

Preteens and Body Image

How individuals feel about their own appearance is called their *body image*. People of all ages have unrealistic ideas about how their bodies should look, but the problem can be especially serious for preteens whose bodies are starting to change. For example, as preteens grow, their feet and hands may appear too large for their bodies. Some girls feel too tall. Boys worry about being too short. Both boys and girls may worry about their weight. This can translate into a self-esteem problem for preteens. Many girls admit to dieting before the age of twelve. Some boys turn to weight training or steroids to try to quickly build muscles.

SIGNS OF A POOR BODY IMAGE

Signs that preteens are suffering from a poor body image vary from person to person, but may include some or all of the following:

- Obsessing over a certain part of the body.
- Spending an excessive amount of time in front of a mirror.
- Weighing themselves frequently.
- Excessive exercising or weight training.
- Wearing overly large clothes.
- Withdrawing from activities due to feeling self-conscious.
- Constantly criticizing their own appearance or the appearance of others.

CAUSES OF POOR BODY IMAGE

Puberty usually begins during the preteen years. The physical changes of puberty often make preteens feel self-conscious. Girls usually gain weight at this time, as their hips widen and their bodies begin to round out. These changes may cause

preteens to become preoccupied with their own bodies.

At the same time that their bodies are changing, the opinions of friends and peers become increasingly important to preteens. They want to “fit in” and may compare themselves unfavorably to others their age.

Many preteens admire models, singers, and other celebrities and want to look like them. Television, movies, and magazines constantly bombard the public with images of these “beautiful” people. When preteens compare themselves to these images, their self-esteem can suffer. They may develop unrealistic expectations about their own appearance. Because many female celebrities are thin, preteens may believe that a person must be thin in order to be accepted. Some preteen males feel they need to “bulk up” to look better.

Unfortunately, some advertisers take advantage of concerns about body image to make a profit. In order to sell a product, an advertisement may deliberately convey the idea that a particular look or body type is important or desirable. This reinforces the stereotype that certain body types are better than others.

EFFECTS OF A POOR BODY IMAGE

A poor body image can have many negative effects. If preteens become overly concerned about their weight, they may develop eating disorders. A common eating disorder for preteens is anorexia. Signs of this disorder include rapid weight loss, barely eating or only pretending to eat, spending excessive time in the bathroom after meals, and exercising obsessively. Eating disorders can cause many health problems and can even lead to death.

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Preteens who are unhappy about their appearance are also at greater risk of developing depression. Depression can keep a person from leading a normal life and even increase the risk of suicide.

A HEALTHY BODY IMAGE

While having a “perfect body” is an unrealistic goal, having a healthy body is not. With the support of their families, preteens can develop healthy attitudes and lifestyles that can help them feel good about their bodies. Here are some ways that parents and other family members can help a child feel comfortable and content with his or her body.

- Parents need to be aware of their own issues with body image. They should address their own concerns about appearance in a healthy way so they do not pass on unhealthy views about body image.
- Parents should encourage good nutrition and exercise habits and should model these behav-

iors themselves. Children who develop good habits at a young age are more likely to continue these habits into adolescence and adulthood. Preteens and teens who eat right and who exercise regularly are not only more fit, but also feel better about themselves.

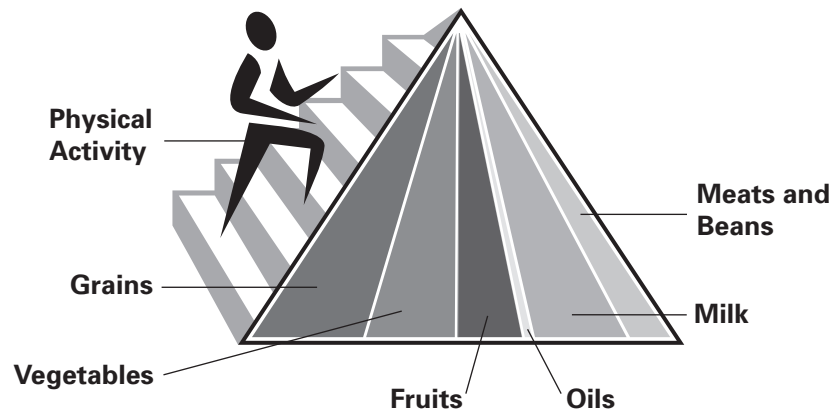
- Parents should never compare their children with their siblings and friends. Children in the same family may have different body types. It is a parent’s job to teach children to accept, and even celebrate, differences in talents, skills, and appearance.

Parents need to help their children focus on their strengths, rather than on any real or imagined imperfections. Parents should look for behaviors and accomplishments that they can praise. Children who focus on their strengths are less likely to become overly concerned about their outward appearance.

Taking Action

Look critically at magazine or newspaper advertisements. Choose one that promotes a healthy body image and one that may promote a poor body image. Cut out or photocopy the ads. For each photo, describe the age group that you think the ad is aimed at and why. Then explain why you believe the ad does or does not promote a healthy body image.

Using MyPyramid at Any Age



Based on their age and activity level, individuals need varying amounts of food. This is one of the principles behind the MyPyramid food guidance system released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2005. This system replaced the Food Guide Pyramid that had been used since 1992.

The revised system is more than a diagram. It is an interactive system that can be found at the Web site www.MyPyramid.gov. The system helps people determine the kinds and amounts of foods that are right for them, based on their age, gender, and level of physical activity. It is designed to provide information about the needs of anyone over the age of two. Part of the site, MyPyramid for Kids, is designed especially for children ages 6–11. It uses an interactive format to present nutrition information and related activities for children.

The recommendations in the food guidance system are based on the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The food guidance system stresses the importance of eating foods that provide adequate vitamins, minerals, and fiber. It also emphasizes the importance of lowering the amount of saturated fats and cholesterol in the diet. It promotes a healthy lifestyle that balances nutrition and exercise.

The slogan of the MyPyramid system is “Steps to a Healthier You.” This slogan stresses the importance of gradual improvement. Even small steps that children and adults take to improve their diets and activity levels can produce worthwhile results over time.

The MyPyramid symbol, shown above, illustrates some of the principles behind the food guidance system:

- **A healthy diet includes a variety of foods.** Foods should be chosen each day from the five food groups—grains, vegetables, fruits, milk, and meat and beans. A small amount of oil should also be included in a healthy diet.
- **The amount of different foods that a person should eat varies from person to person.** The widths of the six food group bands illustrate that children and adults should eat more food from some food groups and less from others. The MyPyramid for Kids information includes recommended daily food amounts for the five main food categories.
- **Foods containing solid fats and added sugars should be eaten in moderation.** The wide bottom of My Pyramid indicates those foods that

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contain little or no solid fats and added sugars. The narrow top indicates foods high in solid fats and added sugars should be minimized. What are some foods in each category?

- **Daily exercise is a key component of a healthier lifestyle.** The person climbing the steps in

the MyPyramid symbol is a reminder that physical activity goes hand-in-hand with healthy eating. The amount of time that a child or adult spends in physical activity affects the amount of food that the person should eat.

Taking Action

Access the Web site www.MyPyramid.gov online. In the boxes under “My Pyramid Plan,” enter your age, gender, and the amount of exercise you normally get. Then, using the table, record the amounts from each food group that it recommends for you each day. Think back to your activity level at ages eight and 12. Enter the amounts and study the MyPyramid plans that result. How do the recommendations seem to vary by age? Write a paragraph summarizing what you have learned.

Food Groups	Age 8	Age 12	Your Age _____
Grains			
Vegetables			
Fruits			
Milk			
Meat and Beans			

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