

Preventing body dissatisfaction and  
unhealthy eating patterns in children:  
Strategies for parents of preschoolers



**PARENTING STRATEGIES:**  
Preventing body image and eating problems



confident body  
confident child

## Purpose of these Guidelines

These guidelines describe strategies that parents can use to prevent or reduce the risk that their child will develop unhealthy body image or eating patterns. They are designed to help parents create a positive family environment in which their young children can develop body confidence and a relaxed, healthy relationship with food.

## Development of these Guidelines

These guidelines were developed using the Delphi expert method, meaning they are based on the expert opinions of a panel of mental health clinicians, researchers and educators from Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the USA and Canada. The experts were asked to rate which parenting strategies were essential or important for parents to prevent eating and body image problems in young children. Details of the methodology can be found in: Hart LM, Damiano SR, Chittleborough P, Paxton SJ & Jorm AF. 'Parenting to prevent body dissatisfaction and unhealthy eating patterns in preschool children: A Delphi consensus study.' (in submission).

## How to use these Guidelines

These guidelines aim to be helpful for most parents most of the time. **In this document, the word 'parent' includes any significant care-giver, such as biological parents, step-parents, grandparents or legal guardians. The information given is designed for parents of girls or boys aged roughly between two and six years.** All of the information is relevant for mothers, fathers and other family members, such as grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts or uncles.

Each family is unique, so you may need to adapt these strategies to your situation and the specific needs of your child. Keep in mind your child's individual age, body size, eating habits and appearance concerns when using these strategies, as they may not be appropriate for every parent and child. If a child is living with separated parents it is important that the parents are consistent in their messages about eating, weight and shape. These guidelines are also designed to be suitable for parents in developed English-speaking countries. They may not be suitable for other cultural groups or for countries with different family systems.

Although these guidelines are copyright, they can be freely reproduced for non-profit purposes provided the source is acknowledged. Please cite these guidelines as follows:

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# What is this all about?

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## What do we mean by body dissatisfaction?

**A person's body image is how she or he thinks and feels about their body. It is not just about how they look.** A person's body image can be positive, negative or neutral. Having a positive body image means accepting your body and feeling mostly satisfied with your appearance. Having a negative body image means being dissatisfied with or disliking your body. This is also known as 'body dissatisfaction', and can lead to feelings of shame and depression or missing out on fun activities. Despite how they might appear on the outside, anyone can have either a positive or negative body image or a little bit of both.

In these guidelines, we use the term **healthy body image** to refer to positive thoughts and feelings about the body and appearance, which encourage healthy eating behaviours, fun physical activity, paying attention to the body, taking care of yourself, good self-esteem and body confidence.



In this document, the word 'parent' includes any significant care-giver, such as biological parents, step-parents, grandparents or legal guardians.

## What do we mean by unhealthy eating patterns?

Most people think of eating patterns as the where, what and how of eating. Our eating patterns include meal timing, frequency and environment (e.g., family, school, restaurant or take-away), as well as portion sizes and diet quality (e.g., intake of fruit, vegetable and energy density). In addition to this, eating patterns also include the why of eating; that is the way our attitudes to food and eating influence where, what and how we eat.

We use the term unhealthy eating patterns to refer to negative eating behaviours and attitudes in children that have been associated with poor health outcomes. These include, emotional eating to soothe negative emotions, disordered eating such as binge eating or dieting for weight loss, and negative attitudes to food such as fear of fatty or 'unhealthy foods'. Unhealthy eating patterns can also include clinical eating disorders (e.g., anorexia or bulimia nervosa), though these are rare in children. Despite children being influenced by a range of external factors, parents can play an important role in preventing a range of unhealthy eating patterns, including eating disorders in their child. They can do this by encouraging their child to develop a healthy body image and healthy eating patterns.

Parents often worry about 'fussy eating' in children, when they find it difficult to get children to eat enough fruit and vegetables, or to eat family meals prepared for them. The eating patterns we are focussing on are not about fussy eating, but are more about when food is used to calm or soothe emotions, such as eating too much when feeling unhappy, or eating too little because of fear of weight gain.

