

Be Real

Being confident about body confidence: a guide for parents

Thanks for taking the time to read this short guide to body confidence, which supports the work your child's school is doing to become a body-confident school.

What is body confidence?

Body confidence is when someone accepts, appreciates, and thinks and behaves positively in relation to their body and appearance.

Why does body confidence matter?

People who lack body confidence are likely to have less confidence in general, which can hold them back from achieving their full potential. They are also likely to be less physically healthy and are more vulnerable mental health issues.

Recent research by the Be Real campaign has shown that 89% of students (boys and girls) aged 11 to 16 have concerns about their looks. Most students (99%) have done or would consider doing something to change their looks (ranging from moderate to extreme measures). 73% have done/would consider doing more drastic actions (e.g. diets, protein shakes, meal replacement shakes, tanning or cosmetic surgery).

Why has body confidence become such a big issue?

As well as the challenges of going through puberty, young people today are also dealing with lots of other pressures on body image such as:

- celebrities being criticised for being less than perfect or praised for appearing to have a perfect body
- rising obesity levels
- dieting trends such as 'clean eating' and fasting, which label foods as 'good' or 'bad'
- images being manipulated to create impossibly 'perfect' bodies in advertisements
- sharing and comparing photographs on social networks.

Is it just an issue for girls?

Body confidence has been seen as a greater issue for girls than for boys in the past, but it is increasingly an issue for boys too, who feel the need to have a 'perfect' look as promoted by male models in advertisements, or who perceive protein shakes as a way of achieving a 'perfect' look. In recent research, 40% of boys said that they had used, or would consider using, protein shakes to change their appearance.

What can I do to help?

As a parent, you have a really important role to play. Research by the Be Real campaign found that students were more likely to turn to their parents for support on body confidence than anyone else. That doesn't mean you have to have all the answers, but there are some really simple things you can do to help your child develop their own body confidence; you should find that you feel more body confident too.

It's a good idea to start by thinking about the way you talk about your own body. Do you tend to criticise the way you look? Do you talk about 'bad' foods, tell yourself off for not taking enough exercise, or wish you looked different? Most of us fall into these bad habits at some point in our lives but these actions send out messages that we don't like the way we look – and that it's okay to behave like this. Yet we wouldn't want our children to copy this.

Avoid:

- 'fat talk' (being negative about your own appearance)
- complimenting people on weight loss (even if it's weight they didn't need to lose)
- implying that someone's appearance is the most important thing about them
- chatter about unflattering photos of celebrities
- talking negatively about how appearance changes with age
- talking about 'junk food' or 'bad'/'good' foods; instead talk about eating the right amount of different types of foods.

Instead:

- encourage your child to recognise their personal qualities and strengths
- recognise the qualities and strengths of other people too
- celebrate the fact that everyone is different
- show respect to other people.

Where can I find out more about body confidence?

The Dove Self-Esteem Project (www.selfesteem.dove.co.uk) has useful information for parents. Although these materials are aimed at parents of girls, it will give insight into boosting self-esteem, bullying and the role of media for parents of boys too.

What should I do if I'm worried about my child?

Having low body confidence doesn't mean someone has, or is going to develop, an eating disorder or a major health problem. However, if you are concerned about your child, try speaking to your GP or the charity Beat (www.b-eat.co.uk, 0345 634 1414).