

# Promoting Positive Body Image in the Classroom

## KEY TERMS

### Body Image:

is how you think and feel about your body; what it looks like, what you believe about it, and how you feel about your body.

### Positive Body Image:

means feeling comfortable, confident, and happy about your body. A positive body image is developed by understanding that bodies come in a variety of weights, shapes, sizes, and abilities.

### Self-Esteem

is closely tied to body image. It refers to how worthy and confident a person feels. It also refers to the level of self-respect a person has for themselves.

A **positive body image** is linked to **positive self-esteem**, which means to value and respect ourselves, and to be confident in our personal abilities and proud of who we are.

Negative body image and self-esteem can have serious effects on health. Left unrecognized, negative thoughts and resulting behaviours can lead to poor mental health and conditions such as depression, stress, anxiety and eating disorders.

Body image and self-esteem begin to develop early in life and are influenced by many factors including: parents and caregivers, friends and peers, educators, social media and physical and social environments.

Individuals who have a positive body image and self-esteem are more resilient to the daily stresses and challenges that they may face in life.

## WHY SCHOOLS?

Schools play an important role in promoting positive body image and role modelling body respect. Words and actions about body shape or size can have unintended negative effects.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Comments about dieting, weight loss, or appearance (even in a complimentary way) can reinforce the idea that some bodies are better than others.

Formal and informal messages at school should promote body diversity and encourage positive body image. Body acceptance can be improved through learning opportunities for the enjoyment of physical activity and eating, combined with supportive social and physical environments.

Sensitivity regarding weight and shape and personal values regarding 'what is healthy' are important when considering instruction (Ontario Ministry of Education 2019). Given, that youth are vulnerable to development of disordered eating and body image issues discussing weight and dieting in the classroom can be harmful. Early adolescence brings changes in body composition such as natural increases in body weight and fat. This should be acknowledged as a normal part of development.

**In 2023, approximately 56% of Ontario youth in grades 7-12 reported being preoccupied with their weight or body shape which are known precursors to disordered eating (Boak and Hamilton, 2024).**

### What Can Educators Do?

- Help students build confidence without focusing on appearance. Several factors contribute to students feeling good about themselves including intellectual abilities, physical abilities, social skills, interests, and body image. Helping students increase confidence in their unique talents and abilities reduces the emphasis they place on physical appearance.
- Instead of focusing on certain body types (e.g. endomorphs, ectomorphs, apple, pear, etc.), teach students that both height and weight are the result of the interaction of genetics. Like eye, hair, and skin colour, body weight and shape are largely determined by our genes. When teaching about genetics and heredity, emphasize that all people are unique individuals.
- Be kind to yourself and others. Remember that body positivity is a journey, and we are all at different stages in our journey. What was taught in the past was consistent with evidence-based guidelines at that time. Now the evidence shows that we need to recognize the ways in which diet culture impacts teaching and role model body inclusivity in the classroom.

# Ways to Support Health & Educational Outcomes with a Food and Weight Neutral Lens

## School & Physical Environments

- Schedule adequate time for eating (minimum 20 minutes) as per school meal and snack program recommendations (Student Nutrition Program Guidelines).
- Create safe environments during mealtimes without comments about food choices or what is eaten.
- Talk about all foods neutrally (e.g. no good or bad foods). Practice describing foods based on their colour, shape, smell, flavour, and texture rather than perceived nutritional value.
- Use body diverse visuals in the classroom (resources, handouts, posters).
- Remove scales.
- Avoid comments about dieting, weight or body shape for yourself and others.
- Create a school culture where students and adults of all body shapes and sizes, genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientation have a safe, inclusive space and feel connected to their school.
- Ensure desks and chairs fit all bodies.

## Student Engagement

- Use student food-preference surveys to help determine what foods to offer and/or sell at the school.
- Provide hands-on opportunities to grow, prepare and/or enjoy food together.
- Provide leadership opportunities for students to be involved in the development, organization, and implementation of school-based activities (e.g. organize and run a student-led tuck shop).
- Create engaging learning experiences that promote collaboration, innovation, and creativity (e.g. develop and maintain a school garden).
- Get input from students on activities and topics of interest.



## Curriculum, Teaching & Learning

- Encourage exploring foods, where they come from and ways they are enjoyed, opposed to categorization of foods.
- Ensure lesson plans and student assignments do not include food logs, calorie counting and weighing of students.
- Teach media literacy and support students to think critically about diet culture messages (e.g. “good” foods and “bad” foods).
- Encourage critical thinking skills around social media related to weight/body shape.
- Normalize increases in weight, body fat and appetite during growth and puberty.
- Frame physical activity as a way to promote well-being in addition to a fun and social activity, not to control weight or shape.
- Teach children that healthy bodies come in many shapes and sizes. All bodies are good bodies and deserve to be treated with respect.
- Do not take away gym or recess as a form of punishment. Movement is an essential part of living, not a reward.
- When teaching about health, disconnect weight from health. Instead focus on adequate sleep, physical activity, self-compassion, self-regulation, and mindful eating.
- Support diverse exposure to types of physical activity (i.e., dancing, hiking, yoga, intra-murals, recess, class sports).

## School & Classroom Leadership

- Choose non-food rewards and incentives for students.
- Respect parents’ roles in food selection.
- Learn more about food literacy and its influence on eating patterns.
- Understand and communicate meal supervision roles to the whole school community through social media, school handbook and school policies.
- Support professional development opportunities for educators and staff to explore and reconsider their own definitions of health and well-being from a weight-neutral perspective.
- Weight based teasing or bullying is the most common form of bullying in schools. Follow your board’s anti-bullying policies if you witness or are told about weight based comments or bullying.

