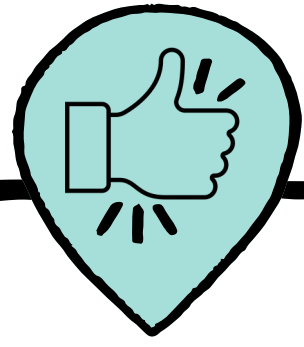Aleece Katan

Body Image in School-Aged Children: A Guide for Parents

What is body image?

Body image can be defined as the way in which we perceive our bodies, and how we think and feel about them. People often refer to one's body image as being 'positive' or 'negative'.

(Cash & Smolack, 2011)

Positive Body Image Means:

- Appreciating the things that your body can do for you
- Having thoughts and feelings about your body that are stable
- Being accepting of and comfortable with your body, even if you do not love all parts of it or if it does not align with society's ideals
- Filtering out harmful information, such as criticism from others, that could affect how you feel about your body
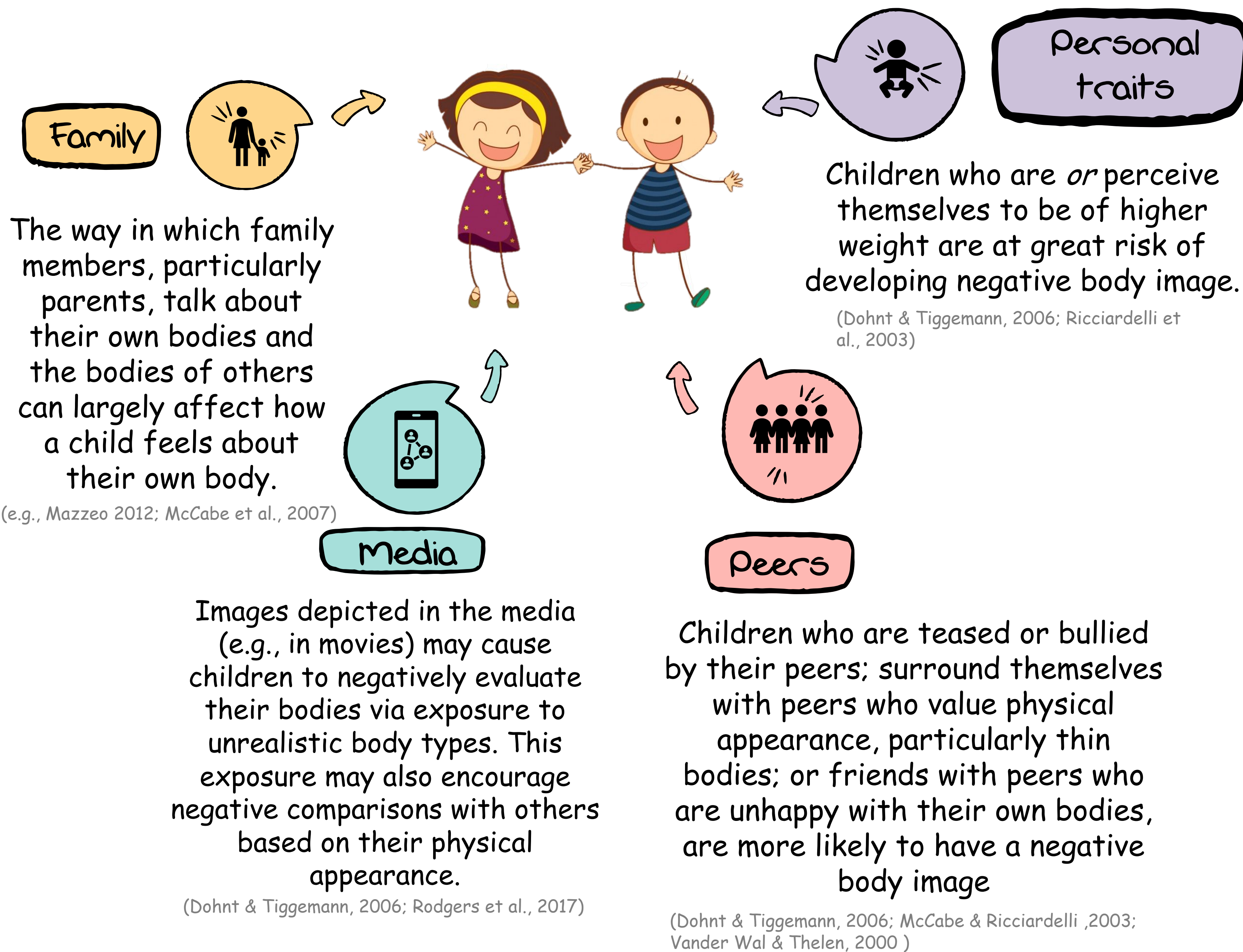
(Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015)
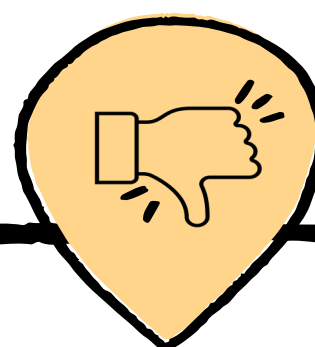
Negative Body Image means:

