

The BODY

H
PROJECT
BODY
LOVE

confidence coach

**RAISING, COACHING AND MENTORING YOUNG WOMEN
WITH BODY IMAGE IN MIND**

In association with

Women's Health

Written by Jo Usmar

-

Contents

p3

EDITOR'S LETTER

p4

INTRODUCTION

What is body confidence and why is laying a positive groundwork in girls and young women so important?

p7

INFANTS (0-8)

What behaviours and language affect babies and children up to eight years old? This section covers mimicking, the importance of play and establishing good role models

p16

PRE-TEENS (9-12)

At this age, girls' attention starts to turn away from parents and towards peers. We look into the impact of puberty, introductions to internet usage and opening up a dialogue

p24

TEENS (13+)

What are the body image repercussions of coming of age in the digital era? We look at the influence of fat talk, the inner critic and the aesthetic ideal

p32

FURTHER READING



Editor's letter

As a child, I was taller and stronger than my friends, and I developed insecurities because of it. I was four when I began weighing myself - which feels all the more upsetting now that my own daughter, Nell, is that age. Nell is my mini me, and as well as inheriting my stubborn streak and confidence, she's inherited my build. She's already wearing clothes for six and seven-year-olds and she's at least a head taller than her friends. At a friend's barbecue recently, she ran up to me and whispered in my ear, 'He called me fat,' after another child commented on her appearance.

Since *Women's Health* launched Project Body Love, our campaign to change the way women think, feel and speak about their bodies, our research has revealed a complex web of influences informing body image. And we know that children internalise this messaging from a young age.

With that in mind, we've enlisted the help of experts in body image, along with parents and teachers, to bring you a practical guide to raising, coaching and mentoring young women, from the toys to buy for babies to the language to use around teenagers. The research is ongoing, and no guide can make up for hands-on experience. But becoming more aware of our collective habits, and their impact, is a positive step towards ensuring the next generation of young women are more confident than their parents.

I'm determined to equip Nell with the self-belief to counter any criticism levelled at her, and grow up celebrating her intelligence and charm. I tell her she's pretty, but also kind, clever and strong. And as for the child who called her fat, I told her to tell him, 'I'm big and strong like my mammy.'

Claire Sanderson, Editor-In-Chief, Women's Health
Follow me on Instagram @clairesanderson

How to use this book

This book isn't just for parents; it's for godparents, teachers, mentors, coaches and anyone else who comes into regular contact with young women. We've divided it into three age ranges, but we suggest reading every section, even if you don't feel it's relevant to the children in your life. This will help you to better understand how making subtle shifts in your language and behaviour can make a big difference. Please note that body confidence is a huge - and complicated - subject, and for the purposes of this book, we have chosen to focus only on the issues that came up time and time again in the research. If you would like to explore any of the issues raised in this ebook in further detail, you'll find reading materials on page 32.

There are many serious mental health issues associated with body confidence. If you believe you, or anyone you know, may be suffering from a body image anxiety disorder, such as body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), or an eating disorder such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia, speak to your GP for further help.



What is body image?



Body image refers to how you see your body (perception), how you think about your body (cognition), how you feel about your body (affect) and how you treat your body (behaviour). Some people use the term 'positive body image' interchangeably with 'body confidence' – feeling happy and comfortable with how your body looks and feels.

Body image is individual, and informed by everything from cultural influences to the media, religion and race to gender identity, disability and class. It's also influenced by your childhood; how you were raised plays a fundamental role in the formation of your sense of self-worth. If family members had disordered relationships with food when you were growing up, this could have affected the way you view food, eating and your appearance. If you were only ever told stories about beautiful heroines rescued by handsome princes, this might have influenced your view of what's aspirational. It's influences like these that we're going to explore here.



Yes

Is this really a big deal?

Yes

Yes


A 2016 study by the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY) found that almost a third of nursery and school staff had heard a child label themselves as ‘fat’, while 10% said they’d heard a child say they felt ‘ugly’*; a 2016 study by Girlguiding UK found more than a third of seven to 10-year-old girls believed women are judged on their appearance ahead of their abilities; and an extensive 2019 survey by the Mental Health Foundation (MHF) found that almost a third of British teenagers felt ashamed of their body, with 35% having changed their eating habits in an effort to alter their appearance***. While such feelings aren’t always symptomatic of a mental health problem, they can be a risk factor for a range of conditions and behaviours, like depressive symptoms and eating disorders.**

But if feeling negatively about your body can be debilitating, building body confidence presents an opportunity to thrive. How you feel about your appearance affects your self-esteem and self-worth, how capable you believe you are, and the value you place on yourself as a person, which has been linked with a willingness to try new things, better social and academic outcomes[†] and even better life satisfaction^{††}.

