

My Body My Way

Helping our children to have a Positive Body Image

Did you know?

- Over 50% of young girls and 25% of young boys would say that their peers have body image concerns or worries.
- Body image concerns begin in girls as young as 5 years old.
- 1 in 4 girls under the age of 7 has tried dieting at least once.
- 1 in 3 boys aged between 8 – 12 is dieting to lose weight.



In today's society our children are bombarded with manipulated images of the "perfect" body from an alarmingly young age. More and more people are unhappy with their appearance than ever before and negative thoughts towards one's self are becoming apparent in children as young as five years old.

A high percentage of this pressure comes from sources such as the TV, Social Media and Advertising. However, some of it comes from the adults our children spend the most amount of time with.

As adults we have a massive influence over the way in which children feel about their bodies and as such it is important that we try to portray the same consistent messages when it comes to this topic. Here are some practical things that we can all be more aware of to try and support our children to have a healthy, positive body image.

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Try to avoid being negative about bodies or body shaming anyone.

As children we learn a lot from the people that we spend the most time with. Therefore when it comes to body image it is important that your children see body positivity from the adults in their life. This does not mean we all need to instantly fall in love with our bodies over night, however we should not speak negatively about our own appearance or the appearance of others. The less negative comments our children hear in relation to bodies and appearance, the less pressure they will put on themselves to look a certain way. If we consistently tell our children that they “are beautiful” and then complain about our own bodies and the bodies of others, we are giving them conflicting messages which will leave them with a sense of confusion around how they feel about themselves.

Try to avoid any “Diet Culture” at home or in front of your children.

Diet culture covers a broad range of things, all of which should probably be avoided around our children. This includes things like having magazines which specifically target weight and how to lose weight on the covers lying around the house. If you are engaging in any sort of diet, this should not be something which is discussed at length or shown in any great detail around your children. This includes using phrases such as “I have earned this chocolate bar as I’ve been good all week”. Speaking in this way teaches our children that sweet things need to be earned rather than enjoyed as a treat when we feel like it. Of course we should not be eating unhealthy foods all the time but this should be explained as a matter of health to your children and not in relation to our weight.

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Do not consistently give praise for the way your children look.

Of course it is normal to want to tell our children how beautiful they are regularly. However falling into this type of pattern reinforces the idea that appearance is important and is something that should be worked on and maintained in order to receive compliments. Make sure you praise your children for other things more often, such as doing a good job with homework or exhibiting positive personality traits like being kind to a friend. If you find yourself wanting to praise appearance, try to make the compliment something specific such as telling your children that their face lights up when they play a certain game or participate in an activity which they enjoy, rather than simply telling them they are beautiful.

Don't be afraid to talk about bodies.

Quite often if we aren't sure how to deal with a certain topic we may avoid discussing it altogether. However, the more we talk about bodies in a positive sense the more comfortable we will become with this. Talk regularly about the physiology of the body and the many amazing things that it does on a daily basis in order to support us. Our bodies should be seen as a magnificent tool that is here to help us achieve our dreams, and not just as a physical appearance. Feel comfortable having conversations about what goes on inside the body and encourage your children to ask questions about what's going on.



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Don't dismiss something if your children come to you with a worry or concern about their appearance.

As a parent sometimes our instant reaction to our children speaking negatively about their appearance might be to quickly tell them that they are being silly and they are beautiful the way they are. If we react in this way it makes the child feel a sense of shame for thinking the thought and coming to you with their concern. Instead have a conversation about why they feel this way. What has made them come to this decision about their appearance? How can we help them feel better? Explore the situation with your child and explain about different body shapes and sizes, how it is normal for us all to look different and remind them of the work that our bodies do everyday to keep us alive.

Try to involve your children in the decisions about how they dress.

Lots of people like to express themselves through the way that they dress and look. There is nothing wrong with wanting to show parts of our personality off through the clothing that we chose to wear. Involving your children in this process will make them feel more comfortable and will give them a sense of control over their appearance. Discussions can be had around why they like certain styles and as adults we can show good examples of this by explaining why we like our favourite outfits, or why we chose to wear comfortable clothing indoors. Try to encourage individuality and promote a sense of creativity if this is something which appeals to your child.

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If possible, try to find a physical activity that you can enjoy together.

Exercise is good for our physical and mental health and is something that should be enjoyed. Nowadays people exercise in order to change the number on the scales however this is something which we should try to discourage in our children from as early an age as possible. Find an activity which you can both take part in together and show your children how fun exercise can be. If you engage with your child and show no concerns over how you look while taking part, this will reinforce that exercise is fun and something that can be enjoyed with friends and family.

Try to avoid mainstream television as a regular activity and introduce your children to people who look different from “the norm”.

Try to spark a curiosity about bodies in a positive sense. “Isn’t it interesting how we all look different? Doesn’t it make the world a more interesting place to live?”. Have conversations about people on TV / Social media / real life who look different and reinforce how amazing this is. Try and introduce your children to a wide range of physical appearances including different shapes, sizes, ages, races and abilities. As your children grow older they will feel more comfortable looking past the physical appearance of someone if they have been exposed to people of all diversities, making your children less likely to pre-judge themselves and others based on appearance.

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Try to encourage high self esteem and confidence in other areas.

Evidence shows a direct link between high self esteem and positive body image. If we have high self esteem we are less likely to think negatively or put too much pressure on our appearance. Try engaging in exercises to build self esteem as a family such as completing a self esteem diary for the week and then having regular discussions about this. The less focus we put on appearance the less important it will become and your children will focus more on what makes them happy and the things that they are good at.

Combating negative body image in your child may feel like something that is impossible to do. It can also be very upsetting as a parent to hear your child speak negatively about themselves. However following the simple steps above and remaining consistent with this approach will minimise the negative thoughts around bodies that your children may have.





ABOUT MY BODY MY WAY

- In 2017, Penumbra piloted a series of the My Body My Way workshops with pupils and teachers in North Ayrshire.
- The workshops are aimed at children aged 9 – 11.
- The workshops tie in with the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland and cover a broad range of experiences and outcomes.
- All of the resources are now free to download from www.irocwellbeing.com

If you are interested in further information related to My Body My Way please contact ...





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