

Ask a Nurse with Isabel Clark

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File photo

Looking good

Healthy attitudes about body image

Q. I am the father of two daughters aged four and seven, and I'm worried my oldest girl is picking up the wrong ideas about how she looks. What do I need to know?

A. Parents are usually in the best spot to see if their children are starting to have mistaken ideas about food, weight, and their own bodies. Dangerous weight-control practices like dieting can lead to eating disorders in grade school-aged children, so you are wise to pay close attention to your daughter. You can take steps right away to make sure your whole family develops good body images.

Q. What does the term "body image" mean?

A. Body image is what you think your body looks like. Sometimes, how you think you look does not resemble your actual appearance at all. But that's not the only thing to consider. The other important issue is self-esteem because that's how you decide how you feel about yourself as a person. Your opinion of yourself shows in how you live your life every day. If you feel bad about yourself, you probably won't spend a lot of time making sure to eat a healthy diet.

Q. What can I do to help my girls feel good about themselves?

A. The best thing you can do is make sure that you are a good role model for your daughters. Children develop their values from their parents, so now would be a good time to look closely at

your own attitudes around food, weight and shape. Ask yourself what opinions about appearance and achievement your girls are receiving from you. Parents may unintentionally give their children messages that create body image issues. Even off-hand comments you make about how others appear can lead your children to believe that how you look on the outside is a reflection of how valuable you are as a person. Make sure you lead by example.

Be very clear about the dangers of dieting, and never diet yourself. Ninety-five to 98 per cent of diets fail. You can help your daughters see that healthy eating every day is important so your body can work and play. One of the ways you can encourage healthy eating is by having meals together as a family. It's a wonderful way to spend time with your girls that gives you the chance to talk with each other.

Listen to your daughters. Never ignore negative comments they may make about their shapes or sizes. Use this time to talk to them about why they feel badly about themselves and teach them about the ways normal bodies are different. Let them know that they are important as people, not for the way they look or what their weight is.

Q. My oldest daughter has also started to watch a lot of adult exercise shows on TV. Her little sister likes to be with her so they are exercising together. Is that a problem?

A. To be healthy, children need to have about 90 minutes of physical activity a day, so make it part of your daily life together. Encourage activities that are age-appropriate like skating, bike riding and swimming that will take your girls away from watching TV. Play and activity don't need to be organized events, so offer different things to do and play actively with your children. Simple things like taking the dog for a walk and gardening give all of you a chance to be active together at home. Exercise teaches us how to enjoy what our bodies can do, and has benefits beyond weight control. You may want to look at what kinds of physical activities your oldest daughter is already involved in and make sure she is not doing more exercise than is right for her age. She should understand why it is important to be active, but that it is also important for her to accept the body size and shape that she was born with.

Q. How can I protect my daughters from the unrealistic images the media gives?

A. Television, movies and magazines give children very unrealistic ideas of what bodies usually look like. Fashion models are becoming thinner. Most fashion models weigh 25 per cent less than the average female. Just 20 years ago, models were eight per cent smaller than the average female. Talk to your daughters about accepting who they are and teach them that healthy bodies come in many shapes and sizes. Show them how advertisers use thin models to sell products. The most important thing is that you realize you can make a difference in your children's lives. Building healthy self-esteem, positive body image and encouraging good communication are the ways to prevent eating disorders from starting.

Isabel Clark is a telehealth nurse with Calgary Health Link.

FYI

For more information on eating disorders, please visit:

Calgary Health Region
www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/eatingdis
 National Eating Disorder Information Centre
www.nedic.ca
 Alberta Health
www.health.gov.ab.ca/public/growing.html

If you would like to speak to a health professional, you can contact your family physician or speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling Calgary Health Link.

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 Or toll free: 1-866-408-LINK (5465)