- Having negative thoughts or feelings about your body shape or weight (e.g., feeling ashamed of the way your body looks)
- More frequently comparing your own appearance with that of others, such as peers or celebrities

(Cash et al., 2004; Littleton & Ollendick, 2003)

What affects a child's body image?

Family

The way in which family members, particularly parents, talk about their own bodies and the bodies of others can largely affect how a child feels about their own body.

(e.g., Mazzeo 2012; McCabe et al., 2007)

Media

Images depicted in the media (e.g., in movies) may cause children to negatively evaluate their bodies via exposure to unrealistic body types. This exposure may also encourage negative comparisons with others based on their physical appearance.

(Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Rodgers et al., 2017)

Peers

Children who are teased or bullied by their peers; surround themselves with peers who value physical appearance, particularly thin bodies; or friends with peers who are unhappy with their own bodies, are more likely to have a negative body image

(Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; McCabe & Ricciardelli ,2003; Vander Wal & Thelen, 2000)

Personal traits

Children who are or perceive themselves to be of higher weight are at great risk of developing negative body image.

(Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Ricciardelli et al., 2003)

Why is body image important?

Children as young as

3 years old

Internalize 'thin deals' and display a preference for thin rather than larger bodies.

(e.g., Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Lowes & Tiggemann, 2003)

Body image is relevant to children of all genders; however, girls tend to be more dissatisfied and concerned about body fat than boys.

(Smolak, 2004)

54%
Of 6- to 9-year-old girls want a thinner body (Slater & Tiggemann, 2016)

47%
Of 6- to 11-year-old boys want a thinner body (Ricciardelli et al., 2009)

A Negative body image can …

- Lower self-esteem (Lawrence et al. 1995)
- Increase depressive symptoms (Stice & Bearman, 2001)
- Lead to unhealthy and restrictive eating behaviours (Stice & Shaw, 2002)
- Negatively impact school performance (Yanover & Thompson, 2008)

A positive body image can…

- Reduce the likelihood of dieting (Andrew et al., 2016)
- Enhance well-being (Swami et al., 2017)
- Encourage intuitive eating (i.e., eating when hungry, and stopping when full) and physical activity (Andrew et al., 2016)

What role do parents play?

- Parents play a key role in shaping their children's body image. Their influence can help protect against possible body image-related threats (e.g., media influences) that their child experiences
- Starting at age 3, children begin to monitor their parents' health- and eating-related behaviours

(Hart et al., 2015; McCabe et al., 2007)

