

Volume 3

# Promote Positive Body Image in your School

## Adolescents are very susceptible to body image dissatisfaction

*Don't* focus on the dangers of eating disorders.

*Don't* emphasize obesity and weight.

*Do* develop a supportive school environment for students of all shapes and sizes.

*Do* empower students to challenge society's messages about weight, shape and dieting.

Follow these guidelines to make a difference in your school



## Create a supportive school environment

### *Examine your own attitudes and beliefs about weight, shape and dieting*

School staff and parents are important role models for students. Explore your personal beliefs about weight and shape and your behaviours around food, activity and dieting. You may inadvertently reinforce negative body image attitudes and behaviours of students by:

- Making critical comments about your own body or the body of others
- Dieting or talking about dieting
- Sharing weight loss tips
- Giving compliments to people who have lost weight

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Go to [www.schoolhealth101.ca/action](http://www.schoolhealth101.ca/action) for more ideas to promote positive body image, healthy eating and being active.

## *Prevent bullying*

Students who experience harassment and prejudice about weight, appearance, eating habits, sexuality or culture are more likely to:

- Feel shame about their bodies, develop low self-esteem and depression
- Use risky methods of weight control which increases the risk for developing an eating disorder and becoming overweight

Be especially aware of students at higher risk for appearance-related harassment, such as:

- **Overweight teens.** Large people in our society often experience prejudice and social isolation. Restrictive dieting is common and can lead to bingeing and weight gain.
- **Early maturing girls.** Because they gain weight and body fat before their peers, they are more likely to feel badly about their bodies and more likely to diet. They are also more likely to receive sexual attention and teasing.
- **Any student who may be perceived as "different".** For example, late maturing boys and students with disabilities.

Components of an anti-bullying strategy should include policy development, education, and specific guidelines for student supervision and managing reported incidents.



## *Make it easier to eat healthy*



Regular meals and snacks are important for health and learning. Encourage staff to set a good example by taking time for lunch and snacks too. Make sure healthy options are available.

Check out these ideas for your school:

- Breakfast, lunch, snack or milk programs
- Healthy options for vending machines, tuck shop, cafeteria and special school lunch days
- Adequate time for nutrition breaks; guidelines that allow students to eat snacks in class
- Opportunities to learn basic cooking skills—as part of the curriculum or an after-school club
- Healthy fundraisers. Be cautious of "starve-a-thon" fundraisers which could inadvertently promote disordered eating



## *Create physical activity opportunities for students of all shapes, sizes and skill levels*

Balance competitive games and team sports with small group activities that emphasize personal fitness and fun. Allow opportunities for girls-only and boys-only activities. Provide some flexibility with uniform requirements to allow for body image insecurities or religious requirements. Provide opportunities for less skilled students to practice new skills. Connect physical activity with having fun, not with improving appearance.

## *Consider forming a school wellness committee to promote positive body image*

Your Public Health Nurse can suggest resources and ways of getting the process started. Teamwork and creativity are essential, involving keen staff and students, as well as parents and community agencies.

## Ideas for the classroom

### Media literacy

Help students become critical of the unrealistic standards for weight, shape and appearance in the media. Discuss the stereotypes for guys and girls that are unrealistic and limiting.



### Puberty teaching

Acknowledge the body image pressures experienced during puberty. For girls, the need to gain weight and body fat for health and fertility conflicts with the cultural thin ideal. Although boys naturally become bigger and more muscular, few can match the exaggerated muscularity shown in the media. Students may use unhealthy practices to try to achieve their ideal.

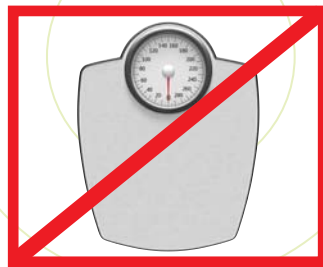
### Healthy ways to cope with stress

The teen years are stressful. Students who develop healthy coping patterns are less likely to use restrictive dieting or steroids to deal with life's problems. Discuss positive coping techniques. Provide opportunities to learn and practice relaxation skills such as deep breathing, progressive relaxation or meditation.



### The problem with dieting

Help students evaluate the easy promises made by the multi-billion dollar diet industry. Their "quick-fix" strategies don't work. In fact, 95-98% of dieters regain any weight they lost and often gain back more.



Over time, yo-yo dieting can result in physical and emotional problems, binge eating and increased risk for both eating disorders and obesity.

### Focus on health promotion not on eating disorders

Guest speakers or plays focusing on recovery from eating disorders may glamorize eating disorders or teach students new weight loss techniques. Instead, have your class investigate body image pressures in our society and how students can make a difference.

## AVOID activities that focus on weight, shape or dieting



- ✗ Calculating individual BMI
- ✗ Graphing weight (or height)
- ✗ Assessing body fat composition
- ✗ Emphasizing the calories in food – instead, look at how much nutrition the food provides. Is it an "everyday" food or a "sometimes" treat? Focus on the importance of regular meals and snacks. Teach students to follow their hunger and fullness signals
- ✗ Connecting physical activity with appearance or losing weight – instead, connect it with health, stress relief, and improved school performance

## Are you concerned that your student might have an eating disorder?

- Consult with appropriate support people within your school or board – principal, guidance counsellor, social worker, etc.
- Find out more about community resources from your Public Health Nurse – call 905-799-7700
- When talking to the student, express your concerns for their health in a non-judgemental way
- Negotiate who needs to become involved for the student's safety – e.g., parents and family doctor

## Workshops for Schools

- **Body Image Workshop for Teachers**  
Practical classroom support and curriculum resources provided by Peel Public Health.
- **Body Image Workshop for School Councils**  
Help parents understand the pressures their adolescents face and how they can be supportive.
- **To arrange a workshop, contact your Public Health Nurse or call 905-799-7700.**

## Community Resources for Eating Disorders in Peel

- Body Image Coalition of Peel [www.bodyimagecoalition.org](http://www.bodyimagecoalition.org) – check out the Directory of Resources and Services
- Central West Eating Disorder Program [www.cwedp.ca](http://www.cwedp.ca)

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For more information on body image contact  
Region of Peel Public Health at 905-799-7700.

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