BOYS AND BODY IMAGE

Parent Tip Sheet

Boys are affected by the media's depictions of unrealistic body types. Help them attain their own ideal — not someone else's.
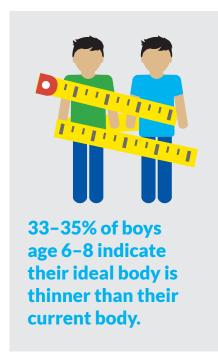
Did you know?
- Body image develops early in childhood.
- Body image is influenced by family and culture.
- Exposure to traditional media is a risk factor for developing body dissatisfaction.

3 facts about body image

The proportion of undressed males in advertising has been rising steadily since the 1980s.

33–35% of boys age 6–8 indicate their ideal body is thinner than their current body.

The measurements of the male action figures young boys play with exceed even those of the biggest bodybuilders.

"Body image" definition: one's perceptions, feelings, and behaviors toward one's body

What's the issue?

The pursuit of a perfect body is no longer only a "girl" thing. From padded Halloween superhero costumes that give 5-year-olds six-pack abs to action movie stars with exaggerated physiques, representations of men in the media have become increasingly muscular and unrealistic. Boys are falling prey to the images of ideal bodies splashed across magazine covers; in video games, movies, and music videos; and now on social media. Unlike their female counterparts, however, most boys aren't out to get skinny. They want to bulk up.

Big muscles are typically associated with good health. But what drives a young man to achieve that look can be far from healthy. Researchers have found a significant relationship between men's exposure to muscular-ideal

media and negative self-image. With the advent of social media, online forums and blogs make it easy to seek and share information about diet and fitness. And some boys are going to extreme efforts to get a muscular, chiseled physique. Finally, frequent exposure to sexual material can impact men's self-consciousness about their own appearance, as well as lead them to view women as sex objects.

Why body image matters for boys

Although research on boys lags behind that on girls, it's clear that negative self-image can affect boys' physical and mental health.

Boys are encouraged at an early age to think that being a man and being physically strong go hand in hand. As they grow older, the pressure to "man up" can sometimes lead to crash diets, over-exercising, smoking, or even taking dangerous supplements. Exposure to highly sexualized material can impact men's self-esteem and relationships. And in a culture that discourages boys from talking about their feelings, it can be that much harder for parents to detect a son's body dissatisfaction.

What families can do

Make health a habit. If you take care of yourself, you'll help your kids appreciate all that bodies can do. By fostering a healthy lifestyle, you're helping your kids resist extreme dieting messages.

Look for alternative media. Avoid TV, movies, and magazines that promote stereotypes and outdated gender roles. Seek out unconventional role models and talk about people from media and real life who have different body types and say why you find them beautiful (for example, they're kind or wise).

Do a reality check. Point out that the sports celebrities they admire have teams of people helping them to work out, feeding them special meals, and, in some cases, surgically altering them. The same holds true for "hot" movie stars. One glance at the real men in their lives will drive home this point.

Keep an eye on your kid's social networks. Online, boys can feed their obsession in isolation. Bodybuilding and fitness forums can promote risky training and unattainable body ideals that boys may pursue without checking with a doctor or coach. Also, boys can expose themselves to constant criticism by posting photos of themselves.

Talk about "real" girls. Highly sexualized media can distort boys' understanding of girls, relationships, and what the opposite sex looks like. Talk about how porn represents an extreme perspective that's not realistic.

Get more information on media's impact on girls' and boys' body image at https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sex-gender-and-body-image