The best time to start projecting this positive messaging on to children? From birth. ‘Children become aware of their appearance from around the age of three,’ says Dr Emily Lovegrove, past research fellow at UWE Bristol and psychologist specialising in bullying and appearance. ‘But even before this age, they are picking up on language and behavioural cues in a way that shapes their understanding of the world and the people they will grow up to be.’ Let’s get started.

*pacey.org.uk/news-and-views/news/archive/2016-news/august-2016/children-as-young-as-3-unhappy-with-their-bodies/
theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/oct/04/girls-as-young-as-7-feel-pressure-to-be-pretty-body-confidence-girlguiding-study-reveals *mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/body-image-report †ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21942279
††psychcentral.com/news/2016/05/11/body-image-strongly-tied-to-overall-life-satisfaction/103115.html

Infants

0  8

Infants (0-8)

Babies and young children mimic behaviours and actions, though how and when they start doing this is still being researched. Some studies say it happens within weeks of birth, others believe it begins later, but researchers agree that everything from clapping to feeling frightened of spiders can be learned from the adults who are a child's only frame of reference.

Most babies can respond to the rhythms of language and noises from birth, and by 12 months, they can attach meanings to words and start to mimic language. By 18 to 24 months, children can recognise the difference between nouns and verbs and gain an understanding of basic sentence structure*.

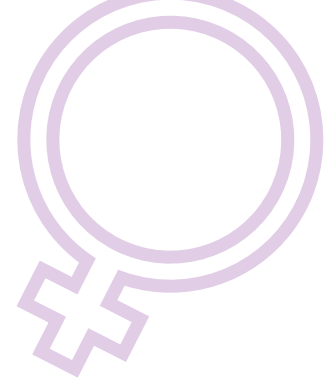
Children start to recognise themselves in a mirror at around the age of two and will begin to be aware of their appearance from around three, developing a concept of gender from three to five†.**

Please note that every child is different and develops at a different rate. The ages given here are based on generally agreed averages.

*[verywellfamily.com/how-do-children-learn-language-1449116](https://www.verywellfamily.com/how-do-children-learn-language-1449116) **theconversation.com/how-do-children-develop-a-sense-of-self-56118 †theconversation.com/when-do-children-develop-their-gender-identity-56480

INFLUENCES ON BODY IMAGE

Gender



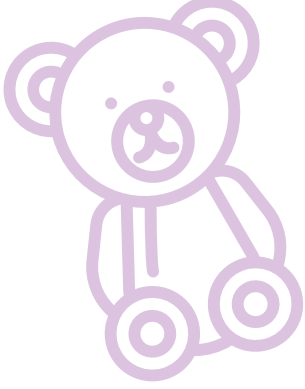
Studies have found that when a baby is dressed as a boy, adults are more likely to bounce them on their knee or lift them in the air, while babies perceived to be girls are given more hugs*. It means children are internalising messaging that appearance influences how they are treated from a young age. ‘We know that girls are much more likely to be praised on looking pretty, whereas boys are encouraged to play, with a greater focus on achievement in fixing, building and climbing,’ says cognitive behavioural therapist Claire Luchford. ‘This means that intrinsic qualities are being validated for boys, while external values are being validated for girls. This tends to continue as girls grow up, when they’re encouraged to look pretty with make-up and clothing. The messages they’re receiving suggest that their value is very much based on their external appearance, even down to a stronger focus on behaving well.’**

On the flip side, a 2014 study published in the *British Journal Of Developmental Psychology* found that mothers talk differently to daughters than sons, using more emotional words and content when speaking to four-year-old girls than boys. Researchers stressed that learning emotional intelligence early is incredibly important for children in terms of school success and good peer relations[†].

THE BODY CONFIDENCE COACH...

Buys neutral clothes for children, or dresses them in a mixture of colours, suggests Dr Lovegrove. That means avoiding slogan items like ‘Mummy’s little princess’ as well as other gendered items like bows and bikinis. Just becoming aware of any biases, conscious or unconscious, regarding the way you treat children who present as girls, and the level of importance you place on appearance, is useful. It’s not wrong to compliment a child for looking pretty, but it becomes problematic when the child believes looking pretty is their primary means of receiving approval and praise.

