Key messages

- Every body comes in all **different shapes and sizes.**
- **Media and online often only show one kind of beauty** - often these images are photoshopped, filtered or just good angles.
- During puberty, young people become more **body aware** with more **pressure to confirm to the 'ideal'.**
- Negative body image **can lead to eating disorders and other mental health issues.**
- This can **affect people of all ages and all genders**.

Body image

Body image refers to how you see yourself, how you feel about the way you look and how you think others perceive you. The reality is that every body comes in all different shapes and sizes, and it is unrealistic to represent only one body type as beautiful. Lots of people of all ages and genders can struggle with their body image. During the onset of puberty, young people's bodies begin to change as they become an adult. This can make them hyper aware of their own body's normal and natural differences to their peers. The influx of hormones influencing young people's emotions and thinking also impacts how they think about their body.

With the degree of physical and emotional changes occurring during puberty, it is normal for young people to be more self-aware. Body image was identified as one of the five top concerns of young people in Mission Australia's Youth Survey 2025[1], with concerns considerably higher among young women than men. Men are increasingly feeling this pressure to achieve or maintain an 'ideal' appearance of high levels of fitness, strength, and physical 'perfection' through online "fitness gurus".

Research from the Butterfly Foundation in 2024 reported that:

- 90% of young people (12-18) had some level of concern about their body image
- 56.5% of young people were dissatisfied with how their body looks
- 38.4% were mostly or completely dissatisfied with how their body looks
- 75.5% of young people wished they were thinner/leaner and 66.6% of young people wished they were more muscular.[2]

Online and media influence

We live in a world that sends us all sorts of messages about what the 'perfect' body looks like.

We are constantly receiving image-related messages from different sources, all from places like what we see online, advertisements, and film. television and media indicating what society views as 'beautiful', 'ideal', 'healthy' and 'attractive'. The reality is that these 'perfect' images to which too many aspire are typically digitally altered, using photoshop, various filters, angles, and lighting to look a certain way. They are not true or realistic images.

The increasing use of filters and edits to photos online also has a circular impact - 44% of young people report never or rarely posting unfiltered or unedited photos of themselves online.[1]

Influences from people around us

It is important to recognise that online spaces are the only thing driving young people to have an unrealistic idea of how bodies should look. 78.5% of young people have received negative comments or been teased about their appearance, of which 78.2% reported it happened at school and 37.4% reported it happening at home.[1]

It is not surprising then, that instead of embracing and celebrating diversity in all body types, we end up focusing on what can be dangerous and often physically unattainable perfection.

Body image disorders

Body image disorders are a group of mental health issues which are characterised by being excessively concerned with how one's body looks.[3]

Body image disorders can affect anyone. Though there are factors that may increase or contribute to an increased chance of having a body image disorder.

- Age - This can be in late childhood and adolescence (during puberty) but can also arise in their midlife too.
- Teasing and bullying related to bodies - people who have experienced teasing and bullying related to their bodies are at higher risk of experiencing body image disorders.
- Unhealthy role models - exposure to people promote unrealistic, unhealthy or untrue ideas of bodies contribute to developing poor body image.
- Pre-existing mental health concerns - people with anxiety, depression, or other mental health concerns are at risk of experiencing body image issues. [4]

Eating disorders

Eating disorders are a group of mental health issues which is characterised by a negative change in thoughts, feelings and behaviours towards eating. While, eating and body image disorders are often grouped together, and may present together; they are separate groups of mental health concerns.

A common misconception about eating disorders is that they stem from a desire to look more beautiful. In actual fact, an eating disorder is a serious and complex mental illness and there are several factors which may contribute to someone developing an eating disorder.

- Genetic influences - while not completely understood, there is strong evidence for genetics playing a factor in someone developing an eating disorder
- Mental health concerns - Illnesses such as obsessive-compulsive have been shown to link to eating disorders
- Personality traits - traits such as perfectionism, neuroticism and harm avoidance can impact someone developing an eating disorder
- Internalising strict ideas of beauty and attractiveness - Society constantly promotes specific bodies and looks as attractive. If someone internalises these ideas can contribute to someone developing an eating disorder.[5]

Body image and eating disorders are complex and a range of factors across someone's life can influence whether they develop a body image and/or eating disorder.

If you suspect that a student may have a body image or eating disorder, then it is important that you express your care and concern for the student, suggest that they seek help, and involve their family where possible and appropriate. Have a look at the Butterfly Foundation's Supporting a student with an eating disorder at school for more information about what to do.

