

MIND OVER MIRROR

PARENTING FOR A HEALTHY BODY IMAGE



This content was co-created with a diverse group of parents who know first-hand the challenge of modern parenting. We hope it provides a starting point for parents to navigate the topic of body image with their tweens and teens.

WHEN YOU SAY THE WORD 'PERFECTION' WHAT COMES TO YOUR MIND?



We asked teenagers what they thought about when they hear this loaded word.

For teens and tweens, 'perfection' conjures up images of smooth-as-silk skin; dazzling faces; shining hair; edgy; flawlessly put-together; stylized.

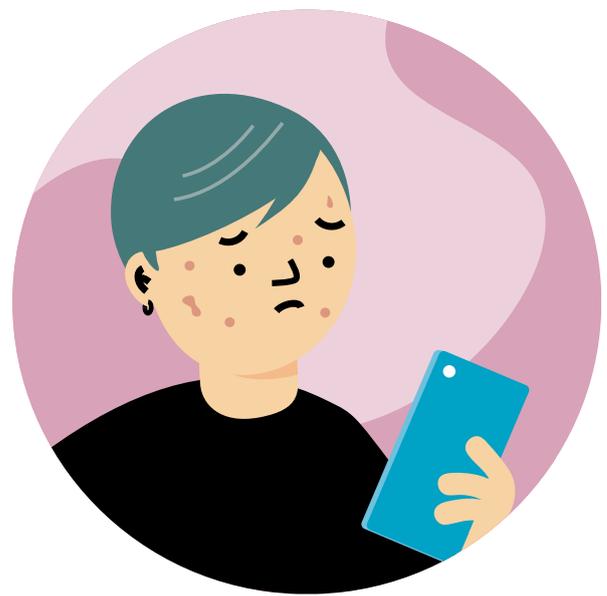
After much prompting, then came the associations of 'perfection' with school grades, behavior – all those other "minor" considerations (minor for them, anyway!).

FOR TWEENS AND TEENS, 'PERFECTION' OFTEN RELATES TO PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Of course, ask those same teens if anyone has achieved perfection, and they show how clued up they really are on this topic. They know it's unachievable. They know those Insta-"perfect" models use filters, lighting, make-up, angles – all the tricks to achieve that 'flawless' shot. They know more about all that than we parents do!

Does knowing that it's fake make a difference? It seems not. Many teens still aim to achieve perfection, despite knowing how unachievable it is.

From social media to the school gates, the influences on body image are many and they are difficult to escape from.



“BUT WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?” I HEAR YOU SAY

This guide explores some of the ways that parents can explore these important topics of body image with tweens and teens.

As part of Mental Health Awareness Week 2019, the Mental Health Foundation published research on [Body image: How we think and feel about our bodies \(PDF\)](#).

The research shows that body image is closely connected to our sense of self, our wellbeing, and our mental health.

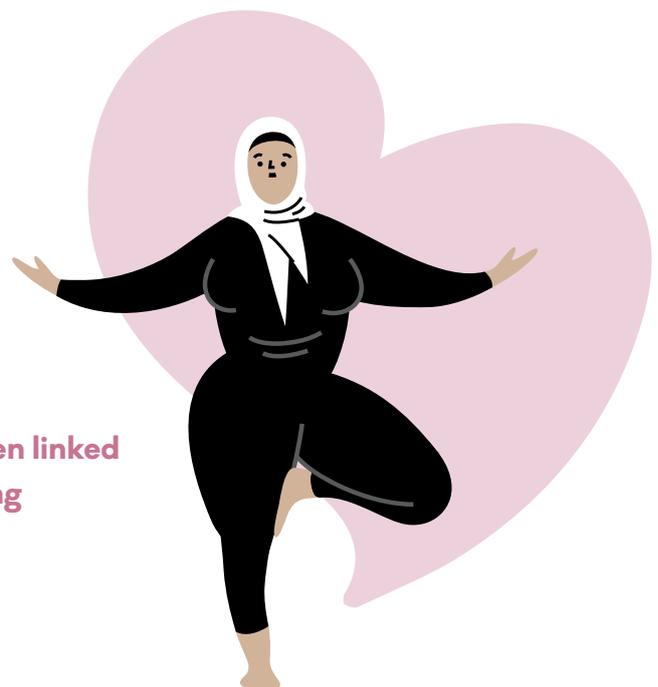
We know that body image matters. The challenge for parents is often knowing what we can do to help our kids develop and maintain a healthy body image.

WHAT DOES A HEALTHY BODY IMAGE LOOK LIKE?

We hear much talk nowadays of ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ body image. But what does a healthy body image even look like?

For one thing, having a healthy body image is not about how healthy we are or about how we look. It’s really about how we feel about our bodies. Health and other factors can influence our body image.

Body satisfaction and appreciation have been linked to better wellbeing and less unhealthy dieting



WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO BE A BUFFER FROM THE INFLUENCES THAT AFFECT OUR CHILDREN'S BODY IMAGE?

TIP#1 COMPLIMENTS TO THE TWEEN

In a world that seems to value appearance above everything else, our own behavior as parents can either increase or decrease the effects of social media and peers.

Research tells us that our body image is greatly affected by our relationships.

Some people say that we shouldn't

Almost one third of adults (32%) think: "My value as a person depends on how I look"



compliment our children's appearance. Others would disagree with that. After all, who doesn't like to hear those words: "You look nice". The question is... How much do we value our children for looking a certain way? Do we reinforce the view that appearance = value?

EXPERIMENT#1

Compliment your child on how they look:

That shirt looks good on you!

You have great skin!

You have beautiful hair!