Learn Sociology*; Edward Brent, Jones & Bartlett *Language And Gender*; Penelope Eckert & Sally McConnell-Ginet, Cambridge University Press
[†]time.com/3581587/mothers-emotion-words-girls-boys-surrey-studymothers-encourage-emotions-more-in-daughters-over-sons-study-says/



INFLUENCES ON BODY IMAGE

Toys

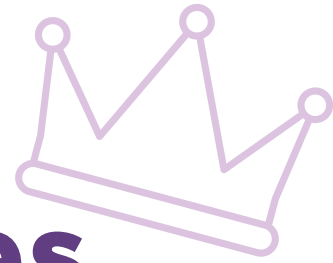
Research confirms that we tend to offer different kinds of toys to girls and boys. In a 2017 BBC experiment, infant girls were dressed in what are traditionally thought of as boys' clothes (blue outfits, shirts and jeans) while boys were dressed in pink or pastel colours. The children sat in front of a selection of toys and adults were asked to play with them. The adults pushed traditionally masculine toys, like trucks or building blocks, on the 'boys' and soft, more nurturing toys, like dolls and teddy bears, on those they thought were girls*. This is important, as research suggests traditional 'boys' toys' can support cognitive development. Pushing a truck around the floor, for example, means a child has to navigate corners and space, while building blocks encourage a child to learn how the blocks stack, and to find solutions when they don't. Studies have also shown that cognitive toys encourage kids to be focused, develop curiosity, take risks, set goals and meet challenges†.

Toys can also teach children about what their bodies can do. 'A lack of body confidence isn't necessarily that you don't like your body, but that you don't know what it does,' says Libby Northedge, a trainee practitioner of therapeutic play, a method of responding to the mental health and emotional needs of children through play. 'Children are learning about their bodies, and if we want them to think less about what they look like, we need to show them what their bodies can do and what they can create.'

THE BODY CONFIDENCE COACH...

Makes sure girls have access to a range of toys. Toys that make noises or change colour provide auditory and visual stimulation, and studies have found toddlers gain confidence in decision-making and spatial awareness with puzzles or building blocks. Northedge also recommends games that require physicality. 'Dressing up, playing with clay, messing around in the playground: these things teach children how their bodies work and how to communicate with others.'

*[youtube.com/watch?v=nWu44AqF0il](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWu44AqF0il) †[legofoundation.com/media/1063/learning-through-play_web.pdf](https://www.legofoundation.com/media/1063/learning-through-play_web.pdf)



Fictional heroines

This is the age at which we are first exposed to stories. ‘This is important, as children imbibe the messaging in the stories, especially when the same messages are repeated over and over,’ says Dr Lovegrove. And while children’s stories have become more progressive in recent years, the majority still reward Western concepts of beauty, and punish or shame prescriptive definitions of ugliness. Dr Lovegrove points to *Shrek* as an example of a more progressive story that’s still flawed. ‘The message was supposed to be that looks don’t matter in love. Yet, when Fiona decides she wants to be with Shrek, she has to become an ogre, because you can’t possibly have a beautiful woman marrying an ogre,’ she says. These tropes aren’t unique to girls. Representation of princes as strong, handsome and quick-witted are problematic for boys too. And there’s also the lack of diversity, both in regard to race and disability, to contend with. ‘The standard stories children hear are about able-bodied white children,’ says Toni Mason, head teacher at St John The Baptist primary school in Hoxton, East London. ‘There are a lot of pupils with African heritage at the school where I work, and we quickly realised they weren’t seeing themselves in books or films. They couldn’t see children of the same skin colour or ethnic background succeeding or having adventures. It’s integral for children to see positive images of people that look like them. If they can’t see people like them achieving, how can they picture themselves achieving?’

THE BODY CONFIDENCE COACH...

Shows there is more than one way of being a girl. ‘Emphasise this with the stories you tell or the programmes you watch with them,’ says Mason. ‘Our pupils have responded well to hearing stories about children of different races, sizes and abilities having adventures and being the heroine of the tale.’ Be aware of the artwork, posters and photographs you have on the walls – whether at home or in a learning environment – and make sure the child in your life can see people who look like them, or with similar backgrounds to them, achieving and being celebrated.