- Parents who make negative comments about their own and others' bodies have children who often report body image concerns (Mazzeo, 2012; Mills et al., 2016)
- Children who see their parents dieting report poorer body image and are more likely to engage in unhealthy eating behaviours (Keery et al., 2006)
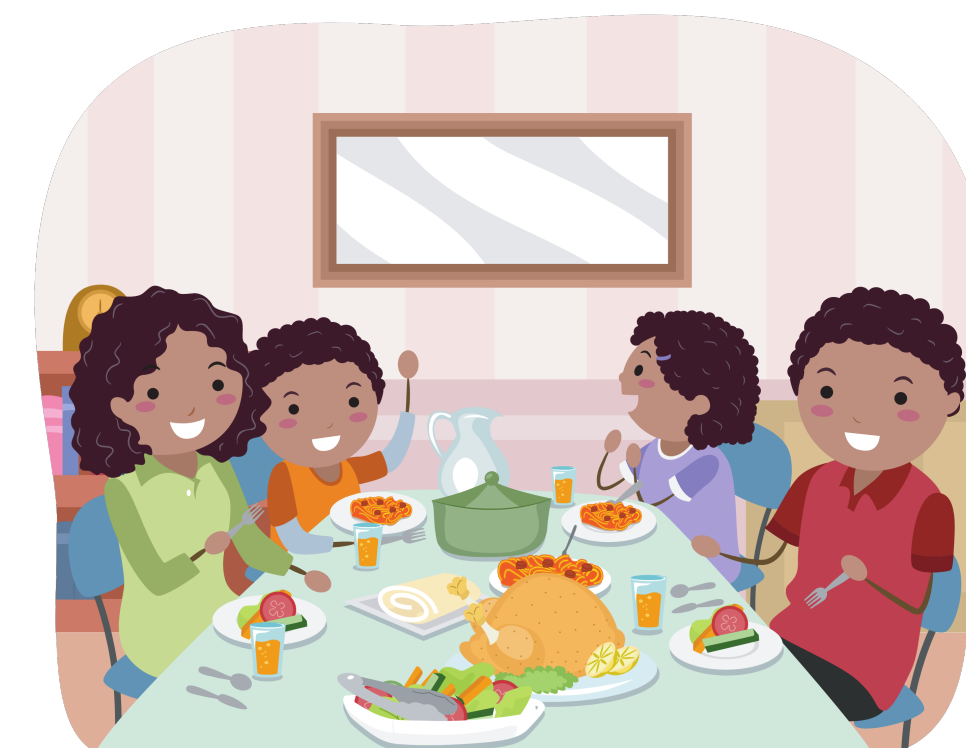
Tips for Parents

Watch the conversation. Avoid making negative or critical remarks about your own body, your child's body, and other bodies in front of your child. Instead, model an appreciation and acceptance of all body types (e.g., Hart et al., 2014; Fulkerson, 2006).

Appearance is not everything. Encourage and praise values, talents, and strengths that are unrelated to physical appearance, such as compassion and working hard, both in your child and when talking about others in front of your child (e.g., Hart et al., 2014; Voelker et al., 2018).
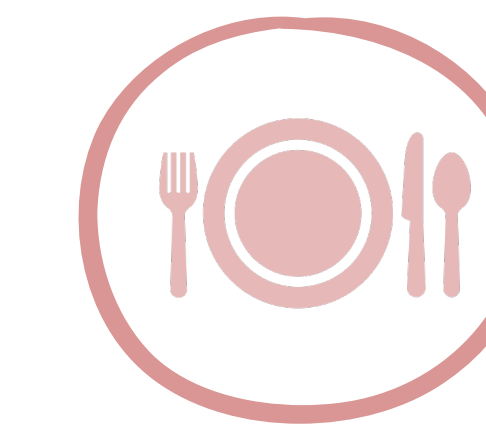
Avoid engaging in and encouraging dieting. Avoid modeling and encouraging dieting behaviours in front of your child; instead, model a diet filled with a variety of foods and drinks (e.g., Hart et al., 2014; Rodgers & Chabrol, 2009).

Encourage physical activity. Encourage and model frequent engagement in physical activities. Place emphasis on the fun associated with physical activity and the wonderful things that our bodies are capable of (e.g., Gaspar et al., 2011; Hart et al., 2014).

Be a critical consumer. Talk to your child about the media when you are away from it and when you are consuming it (e.g., watching tv together). If you come across body stereotypes in the media, use this as a teachable moment: model and encourage your child to pay attention to these stereotypes and the potential harm in them (e.g., Dohn & Tiggeman, 2016; Schooler et al., 2006).

Listen to your child. Coping with emotions and societal pressures can be challenging, and children who cope by eating or dieting are at risk of developing body image concerns. To avoid this, provide your child with the space to talk about their thoughts and feelings. Help your child identify healthy ways to cope with their difficult emotions so that they do not turn to food or dieting (e.g., Hart et al., 2014; Littleton & Ollendick, 2003).

Want more information? Check out these resources!

Website: https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/factsheet/raising-kids-with-a-healthy-body-image

Book: "The Body Image Survival Guide for Parents: Helping Toddlers, Tweens, and Teens Thrive" by Marci Warhaft-Nadler