In these guidelines we use the term 'healthy eating' to refer to the nutritional components of our diet (i.e., following the healthy food plate or pyramid, or eating two serves of fruit and five serves of vegetables per day), but also to refer to the attitudes towards food that allow a balanced, relaxed relationship with food and eating.

# Body image

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## What influences body image in children

The development of a child's body image is shaped by a number of factors, including culture, comments and feedback from others. Children are often exposed to messages that suggest changing your appearance can solve many of life's problems. This may lead to a child feeling unhappy about their body and wanting to change it. These messages can come from media, friends or family. Parents should be aware that their conversations and feelings about their own appearance, weight, body shape and dieting, may influence their child's feelings about these things.

Both fathers and mothers play an important role in a child's development of healthy body image and eating patterns. **Although body image is often thought of as a 'girl's problem', boys can also experience body dissatisfaction, and fathers play an important role in a child's development of healthy body image.**

## Why body image is important

Although there is a lot of concern in the community about the unhealthy effects of being overweight, research tells us that the more parents encourage their child to worry about weight, or to lose weight, the more body dissatisfaction their child is likely to experience, and the more likely they are to experience problems with eating and weight in the long run. We know that if a child is overweight, placing pressure on them to be thin will actually increase the risk of unhealthy weight control behaviours, disordered eating and eating disorders.

Importantly, encouraging children to feel positive about their bodies also encourages them to be healthy and confident. **Helping a child who is over their most healthy weight to have a positive body image does not mean encouraging them to be unhealthy, or to continue to gain weight.** In fact, positive body image is more likely to lead to healthy lifestyle behaviours, such as eating a healthy diet, engaging in regular physical activity and taking care of health. We also know that positive body image makes children less likely to experience symptoms of depression and eating disorders. That's why we like to call it a 'healthy' body image.

Having a healthy body image is good for children (and parents too), no matter what their weight, shape, size or appearance.

## How to encourage healthy body image

There are many ways in which parents can help shape their child's developing body image. Children can learn from parents either by watching and listening to what parents say, or by being told or encouraged to behave in a certain way. It is therefore important that parents are not only careful about what they say directly to their children, but also what they say and how they behave when their children are around.

**To be good role models, parents need to examine their own attitudes and beliefs about body image, weight and shape and how these may influence their child.** Rather than talking about weight and appearance, for example, it is helpful if parents focus on health and personal strengths. Parents can do this by **promoting the importance of a fit and healthy body, rather than a thin or ideal body.**

Regardless of the child's weight, size or body shape, it is also important that parents accept their child as they are and allow their child to talk about how they feel about their body and listen to what they say. If a child appears to be approaching puberty, discussing the changes that will happen to the child's body and emphasising that these are natural and occur in all boys/girls is a helpful way for parents to support their child through this important time.

## Body image continued

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Other strategies for encouraging healthy body image include valuing qualities not related to appearance, valuing differences in appearance, being careful about comparisons with others, being a good role model, discouraging teasing or bullying and counteracting negative media messages.

### *Value qualities not related to appearance*

By encouraging their children to develop values that link personal worth to qualities such as loyalty and care for others, parents send the message that children are loved for who they are, rather than what they look like. Parents can do this by:

Encouraging their child to:

- Value their positive qualities that are not related to appearance (e.g., kindness, stamina, interest in music, patience).
- Appreciate the child's strengths and skills.
- Believe that all people have talents, goals and values, and should not be defined by their body shape or size.
- Understand that, regardless of a person's body shape or size, everyone deserves to be treated with respect.
- Be aware of the negative impact that prejudice (e.g., about appearance or weight) has on people.

Discouraging their child from:

- Thinking that a particular diet or body size will lead to happiness and fulfilment.
- Equating self-worth with physical appearance.
- Believing that they will be more likeable if they lose weight or eat less.

### *Value difference in appearance*

Children are often exposed to messages, through cartoons, advertising, children's movies and stories, their parents and friends that suggest you are more likely to be happy, successful or loved if you are slim or muscular, feminine or strong, beautiful or handsome. By encouraging children to value diversity in appearance, parents send the message that people can be successful and lovable in all different shapes and sizes.