Anna Hamilton, 40, assistant head teacher at Mill Hill County High School, London, and mother to Billie, 10, and Ella, seven

Disney tends to kick in for kids around the age of three, and while it's true that the princesses are getting increasingly badass in terms of their characterisation, they still have tiny waists and long hair and look a certain way. Girls from nursery age onwards want to dress up as them, so these aesthetics can inform how your daughter defines what it means to be a girl. As a parent, you can't change this, but you can expose them to a range of female role models. I encourage my kids to watch programmes featuring brave and active female role models and we talk about how unrealistic many princesses and dolls look. Now that they're older, they're talking about how sexist the world around them can be - the other day they were talking about how unfair it is that male footballers are paid more than female footballers. So then you have to qualify that by saying not everything is sexist. It's a constant struggle to try to manage their perceptions. But princesses, dolls and stories mean the subject of appearance is present in their lives from a very early age.



INFLUENCES ON BODY IMAGE

Food, diets and eating behaviours

While the influences that shape a child's relationship with food are complex, research has highlighted the need for positive role models around eating behaviour and food choices*. 'Even at this young age, children are picking up on behaviours that can inform their body confidence,' says Dr Lovegrove. Habits to look out for in your own behaviour include constantly checking mirrors, refusing to be in photographs and making expressions of disgust or disapproval around eating or bodies (see page 14 for more common low body confidence behaviours).

On the latter point, assigning moral values to food (think: clean, naughty, guilty) has become a common part of our collective vocabulary around eating, and it can be damaging, says Kimberley Wilson, a chartered psychologist specialising in whole body mental health. 'The problem with lacing food with moral language is that it plays into our human tendency to see things in black or white terms. In reality, nothing in life works like that, independent of its context. This all-or-nothing attitude to food drives food anxiety, which is a risk factor for disordered eating, body dissatisfaction and poor self-esteem.'

THE BODY CONFIDENCE COACH...

Is aware of their behaviour and use of language around appearance, food and diet culture. 'Disentangling food from value labels is a good place to start if you're trying to improve your own relationship with food,' says Wilson. 'Work at seeing food as food. A brownie isn't "naughty", it's just a brownie. If you challenge these labels when they pop up, you'll be on your way to reducing the guilt and anxiety associated with this harmful attitude to food.' It isn't just the words that are important, it's how you use them. If you use words like 'fat', 'thin' or 'skinny', be aware of the tone you use and your associative behaviour. 'Strong' and 'healthy' are good alternatives, having no bearing on shape or size.

BODY CONFIDENCE RED FLAGS IN YOUR OWN BEHAVIOUR

If any of the below signs sound familiar and affect you most days of the week, impact your mood negatively, cause you undue distress and get in the way of you being able to live your daily life (spending time with family, seeing friends) it's important to seek support from a GP.



Constantly checking yourself in the mirror and being increasingly dissatisfied by what you see



Pinching or poking at your own body repeatedly



Restricting the food you eat, skipping meals or avoiding certain types of food for fear of gaining weight



Refusing to wear a swimming costume or go swimming because of fear of how you will look



Only being happy with photos if you can edit your appearance



Wearing oversized (and dark) clothing in a bid to hide your shape and avoid drawing attention to it



Cancelling social plans or refusing to go out because of the distress caused by trying to find something to wear



Constantly comparing your appearance and particular body parts to other people's online and offline



Constantly taking selfies and being unhappy and anxious to get the perfect shot

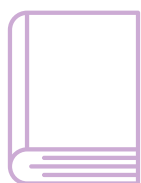


Refusing to appear in photographs because you're anxious about the way you look

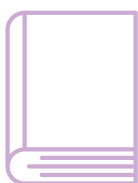


Untagging yourself from photos on social media because you don't like how you look

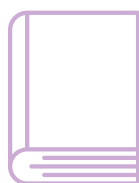
Fictional heroines worth shouting about



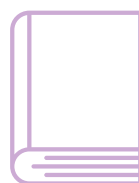
***Good Night
Stories For
Rebel Girls***
by Francesca
Cavallo and
Elena Favilli
(£20,
Particular
Books)



***It's Okay
To Be
Different***
by Todd
Parr (£4.99,
Little,
Brown
Young
Readers)



***Minnie & Max
Are OK!***
by Chris
Calland and
Nicky
Hutchinson
(£10.99,
Jessica
Kingsley
Publishers)



Zog
by Julia
Donaldson
(£6.99,
Scholastic
Press)



***The Worst
Princess***
by Anna
Kemp and
Sara Ogilvie
(£6.99,
Simon &
Schuster
Children's
UK)

A great list of body-positive books for young girls can also be found at amightygirl.com in the article 'Celebrating Every Body'

Pre-teens

9  **12**

Pre-teens (9-12)

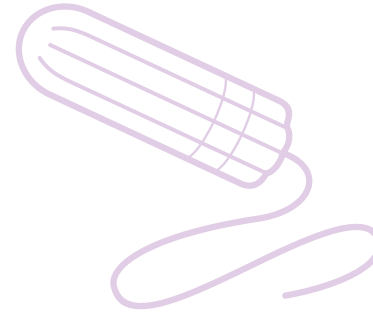
Puberty tends to begin between the ages of eight and 14 in girls*. Physical changes include breast development, growth spurts, growth of pubic hair and the start of periods, usually two years after breast development begins†.

