

Body image: talking with teenagers

This is a transcript of the Raising Children Network video available at http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/body_image_teenagers_video_1.html. Jess is a teenager who is becoming obsessed with her weight. Her mother wants to help her daughter feel better about herself. This video demonstration with actors shows how to start a non-judgmental conversation about teen body image. We also hear from a nutritionist who shares tips for parents on talking about body image with young people.

Mum: So what's the goss, Jess? Tell me something I don't know about Brangelina.

Jess: No gossip. Just thinking I need to go on a diet.

Mum: You do know that most of those models are heavily photoshopped to erase pimples and muffin tops and crank up the bra size. It's not real, Jess, it's plastic.

Jess: Mum, I'm fat and getting fatter. Melissa's been on this special detox diet and looks fantastic. I need to stop eating all this bad junk food, maybe even all food. I want to do this diet here. Can we do it together?

Mum: Jess, you're telling me you want to go on some horribly strict diet so that you can look thin and beautiful like our friend here? You are beautiful, Jess, inside and out. And your body's good to you, isn't it. You're smart and funny and you're a great friend to Sarah and Georgia who like you for being you.

Jess: You're my Mum, of course you'd say that. But it's not fair! Everyone seems to be able to lose weight except for me.

Mum: I know how it feels. I can't tell you how many diets I tried over the years in search of the perfect size 10.

Jess: Yeah, well what did you do then?

Mum: I gave myself a break and started liking this body of mine. It's the only one I've got. I just started being kind to myself and eating properly. No more 'good' food and 'bad' food. There's 'everyday' food and 'sometimes' food. The other thing I did was to start being active every day. What do you like doing with your body, Jess? You used to be a top swimmer.

Jess: I'm too fat for a bikini now. Plus it's raining.

Mum: Come on, hon, enough excuses. Let's do something fun. How about the indoor pool?

Jess: Okay. Okay, we'll put our cossies on and do a few laps.

Mum: Great! And we can treat ourselves to a hot chocolate afterwards.

Jess: As long as it's a skinny hot chocolate.

Hon. Professor Jennifer O'Dea [*nutritionist and health educator*]: What we see here is the mother, Deb, listening to her daughter, Jess, her concerns about her body and weight in a non-judgemental and supportive way. So, she's listening. She tries to keep the conversation going so that she can hear more about Jess's concerns, she wants to keep Jess talking. At the same time, she hopes to steer the discussion back to Jess's positive attributes that have nothing to do with her physical appearance.

She also acknowledges her own past struggles with self-acceptance and how she became proud of things that aren't related to appearance. It's important for parents to understand that if they have any of their own body image issues that they don't, you know, inadvertently impose these on their children because it's quite common to talk about dieting and which diet you're on and trying to lose weight.

The mother offers ideas about physical activities that they can do together which are fun and could build Jess's confidence about her body's ability. And in this regard, you're doing things with the children that make them feel good in their bodies, that their body can do things, which is more important than how the body looks. So, the important message here is that building self-esteem or a sense of what you're worth is at the heart of building a healthy body image.