Messages to share with young people to help build their self-esteem and body confidence

- During puberty, you will notice your body beginning to change, and perhaps become more aware of the way your body looks or how other's bodies look; this is completely normal. If you are feeling really worried about something in particular, don't be afraid to talk and ask questions about your concerns with someone you trust. This could be with your parents, teacher, school nurse or doctor.
- It is normal that some people might not always feel positive about their body shape and size, particularly when their body is going through a number of changes. It is normal to have days where you experience lower self-esteem or poorer body image, every now and then. If this happens regularly, speak to a trusted adult.
    - On days where you may be experiencing lower self-esteem, try to appreciate your body for what it can do, rather than how it appears. Acknowledge and celebrate your body for what it is able to do and its strength, rather than focusing on how it looks.
- Everyone's bodies are unique, and beautiful. There is no one correct way people should look to be beautiful or attractive.
- Comparing yourself to images you see, both in-person and online, can lead to feelings of being ashamed of your body. It's important to keep in mind that these images are likely to have been heavily edited. Highly stylised pictures of celebrities and models are an unrealistic representation of most people today.
- Social media and influencer accounts are often used as a 'highlight reel', showcasing the images with the best lighting, angles, clothes, and filters. The image that gets posted is often the most flattering of hundreds and does not reflect reality.
- When looking at images that focus on ways to alter your appearance (ads for weight loss programs, diets etc.), it's useful to think about what the image might be trying to sell, rather than picking apart your own appearance. Scroll through family photos and look at your family members at different ages and stages.

You may notice that you have similar body traits to other family members and you might like to talk to someone about your body and how it relates to other body types in your family.
- Have fun finding your own style. Search out the clothes that make you feel good and fit properly. Remember, clothes are designed to fit our bodies, our bodies are not made to squeeze into clothes! It can be useful to remember sizing changes from brand to brand, so try not to focus on the size on the tag, but instead how comfortable you feel and look.
- Fashion trends can come and go quickly. It's fun to experiment with clothes and makeup, but don't let it rule your life.
- Try to look at yourself in the mirror with an uncritical eye, as if you were your best (very supportive and loving!) friend.
- When the focus is only on external appearance, it is hard to embrace the many qualities that make a human being attractive. Think about the internal attributes you have that make you special. It could be your sense of humour or that you are a really good listener.
- Social media can be a wonderful source of empowerment and inspiration. However, sometimes it can also be a space that creates dislike and negative emotions towards ourselves and our bodies. It can be really useful to follow lots of different people and organizations who speak about things that are important to you and showcase bodies of different shapes and sizes.
- If someone you follow posts things that have you constantly comparing yourself and your body to others, or have you feeling badly, unfollow them.
- It is okay to look different to your friends and the people you see online. Try to acknowledge that every body is different, and diversity should be celebrated. Health, strength, and happiness looks different for everybody, so be sure to focus on what works best for you and your body.
- Ultimately, feeling good about yourself can only come from one place - inside.

Teaching tips

Schools have a role in providing a supportive, safe and body image-friendly environment.[6] Direct support for students about body image should be available, with a focus on building resilience towards negative body image messages, in a way that is appropriate for their age and gender.[7]

The National Eating Disorders Collaboration's *Eating Disorders in Schools - Prevention, Early Identification, Response and Recovery Support* suggest that schools should take a whole school approach to preventing eating disorders by:

- reviewing protocols, policy and guidelines
- upskilling staff on how to teach and support students
- link to curriculum
- communicate appropriately with students and families.[8]

Below is a summary of principles for education programs supporting positive body image[9].

Essential elements for teaching about body image

- Body image activities that meet the needs of all genders and a variety of cultural backgrounds.
- Activities that promote students' self-identity and self-esteem.
- Media literacy education that assists students in becoming more critical consumers of the media.
- Body image-friendly language that is used between teachers and students, and between students.
- Focus on teaching students about positive behaviours for maintaining good physical and mental health.
- Evidence-based programs that develop positive body image.
- Use of a whole school approach that includes students, teaching staff and parents.

Approaches NOT recommended for teaching about body image

- Using guest speakers, books, videos of those who have suffered/recovered from eating disorders.
- Using pictures of 'ideal' bodies without proper media literacy education as an introduction.
- Exploring body types using 'ectomorph', 'endomorph' and 'mesomorph'.
- Asking students to record food intake.
- Weighing students or calculating their BMI.

External resources

The Butterfly Foundation

The Butterfly Foundation represents all people affected by eating disorders and negative body image – a person with the illness, their family and their friends.

The truth about body image, Kids Helpline

Completely Gorgeous

A website and classroom resource for students and teachers from upper primary school to secondary school. It includes excerpts from the book Real Gorgeous by Kaz Cooke, an animated video, and games and learning activities relating to body image.

Professional Development, National Eating Disorders Collaboration

Lists programs and resources available to schools for the prevention, identification, early intervention, management or care of eating disorders.

Eating disorders information website for young people

Created by the NEDC for young people

Body image, Get the Facts

Stay Beautiful: Ugly Truth In Beauty Magazines, YouTube video

Social media can damage body image – here’s how to counteract it, The Conversation

Related learning activities:

- Body image
- Messages about body image

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