The neural pathways continue to develop through puberty, going through a process known as ‘blooming and pruning’. The blooming period of neural growth in early childhood is followed by a period of pruning, where the brain selectively strengthens neural pathways, while those that are unused are eliminated. This pruning process is dependent on activity and stimulation.

Socio-emotional development during middle childhood is closely linked with self-esteem, which is measured by children through academic achievements, friendships and body image.

*Children who either start puberty very early (before eight) or late (after 14) are advised to see their GP just to check they're in good health

[†girlshealth.gov/body/puberty/timing.html](https://www.tgirlshealth.gov/body/puberty/timing.html)



Puberty

The process of puberty takes approximately four years and kicks off during the pre-teen, or ‘tween’ years. ‘During the prepubescent phase, many girls will gain weight, which is the body’s way of preparing for all the changes it will experience during puberty,’ explains Mine Conkbayir, PhD researcher and author of *Early Childhood And Neuroscience: Theory, Research And Implications For Practice*. ‘This is followed by physical changes, like growth spurts, breast development, body hair and menstruation. This is also the age when most children need to begin using deodorant.’ That a child is going through a period of physical change at the same time as their focus begins to move from the family unit to their peers means puberty can be significant in shaping a child’s body image. The 2019 MHF survey highlighted girls who mature earlier than their peers, and boys who mature later, as being particularly vulnerable during these years.

THE BODY CONFIDENCE COACH...

Normalises these changes. ‘During this time, a child needs reassurance that the changes she is going through are normal,’ explains Conkbayir. ‘Open, age-appropriate and tactful conversations about what to expect - and why it is happening - can help to ease any anxiety, while also preparing her for this overwhelming and confusing time.’ Bear in mind that any emotional response triggered by physical changes will be exacerbated by emotional changes, too, which can manifest in acute mood swings. If you’re a parent or guardian, your response can either aggravate or placate them, explains Conkbayir. ‘When a child feels embarrassed, threatened, scared or anxious, they need you to be patient and calm to help them return to a safe psychological state.’



INFLUENCES ON BODY IMAGE

Social media

That you have to be 13 to have a profile on most social media platforms does little to deter pre-teens. While the amount of access a child has to social media will depend on the rules at home and what they can access via friends, most kids of a pre-teen age will come into contact with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp and even online gaming communities, says Dr Sarah Vohra, consultant child psychiatrist and author of *Can We Talk?* - a book for parents and guardians supporting children with mental health issues. She explains that while there aren't any studies that definitively link social media with body image issues, we do know it contributes to negative mental health symptoms.

'On a clinical level, it takes young people away from real life experiences. They're engaging with people they don't know or who aren't present and it encourages upward comparisons - when you compare yourself with people who have more than you, excel more than you or who you think are better than you - which can affect self-esteem.' Dr Vohra has had children as young as seven in her clinic talking about body image concerns that have been aggravated by social media, and her colleagues have talked about children telling doctors they want to look like their Snapchat filter.

THE BODY CONFIDENCE COACH...

Encourages an open dialogue around social media. If you're a parent or guardian, establishing ground rules is key. 'The rules you implement now and the behavioural tone you set will dictate how they deal with social media going forward,' says Dr Vohra. She suggests starting by establishing the reason your child wants to be on social media - perhaps all her friends are on there and she doesn't want to miss out or wants to keep tabs on a particular influencer.

Next, set ground rules. 'If they're going to have a profile, agree with them what accounts they'll follow and make a compromise (bearing in mind they're not supposed to have a profile yet) that if you trust them to have one, you'll check it once a week to make sure the accounts they're following are positive,' Dr Vohra suggests.

Following that, transparency is key. 'Encourage them to speak to you if they find something they're unsure about or find disturbing. It'll encourage open conversations later if things do get worrying.'

