

Common Sense on Boys and Body Image

Obsessed with their bodies: the new truth for boys

Boys are held to some pretty high standards. There's the NFL showing impossibly large men with astounding speed. Magazine covers preach "Get a Better Body." Physique is the over-hyped indicator of manliness, leaving little room for all those other more important qualities, like empathy, intelligence — and even common sense.

Some facts

Nearly 1/3 of teen boys try to control their weight in unhealthy ways, like skipping meals, taking laxatives, or smoking (*Neumark-Sztainer, 2005*).

25% of anorexic and bulimic adults and 40% of binge eaters are men (*Harvard, 2007*).

60% of preteens and teens feel that they weigh too much and that their lives would be improved if they could attain their goal weight (*Pangea Media, 2009*).

Why body image matters for boys

We want our sons to be healthy — and happy. And that means feeling good about their bodies. Although most people associate eating disorders and body image issues with girls, the obsession with having a "better" body is far from a girls-only issue. Stars such as Dennis Quaid and Elton John have admitted to having had eating disorders, and several scandals have surfaced about steroid use in professional sports. Boys are surrounded by images of six-pack abs, ripped bodies, and perfect hair styles on stars like Matthew McConaughey or David Beckham. Media profoundly influence boys' expectations of what a real body type is.

But male body image isn't something that's talked about that often. Why? As anyone with adolescent sons knows, talking about their bodies is really difficult. All too often they try to "solve" body problems on their own. They aren't as expressive as girls, but that doesn't mean their body images aren't affected by these media influences.

Increasingly, boys become obsessed with controlling their eating, taking supplements, or working out excessively in order to get the "cut" bodies of Abercrombie & Fitch models. And given that boys often organize around "alpha" leaders, body size and type become huge social factors. Even with the negative examples of professional athletes and steroids scandals, boys are still tempted to "bulk up" for team sports or to impress girls.

Parent tips for elementary school kids

- » **Emphasize health over looks.** Talk about what their bodies can do, rather than what they look like.
- » **Keep kids active.** Don't let them "veg" in front of a screen too long at any given time.

Parent tips for middle school kids

- » **Check your own behavior.** Are you overly critical of your own body? Do you exercise and eat well? You are setting an example of adult behavior.
- » **Do a reality check.** Help your children form realistic expectations. Point out that the sports celebrities they admire have teams of people helping them work them 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.
- » **If your son is on a sports team, check in with him about training.** Find out what kind of messages he's getting from his coach and from other team members.

Parent tips for high school kids

- » **Check in.** Ask your son if friends use risky methods to control weight. Since boys will talk more easily about other people than themselves, you can get more information by asking about what their friends do. Ask: Are any of your friends using steroids or supplements? Working out too much? Talking about "purging" after a pig out? If so, ask your son how he feels about it and whether he's ever been tempted to engage in any of these behaviors.
- » **Check for signs.** Sudden weight loss, dramatically increased workouts, large muscle growth, and radically altered eating patterns are just a few signs of eating disorders or potential steroid or supplement use. If you think your son is at risk, make a doctor's appointment immediately. This is critical not only for your son's health, but also for his mental well being, since eating disorders create a lot of feelings of shame. Sometimes your child might be more forthcoming with a health professional than with you, for fear of either letting you down or being criticized.