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*Solution-Based Psychological Services*

## **Dr. Tina Lepage Answers Questions from Carolina Parent Magazine on Children and Body Image**

(1) Given today's powerful and omnipresent cultural and media stereotypes about bodies and beauty, do you think parents have any control over how children and adolescents feel about their bodies? Please explain.

**Actually, parents have a lot of control over how children and adolescents feel about everything, their bodies included. For example, studies have found that the messages that parents give to their child have more influence on the child's thoughts and behaviors than messages they get from peers. So parents can help combat unhealthy media and cultural messages about body image by providing healthy messages within the home.**

(2) In what ways do a parent's body image "issues" affect and/or determine those of his or her children? Is it more common for children to have the same or different body image issues as their parents?

**In terms of overall self-image, on an internal level children see themselves as half mom and half dad. Thus if mom or dad has a poor body image, the child is at risk for having concerns about his or her own body, and for having low self-esteem around this issue. More specifically, children identify closely with the same sex parent in terms of their vision of what it means to be a man/boy or woman/girl. Since girls are more vulnerable to body image issues (due to societal pressures), and girls take their primary cues from their mom's attitude about body image stuff, it is especially important for moms to reflect in their words and actions a healthy attitude about their bodies. Conversely, if mom and dad have a positive and healthy body image, the child is more likely to feel good about his or her own body, even in the face of cultural and media images that hold up unrealistic and sometimes even unhealthy body images. However, even with the best body images within the home, parents do need to also provide information to counteract the media and culture.**

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(3) What are the keys to establishing/nurturing a child's healthy body image? How early should parents start? Is this a planned process or does it just happen?

**There is both some planning and "it just happens" around nurturing a positive body image for your child. The "it just happens" part is what I spoke of above, wherein the parents' body images have an effect on the child's developing sense of self. In terms of when to start, it is never too early to nurture a positive body image (and positive self-image overall), though the key is to not have a high focus on the body and instead chose things that flow naturally into conversation. Here are some hints: (1) refrain from making negative comments about people's bodies in general, and instead focus on the positive and on compliments versus tearing people down, (2) focus on health versus body size, for example, talk about healthy eating versus dieting and exercising for heart and body health versus to lose weight, (3) institute healthy eating and exercise into your family routine, (4) talk about looking healthy versus looking skinny, thin or fat, and (5) compliment your child regularly.**

(4) Thinking specifically about ages 10-14, what are the major body image issues and how can parents best support a healthy attitude?

**By this age of 10-14, children are very aware of the societal pressure to be thin and attractive, and this includes both boys and girls. The major body image issue for girls is thinness, which can be very difficult to deal with at this age as puberty sets in. This is also an issue for boys, and though there is less pressure to be "rail thin," there is still pressure to be thin in general and to be "good looking." The second major issue is more a broad area of the pressure to be attractive, which goes beyond the issue of thinness to things like nose size, acne, wearing clothes that are "in," etc. Parents can support a healthy attitude by (1) having a healthy body image themselves, (2) having a healthy family lifestyle, (3) regularly providing information to counteract what the children see in the media, and (4) teaching the importance of character, personality, and accomplishments over external looks (for example, focusing more on compliments and positive feedback around positive character behaviors, such as helping a friend, doing one's chores, trying one's best at school, etc., and accomplishments, such as learning to ride a bike, or doing well in school, etc.).**