Social media age restrictions

13+

**Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter,
Facebook, Kik, TikTok**

16+

WhatsApp

18+

**All 'adult' websites or
explicit chat rooms**



Exposure to TV, YouTube and porn

With access to the internet comes access to adult content. In a new report*, commissioned by the British Board of Film Classification, more than half of the children questioned had encountered porn by 11 to 13, with most coming across it by accident. And parents were less likely to suspect their daughters had viewed porn than their sons, even though findings suggested similar levels of exposure. While problematic for many reasons, in the context of body image, porn can become a bar for girls to measure themselves against – some experts have even linked exposure to porn to a rise in labiaplasties (surgery to reduce the size of the labia minora), though body image isn't the only driver for the surgery. 'Children come across messages about what it means to be attractive from a very young age, and this can affect body image by informing them what is aspirational or desirable,' explains consultant clinical psychologist Emma Citron, who points out that such messages strike a deeper chord during puberty.

THE BODY CONFIDENCE COACH...

Speaks to children about sex without judgement or shame. As of September 2020, relationships education will become statutory in all primary schools in England. The NHS also advises that it's never too early to start talking about sex in an age-appropriate way. Citron suggests rooting conversation in nature or by using real-life examples, eg, by referencing the recent birth of twins they may know and explaining how that happened. Discussing specific issues – consent, cosmetic surgery, etc – is as useful as explaining the facts. The important thing is that the lines of communication are there, says Citron. 'It's about creating an open dialogue so they know they can talk to you and that you'll listen without judgement. Keep the conversation natural and organic rather than making it feel like a big deal.' Seize opportunities as and when they arise – eg, a storyline on a TV show might spark a conversation about sexting – and when they do want to talk, stay calm and listen.

**James Vine*, 46, lives in
Bristol with his wife, Kate*.
He is father to Daisy*, 14**

Daisy was nine when she told us she wanted to be a vegetarian. She said she didn't like the taste of meat, and that she was worried about the environment. At first, I saw it as a brilliant challenge. I'm a part-time chef, and I enjoyed experimenting with different vegetables. Then she became picky, and the portions got smaller. We didn't want to make a big deal of it, so we said nothing, and let her get on with it. But before long, she was just eating a slice of toast while the rest of the family ate a homemade dinner. It was one of her friends who told my wife and me that she thought Daisy had anorexia. It was a shocking thing to hear, especially from an 11-year-old. We felt like failures; that we had enabled this. We spoke to one of her teachers and the school set up counselling sessions. We later learned that someone had told her she was the best looking girl in school because she was 'so skinny'. Anorexia became a way of staying that way, of fending off puberty - she'd heard that anorexia makes your periods stop. Counselling has helped Daisy - I think she found it easier talking to someone outside her family and friendship group. Her eating has improved and she's taken up team sports, too, which has helped her realise that food is the fuel she needs to be active. I think it's making her see her body in a different way.

*Names have been changed

BODY CONFIDENCE RED FLAGS IN PRE-TEENS

Some of these signs may be what we expect from a child who's negotiating puberty and the inevitable changes to their bodies this brings. However, if they affect a child most days of the week, impact their mood negatively, cause undue distress and get in the way of them being able to live their daily life (spending time with family, seeing friends, school attendance), it's important to seek support from a GP.



Attention turning from what her body is doing to how it looks



'Rating' her own or other people's appearance using words with a value judgement ('Is that normal?' 'Why is he so fat?' 'Am I scrawny?')



Comparing her appearance with that of her peers, celebrities or strangers



Referring to certain foods as 'good' or 'bad'



Getting upset about finding clothes to wear



Using exercise for weight loss or to change her appearance, when it used to be a byproduct of fun



Spending more time in front of the mirror or looking at herself in reflective surfaces



Using the word 'diet', talking about diets in a positive way or even embarking on a diet



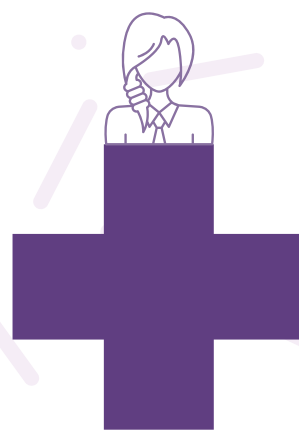
Constantly on her/someone else's smartphone looking at other people's appearance and drawing comparisons



If she has access to social media, only following accounts that pertain to aesthetics, body image and diet culture

Teens

13

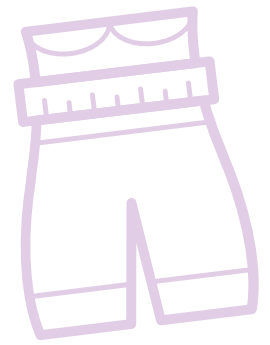


Teens (13+)

The neural pathways that communicate emotion, risk and reward are well developed in teenagers, but the ones in charge of planning, logic and social behaviour are yet to fully mature.