## Home, School & Community Partnerships

- Recognize that some messaging in Canada’s Food Guide may not reflect the food at home.
- Partner with professionals in the community that are weight-inclusive and/or trauma informed (e.g. public health staff, registered dietitians, mental health organizations).
- School Mental Health Ontario provides a decision support tool to help educators determine the suitability of an invited speaker or program. Checklist for Educators for the Planning of Student Mental Health-Related Activities.

# Resources for Educators

## Brightbites.ca

is a website for the school community that provides evidence-based information and resources about food, eating and bodies. It also provides an interpretation of the curriculum for each grade level, using a food neutral and body inclusive approach to help educators with activities/lesson plans that align with food neutral language based on grade.

## Media Smarts (K - 12)

Canada's Centre for Digital and Media Literacy. Includes literacy programs, resources, and lesson plans with the purpose of encouraging children and youth to develop critical thinking skills when engaging with various forms of media.

## Sunny Side Up Nutrition

Provides information on making school activities free of diet talk and body positive.

## Body Sense

an interactive e-learning course developed by the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport and the True Sport Foundation. This course is dedicated to fostering positive body image in adolescent male and female athletes to proactively prevent disordered eating and muscle dysmorphia.



# Examples of Curriculum Activities by Grade Level

Grade	Activity Examples (Healthy Living Curriculum)
<b>2</b> ■ D1.5	<p>Demonstrate the ability to identify and appreciate aspects of how their bodies work and describe what they can do to ensure that they will continue to appreciate their bodies as they grow and change.</p> <p><b>Be Yourself (JK–4):</b> This program consists of a puppet show, presented in video format. Topics include: Bullying, body-based harassment, and nutrition. Contact <a href="#">Bulimia Anorexia Nervosa Association (BANA)</a> to arrange free presentations for your students.</p>
<b>3</b> ■ D1.5	<p>Identify factors (e.g. sleep, food, physical activity, heredity, environment, support from a caring adult, sense of belonging, peer influence) that affect physical development (e.g. of hair, skin, teeth, body size and shape), social-emotional development (e.g., of self-awareness, adaptive skills and social skills) and the development of a healthy body image (e.g., of the ability to enjoy, respect and celebrate one’s body, to acknowledge one’s thoughts and feelings about it, to accept its shape and size and to focus instead on what it can do).</p> <p><b>Be Yourself (JK–4):</b> This program consists of a puppet show, presented in video format. Topics include: Bullying, body-based harassment, and nutrition. Contact <a href="#">Bulimia Anorexia Nervosa Association (BANA)</a> to arrange free presentations for your students.</p>
<b>5</b> ■ D3.1	<p>Describe how advertising, food marketing, and media affect food choices (e.g. TV commercials, product packaging, celebrity endorsements, social media postings, product placements in movies and businesses, idealized and unrealistic body images in movies and programs, magazine articles promoting fad diets, loyalty programs), and explain how these influences can be evaluated to help people make healthier choices (e.g., by critically examining the reasons for celebrity endorsements or public personas or the plausibility of product claims, checking whether there is information in an advertisement to verify its claims, asking for information about product ingredients and nutrients, critically examining the reality and healthiness of idealized body images in the media).</p> <p><b>Amazing Me (Grades 4-5):</b> Addresses media literacy, various aspects of bullying and body confidence.</p> <p><b>Beyond Images (Grades 4-8):</b> Free on-line lesson plans from NEDIC on media literacy and include activities that make a positive difference in combating appearance-based bullying and negative stereotypes.</p> <p><b>Dove Confident Me (Grades 5 – 8):</b> Designed to empower students to feel confident and reach their full potential.</p> <p><b>Self Esteem and Body Image (Grades 5 – 8):</b> Students learn about the concepts of self-esteem and body image, while examining the factors that influence self-esteem such as the media/social media and societal pressures. Contact <a href="#">Bulimia Anorexia Nervosa Association (BANA)</a> to arrange a free presentation.</p>

## Grade

## Activity Examples

# 6

■ D3.1

Explain how healthy eating and active living work together to improve a person's overall physical and mental health and well-being (e.g. both provide more energy and contribute to improved self-concept and body image, greater resistance to disease and better overall health)

**Beyond Images (Grades 4-8):** Free on-line lesson plans from NEDIC on media literacy and include activities that make a positive difference in combating appearance-based bullying and negative stereotypes.

**Dove Confident Me (Grades 5-8):** Designed to empower students to feel confident and reach their full potential.

**Self Esteem and Body Image (Grades 5 – 8):** During this presentation students will learn about the concepts of self-esteem and body image, while examining the factors which can influence our self-esteem such as the media/social media and societal pressures. Contact Bulimia Anorexia Nervosa Association (BANA) to arrange a free presentation.

# 7

■

# 8

■ D2.3

Explain how preoccupation with body image or athletic performance can contribute to harmful or problematic eating habits and substance use. Students demonstrate that ability to make informed choices about caring for their bodies.

**Beyond Images (Grades 4-8):** Free on-line lesson plans from NEDIC on media literacy and include activities that make a positive difference in combating appearance-based bullying and negative stereotypes.

**Dove Confident Me (Grades 5-8):** Designed to empower students to feel confident and reach their full potential.

**Self Esteem and Body Image (Grades 5-8):** During this presentation students will learn about the concepts of self-esteem and body image, while examining the factors which can influence our self-esteem such as the media/social media and societal pressures. Contact Bulimia Anorexia Nervosa Association (BANA) to arrange a free presentation.



# 6

Adapted with permission from Northwestern Health Unit and Embody

 Chatham-Kent  
Public Health

 Lambton  
Public Health