and internalize whatever we do. If you don't want them to say it to themselves ten years later, don't say it to yourself.

- **Stop saying anything (yes anything) negative about your body or your looks in front of your kids (and other humans)**—it's catching!
- **Stop saying anything critical or judgmental about the bodies or eating habits of others in front of your kids.** That's catching too, creates a judging atmosphere and teaches fatphobia.
- **Stop saying positive things about thinness in others, especially when they lose weight.** Kids notice fast what gets praise. You can help them focus, instead, on appreciating someone's kindnesses, creativity, smarts, or talents.
- **Stop diet talk.** Diets are the number one trigger for weight gain (!) and eating disorders. Truthfully, most people just end up feeling like a failure after dieting—and you want your kids to see you as confident and capable. Kids notice and feel it if their parents are always on diets. Diet talk is also boring—I'm sure you have more interesting things to say!
- **Talk more about different kinds of beauty.** Comment on how beautiful grandma's wrinkles are, the bark of a giant redwood tree, the laughter of a stranger, and the cracks on an old piece of pottery.
- **Invite your family and friends to do the same.** Be a change agent in your family. And if well-meaning loved ones struggle to do this, talk it through with your kids afterwards. What did they hear? How do they feel about it?

## Be Media Literate and teach your kids to be so, too.

It is SO HARD to choose media for kids once they discover a world beyond the home. Like it or not, they will discover princesses with tiny waists and princes with bulging biceps and sharp swords. You can teach them media literacy skills. Talk about what you see with your kids. Ask them questions about it, for example, “Did you notice the Princess's head is bigger than her waist? What do you think of that? Who do you think drew it that way and why? Do you think they are trying to get kids to buy something?”

- Peggy Orenstein, in her amazing book *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* talks about “fighting fun with fun.” Instead of forcing your child to avoid Disney movies, entice them with movies and books that present them with diverse example of beauty. It can be a hard search—but some gems are out there! One recent movie that had a slightly more realistic looking main character was DreamWorks' *Home*. And she had Rihanna's voice, so you can't go wrong watching!
- There are some fabulous kids books on this topic. My favorite is *Your Body Is Awesome: Body Respect for Children* by Sigrun Danielsdottir.

## Don't avoid the "F" word— Fat. It's not a bad word!

- Tell your kids: **All bodies are good bodies.** Fat bodies are good bodies, thin bodies are good bodies, tall bodies are good bodies, short bodies are good bodies. Brown bodies are good bodies, white bodies are good bodies. Bodies that walk are good bodies and so are bodies that use a wheelchair. Bodies with curly hair are fabulous and so are bodies with straight hair. Old bodies are good bodies and baby bodies are good bodies. We are all so lucky to have unique bodies!
- How do bodies stay healthy? **Can fat people be healthy? Yes! We can do a lot to help our bodies feel healthy independent of what we look like.** Here are a few tips:
  - **Eat in a way that "listens" to your body.** Notice what gives you energy. Notice what gives you a tummy ache. Notice how hungry you are. Notice when you are full. And notice what tastes yummy!

- **Move your body every day in ways that feel fun to you.** What do you like to do? Dance, run, walk, stretch, climb? Everyone at every size and ability can find a movement that they love.
- **Get plenty of rest and relaxation.** Enjoy sweet sleep at night and find time to breathe, cuddle, read, nap, or draw during the day.
- If a kid says, "Am I fat?" don't say no! I know, the impulse can be so strong to just reassure them. But if you say "No, you aren't fat, you are perfect/so thin/beautiful/just right!" you are implying that perfect exists and it's better than fat. At some point in this child's life, they may have a body with more fat—don't you want them to feel good about themselves even then?
- **Tell them instead: Fat is just a part of our bodies.** Just like skin, hair, bones. **Some people have more fat, some have less.** Most of us will have more or less at different times in our lives. Your body may change over your life to have more or less fat. That's so cool—our bodies take so many forms and yet we are still

us. How amazing! How big were you when you were a baby? What will you look like when you are old? What makes you you when your body changes? How would you know you were you if you changed your hairstyle or had to cut off your arm?

- **Most people don't like to be called by just one part of their body—**would you like it if someone said you were "hair" or "blood vessels?" It's always kindest to let people define themselves and to focus, instead, on their actions.
- **Some people call themselves fat and feel bad about themselves—**they've gotten the message that there is something wrong with them. You can tell them all bodies are good bodies and offer them a kind heart.
- **Some people like to call themselves fat—it makes them feel proud!** That's great. Only call someone fat if they say it first and say they feel proud about it.

## A final word...

Talking to your kids about this isn't a miracle—it doesn't mean your kiddos will be fully protected from body image struggles, self-esteem issues, or even eating disorders. A lot of those issues are bigger than we are—and are woven into the fabric of our society. Body Image ideals, as kids get older, are affected much more by peer norms and media than by families. Eating disorders are actually very based in biological, genetic, and temperamental vulnerabilities. We can't prevent our kids from having a messy human experience—feeling pain as well as joy, losing their way, facing challenges and setbacks.

It's still worth it to talk like this, though! Talking to kids about their bodies in this way will:

- Teach your kids to be kinder, more compassionate people to others and to themselves.
- Give them tools so that if they do develop body image struggles or eating disorders, they will have a solid foundation to return to. Recovery and healing will likely be quicker.
- Enable them to feel they can trust and talk to you safely, no matter how their bodies and minds change over time.

What changes can you make today in addressing body image with or in front of your kids? How might these changes help you, too? You deserve to have a peaceful relationship with yourself, too!