Regulation of dopamine (the pleasure hormone) is also affected during this time, which can lead to erratic and impulsive behaviour.

Adolescence is a vulnerable time for mental health, and anxiety conditions are the most common. While experiencing anxiety at times is totally normal, when symptoms (including fear, nervousness, shyness, irritability, restlessness, fidgeting, nausea) cause the child to start avoiding activities and people, consider seeking help from a GP. Anxiety disorders can both aggravate and be aggravated by body image insecurities.



Fat talk

‘Fat talk’ is an umbrella term for conversational body shaming that reaffirms ‘thin’ beauty ideals. Think: ‘You look great – have you lost weight?’ and, ‘I couldn’t wear that, I’m too big.’ Research has consistently linked fat talk with body shame, body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviour*, and a 2017 review of 35 studies found it to be a risk factor for negative body image, with the authors highlighting the need for awareness-raising among parents in particular. Separate research by the MHF found 42% of girls agreed that something a friend had said had caused them to worry in relation to their body image and the figure was 37% for something a family member had said, suggesting that fat talk can be destructive regardless of who’s doing it[†]. The problem is, it’s also contagious, with studies finding that people are more likely to engage in such talk if those around them are talking in such a way^{††}.**

THE BODY CONFIDENCE COACH...

Can recognise fat talk when they hear it and is willing to confront it. Dr Vohra suggests starting with weeding out fat talk in your own relationships. ‘It’s really important to be honest. If you have a fat-talking friend, tell them that it’s making you feel uncomfortable within yourself, making you look at yourself differently and wonder about your own appearance. Speak in a gentle and honest way and give examples if you can. It’s not enough to reel off a one-line quip, as that won’t resolve the problem. You need them to understand the impact it’s having in order to bring about meaningful change.’ And if it doesn’t work? ‘Consider cutting ties. It sounds brutal, but your mental health is the most important thing here.’ As for any teenagers in your life, the advice is the same – and don’t let awkwardness stop either of you from having this conversation. Chances are, they won’t realise they’ve been doing it, and you raising it will make them more aware.



INFLUENCES ON BODY IMAGE

Inner critic

The existence and persistence of a negative internal narrative known as the inner critic has become a well-known psychological phenomenon, and it can be particularly vindictive in the context of appearance. It was ranked as one of the most significant factors contributing to low body confidence in *Women's Health's* Project Body Love research. 'I've worked with many teenage girls who have difficulty accepting their appearance, only to find out their mums have also spent a lifetime battling an "inner critic" focused on their body shape,' says clinical psychologist and author of *Happy Parent, Happy Child* Dr Genevieve von Lob, who confirms that such thoughts can lead to shame, self-hatred, low mood and low self-esteem. 'These stories are not who you really are, but are beliefs based on conditioning from the world around you.'

THE BODY CONFIDENCE COACH...

Challenges negative beliefs when they hear them. Understanding that her thoughts aren't facts can help a teenager begin to recognise her inner critic, and ultimately silence it. 'In cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), we use the client's own experience to get some flexibility in their beliefs,' says Luchford. 'For example, if they believe "only pretty girls have boyfriends", I'll ask if that's really the case, and if they have any evidence against this in their school or environment? Usually they do. Then I'll ask her to assess the cost of holding on to this belief so rigidly. She might feel sad all the time or perhaps she avoids going out or putting herself forward for things. It can be helpful to notice these patterns of thinking so she can see the repercussions and stop the cycle.' Talk to her about the inner critic - the more she can begin to question it, the less influence it will have over her.

INFLUENCES ON BODY IMAGE

The aesthetic ideal

The pressure to live up to an ‘ideal’ body type as popularised in the media was one of the key influences on teenage body image identified by the MHF in its 2019 survey.

‘Teenagers receive constant messages of what to aim for aesthetically, from Instagram to YouTube vloggers, and self-esteem can take a sharp drop the more the child focuses on the gap between themselves and the ideal,’ says Luchford. One study, which followed 685 14 and 15-year-olds over three years found ‘media-ideal interalisation’ to be a predictor of negative emotions about appearance, which, in turn, predicted unhealthy eating behaviours*. In the MHF survey, 37% of girls said celebrities had caused them to worry about their bodies, and the figure was 28% for TV shows, while children who rejected appearance-based ideals reported feeling more confident about their appearance and were less likely to report body image concerns.