Watch their reaction

Now try complimenting them for something that they are:

You are such a helpful person, it's so nice having your help with the laundry

You are such a good friend, helping out others like that!



Again, watch their reaction

NOTICE:

What is the difference in how your child responds to each type of compliment? Which one seems to make them feel happier, or more connected to you?

Complimenting children's appearance can bring an embarrassed reaction, or they might reject the compliment entirely.

However, there's no downside to complimenting behaviors and attitudes.

Giving compliments that are about character, attitudes or actions can build up a

positive self-image that isn't related to how we look. They can help children feel valued for something that they can build upon.

There's nothing wrong with complimenting our child on how they look. Try to also use plenty of character-based compliments throughout the day.

Character-based compliments reinforce the idea that we are each valuable because of who we are, not because of how we look.

TIP#2 DON'TCOMPARE.COM

We parents can easily fall into the trap of comparing our children to others, even when making positive comparisons.

We want our children to make good, healthy choices. Sometimes we undermine

their confidence by comparing them, positively or negatively, to other people.

This promotes the habit of comparing ourselves with others, which often leads to negative self-comparisons.

AN EXAMPLE OF 'POSITIVE' COMPARISON:

Her skin is so perfect.



CHILD

You have good skin as well.



PARENT

This parent is well-meaning. They want to build their child up, in comparison to others. Body comparisons can be a trap. We can acknowledge the comment ("Yes, she does"), without making comparisons between the other person and our own child.

AN EXAMPLE OF NEGATIVE COMPARISON:

Her skin is so perfect.



CHILD

Well you would have perfect skin too, if you stopped eating all that sugary junk!

OUCH!



PARENT

This parent is well-meaning too. They want their child to look healthy and be healthy. However, comments like this can reinforce body comparisons, and support a habit of negative self-comparisons. These habits can cause self-blame about how we look, which makes it very difficult to be accepting of our own appearance.

Mums and dads, let's not compare our children to others. We can promote a healthy body image by encouraging our children away from body comparisons. This builds a habit of appreciating uniqueness and individuality.

TIP#3

NOT ALL FILTERS ARE EQUAL

Does your child edit every photo? Is every selfie filtered to 'perfection'?

If so, your teen or tween may feel self-conscious. They may find it difficult to accept their natural appearance.

Filters are everywhere. They are mostly unavoidable. However, not all filters are equal.

Some filters are intended to "enhance" a person's appearance. Others are designed for laughs, for novelty or just because (I mean, why the potato-face filter? Really, just why?)

When young people over-use filters to 'perfect' their appearance, we can balance

this out by taking selfies together with them, without filters, or using funny filters instead.

Photos can be a chance to remember precious times together. This is even more important with teenagers, when spending time together happens less easily.

Make the most of the selfie-trend by doing a selfie-shoot together. The aim is to have a laugh and create memories for you to keep.

Note: the aim is **not** to post the photos all over social media – this could undermine your efforts, increasing your teen's self-conscious or anxious feelings.

TIP#4

ASK YOURSELF: HOW'S MY OWN BODY IMAGE DOING?

As parents, our own body image is bound to affect how we relate to our children's body image. Just as with our physical health, it's hard to look after someone else if we ourselves are struggling.

The Mental Health Foundation published [seven tips that you can use to promote a healthy body image in yourself.](#)

TIP#5 TREATMENTS AND SURGERIES

It may come as a surprise to know that young people are increasingly the target audience for advertisements about cosmetic surgeries and treatments. From surface-level procedures like skin treatments through to invasive surgeries, young people today are bombarded by one primary message: "Your natural look is just not good enough".

[The Mental Health Foundation report on body image](#) showed that body dissatisfaction is common, and often profound, in the teenage years. Whether it's acne during the teenage years or dissatisfaction with the shape of a nose or lips, the developing body is often a source of shame, embarrassment or disappointment. Advertisements for cosmetic

treatments take advantage of that sensitive time of life, by targeting adverts to increasingly younger audiences via social media, email adverts and high street promotions.

We can't control all the messaging and advertisements that our teens are exposed to. Judgement isn't helpful either. But we can talk about the reality of cosmetic treatments with open honesty.

Conversations that raise questions about treatments are important. Questions such as, "What are the risks?" "What are your consumer rights?" "What are the qualifications of the provider?" "What is the long-term cost?" can be raised with your teen before they go ahead with any treatments.

If your teen or young adult is considering having a cosmetic treatment, you can explore the following in conversation with them:

Is this something you will still want in a year's time? In-the-moment decisions to get treatment may lead to regret.

Look for provider credentials – are they a registered provider of the specific type of treatment?

Be wary of 2 for 1 offers or other 'deals' aimed at saving cost, often at the expense of quality and professionalism

What are the options if the treatment goes wrong or isn't what you expected?

The aim is not to cast judgment on any decisions. The aim is to enable your young person to make an informed decision, whatever they choose for themselves. This way, they can get counsel and think more deeply before making choices.

IN SUMMARY

Parents can either counterbalance or promote unhelpful messages in the home. Do we reinforce the idea, maybe with throwaway comments, that our children's looks are unsatisfactory? That they aren't good enough? That they need to 'fix' this or that?

Or...

Do we emphasise the beauty of their uniqueness? Do we highlight the value of their individuality? Do we appreciate their natural look? Do we praise the quality of their character? Do we promote a message of health and wellness, rather than 'perfection' or inadequacy?

No one can get it right all of the time.

There are many influences on our teens' and tweens' body image. Being aware of the influences on body image, and using strategies to counter unhealthy influences, will go a long way towards promoting a healthy body image in your family home.

Above all, fostering a healthy relationship with our kids allows for open communication and understanding, providing the building blocks for a healthier body image throughout their lives.

