

Health at Every Size

So, What is Normal?

Teacher Backgrounder

Body image is a current issue for today's adolescents. Body image is how we picture ourselves and how we think others see us. Teen bodies are constantly changing during puberty. While this change is perfectly normal, it can feel overwhelming and out of control.

It is unrealistic to expect to be at society's image of an ideal weight and this can lead to problems. It is more realistic to expect to maintain a healthy weight. Healthy weight can be defined as the natural weight the body maintains through a healthy lifestyle.

A positive body image and self-esteem involve accepting your natural weight, body size and shape and making the most of it with a healthy lifestyle. This can be achieved by focusing on strategies to achieve emotional, physical and social well-being rather than focusing on body weight.

While doing [Learning Activity 2](#), you can help students build self-esteem by having them look at their personal attributes and what makes them unique (aspirations, talents...)

What does "Health at Every Size" mean?

The "Health at Every Size" approach is a health-centred, rather than weight-centred approach, which focuses on the whole person, physically, mentally and socially¹. This approach shifts the emphasis to living actively, eating in healthful ways, respecting each individual, and health and well-being for all at whatever size they may be¹.

Why focus on "Health at Every Size"?

When teens are bombarded with unrealistic images of the "ideal body" that promote thinness for women and large, muscular physiques for men, physical appearance and body shape become very important to most teens.

Many are unsatisfied with their weight and how they look, especially girls. Consider these statistics:

- Fewer than half of female students (43%) are satisfied with their appearance, compared to 57% of boys. And satisfaction decreases with age among girls, from 50% who are satisfied at age 13, to 41% at 15 and 17.²
- 50 percent of BC adolescents skip breakfast.²
- Almost half of Grade 10 girls in BC (45%) indicate they are on a diet or think they need to lose weight³. This reflects the enormous pressure on girls to conform to a thin norm presented in popular culture and media.

Yet, we all come in different shapes and sizes. Genetics, or what we were born with, is the greatest influence on our body shape and size. We should accept our genetic predisposition (which is not in our control). Raising awareness of healthy body image is critical to the health and well-being of teenagers.

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How can you help your students achieve a healthy body image?

Many teens pick up words that describe how they look rather than characteristics such as smart, funny, shy, friendly. Harm can result when students receive messages that suggest their personal worth and the esteem of others is related to their body size.

Rather, students should focus their energy and attention on what is within their power to achieve, which includes:

- Recognizing unhealthy cultural pressures
- Acknowledging that the concept of beauty is based on an individual's attitudes and personal characteristics rather than on external beauty.
- Recognizing the risks of dieting

Students should also look for realistic role models that promote self-confidence and self-esteem. Research shows that self-esteem is the strongest contributing factor differentiating dieters from non-dieters.

Here are some strategies that can help your students develop a positive body image:

- Set appropriate goals for health, not for weight.
- Set goals for a nurturing environment that fosters self-esteem, body satisfaction, and a positive body image.
- Set goals for healthy eating. That includes taking time to relax, and enjoying food.
- Set goals for physical activity. That includes practicing activities that they enjoy for a total of one hour a day and limiting screen time to less than 2 hours a day.

1 "Guidelines for Childhood Obesity Prevention Programs: Promoting Healthy Weights in Children". Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour, The Weight Realities Division of the Society for Nutrition Education, 35:1: 1-4, 2003.

2 "Healthy Youth Development - Highlights from the 2003 Adolescent Health Survey". The McCreary Centre Society, 2004.

3 "Young People In Canada: Their Health and Well Being", Chapter 7, Public Health Agency of Canada -Division of Childhood and Adolescence, William Boyce, 2004.



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Links and Resources

B.C.'s Children's Hospital Provincial Specialized Eating Disorders Program
P3 - Mental Health Building
BC Children's Hospital
4500 Oak Street, Vancouver BC
Tel: (604) 875-2010

Eating Disorder Resource Centre of BC HOTLINE
Hours: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday; 9am-5pm
Address: Mental Health Building
4500 Oak Street, Room P3 302
Vancouver, BC
Toll-free phone: 1-800-665-1822
<http://clbc.cioc.ca/record/CLB2519>

The Student Body: Promoting Health at Any Size
<http://research.aboutkidshealth.ca/thestudentbody/home.asp>

Healthy Weight Network
Website: <http://www.healthyweightnetwork.com/>

Jessie's Hope
<http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/node/189>