THE BODY CONFIDENCE COACH...

Challenges the aesthetic ideal. Encouraging a healthy relationship with, and an understanding of, the media is key. Have conversations about what social media is (a great way to communicate and discover new communities) and what it isn’t (an accurate reflection of reality or a substitute for real life experiences). Dr Vohra suggests encouraging teens to note down every time social media has a negative impact on their feelings or behaviour, and take action by muting or unfollowing – following up with them afterwards to see if it has helped. Finding and following some body-positive content can be useful, too. As well as influencers promoting forward-thinking ways of viewing bodies, a recent study found that viewing parody images on social media led to an increase in body satisfaction and a boost in mood compared with exposure to ‘ideal’ celebrity images alone. Beyond the media, encouraging a shift in their focus from aesthetics to other skills and hobbies can be useful, says Dr Lovegrove.

*ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25416025

Taking control of Instagram

MUTE UNHELPFUL ACCOUNTS

A manageable way to block content you don't want to see is to mute an account.

This can be done discreetly, meaning posts from that account will vanish from your feed. Go to their profile, then click 'following' and 'mute'.

CURATE YOUR FEED

Instagram's 'comment controls' feature allows you to list words - or even emojis - that you consider offensive, inappropriate or triggering. Draw up and agree a list with the child in your life - any comments on their posts containing these words will automatically be hidden. Go to 'settings', select 'privacy' and then 'comments'.

DIAL DOWN THE NOTIFICATIONS

A phone buzzing with likes and notifications can be anxiety-inducing, and is certainly distracting. Push notifications can be turned off for up to eight hours. Go to 'settings' and select 'notifications'.

Difficult conversations

Dr Vohra has created a simple tool to help you have more confident conversations with the child in your life: **FACE FEAR**. It isn't specific to parents; it can be used by anyone who is worried about a young person's mental wellbeing. You can find further information and tools in Dr Vohra's book *Can We Talk?* or on her Instagram page [@themindmedic](#).

FACE: Have a face-to-face conversation

ATTENTIVE: Listen to what they're trying to communicate to you. Why are they feeling the way they are or engaging in negative behaviours?

CALM: Remain calm, don't fly off the handle. Reassure them this is a safe space

ENCOURAGEMENT: If you're met with silence, encourage them to open up

FACTS: Explain your worries, listing the reasons you're bringing up the subject

EXPLAIN: Put it into context, explaining how this is a marked change of behaviour

ACTION: Make a pact to implement changes

REVIEW: Come back a week later to see how it went and how the changes felt

BODY CONFIDENCE RED FLAGS IN TEENS

Some of these signs may be what we expect from a teen who's negotiating adolescence and trying to assert their independence and make sense of their identity. However, if they affect a teen most days of the week, impact their mood negatively, cause undue distress and get in the way of them being able to live their daily life (spending time with family, seeing friends, school/college attendance), it's important to seek support from a GP.



Considering or even embarking on cosmetic treatments or surgery



Wearing heavy make-up to conceal a perceived defect



Spending more than she can afford on beauty treatments or clothes



Changing plans based on how she feels about her appearance



Spending a lot of time focused on a particular aspect of her appearance



Refusing to appear in photos



Exercising excessively or avoiding exercise then feeling guilty about it



Constantly checking her reflection



Regularly altering her appearance during the day



Constantly looking at photos of herself



Constantly comparing her appearance with other people's



Frequently weighing or measuring herself



Asking for reassurance from others about how she looks

Further reading

Mental Health Foundation Body Image Report
mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/body-image-report/exec-summary

'How to talk to your child about social media and the internet'
<https://youngminds.org.uk/take20/how-to-talk-to-your-child-about-social-media-and-the-internet/>

This Book Will Make You Feel Beautiful
by Dr Jessamy Hibberd and Jo Usmar (Quercus)

Happy Parent, Happy Child: A 10-Step Plan For A Stress-Free Family Life
by Dr Genevieve von Lob (Corgi)

Can We Talk? A Guide To Talking About Your Child's Mental Health
by Dr Sarah Vohra (Sheldon Press)

So What Is A Vulva Anyway?
legacy.brook.org.uk/data/So_what_is_a_vulva_anyway_final_booklet.pdf

Edited by

Copy Editor
Nikki Osman

Art Editor
Nathalie Bates

Production Editor
Victoria Rudland