Parents can do this by:

- Helping their child to understand that there is not one 'ideal' body shape for men or women by suggesting that different body shapes and sizes have beauty and value.
- Showing an acceptance of different body shapes and sizes by pointing out that diversity in humans is natural and healthy.
- Not being critical of others' appearance and by making negative comments about weight unacceptable in their home.
- Providing positive messages about weight and shape acceptance throughout the child's life, rather than waiting until adolescence.
- Helping their child develop assertiveness skills to resist peer pressure to conform to norms about appearance.

...frequently comparing your body to others around you can also make you feel second best or unattractive.

### *Be careful of comparisons with others*

Most people understand that when we compare ourselves to images in magazines that show beautiful models or attractive actors, with lots of makeup, lighting, cosmetic surgery and air brushing, we often end up feeling a bit inadequate or dissatisfied with our body. But research also shows that **frequently comparing your body to others around you can also make you feel second best or unattractive.** This is true for children too. We know that children may be at risk of greater body dissatisfaction if they frequently compare their body to those of others.

Parents can help their child by discussing how comparing their body to others can make them feel bad about their own body. Coming up with ways a child can deal with 'fat talk' (where friends put their own body down), dieting ideas and body comparisons amongst their friends, can also help.

## Body image continued

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If a parent becomes aware that their child is making body comparisons, they can remind their child that this not a healthy thing to do because every body is different, each has different strengths and weaknesses.

### *Be a good role model*

What children hear about appearance, weight, body shape and dieting, may influence their feelings about these things. It is therefore important that parents try to avoid saying and doing things that might lead to body dissatisfaction. Parents can avoid:

- Endorsing a preference for thinness in front of their child.
- Criticising their child for being concerned about their appearance.
- Criticising their own appearance, body weight and shape (e.g., 'I'm so fat'), as this may encourage their child to be critical of their own appearance.
- Encouraging their child to believe that losing weight will lead to improved self-esteem and self-confidence.
- Getting involved in 'fat talk'.
- Making negative comments or criticisms about others' appearance in front of children, even if parents think they are not listening.

Also, as it is developmentally inappropriate for children at this age to be thinking about what is attractive (sexually or romantically), parents should avoid talking about 'attractiveness' with their child (e.g. avoid suggesting to a girl she will look prettier to boys if she wears a dress, or avoid suggesting to a boy that girls will like them more if they have big muscles).

In childhood and adolescence, children go through developmental periods where they become concerned about how they appear and fit in with others. Although parents should avoid sending the message that appearance is really important, parents should also avoid criticising their child for being concerned about their appearance.

### *Discourage teasing or bullying*

Appearance-based teasing can be particularly hurtful to children and may affect their self-esteem. It is really important that parents:

- Never criticise or tease their child about their appearance.
- Not allow anyone in the family to tease others about appearance.
- Try to ensure there are good policies at their child's school or centre on appearance-based teasing or bullying.
- Help their child to deal with any teasing about appearance, for example, by discussing strategies for overcoming teasing with the child's educator or carer.
- Speak to adults in the child's life, about the importance of promoting healthy attitudes towards eating and the body in children, if they are concerned about the negative impact the language or behaviour of that adult is having on their child (e.g., teachers, scout leaders etc.).

It is best to always address and discourage appearance-based teasing, even if it appears to be minor and harmless. Although parents often don't have control over their child being teased in social settings, they can help their child develop resilience and strategies for responding to it.

One strategy is to talk with the child about the negative impact teasing can have on others, early in the child's life, before the child is likely to experience or engage in it, and to discuss who the child could speak to for support if they need it. Parents should also talk with their child about the negative impact teasing can have on others, when it becomes an issue, for example when the child is experiencing or engaging in it. For more strategies on helping young children to understand and overcome bullying, see the Resources section at the end of this guideline.

## Body image continued

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### *Counteract negative media messages*

Although children's body image is affected by many things, media is particularly powerful.

Research suggests that if children view media that promotes thinness or muscularity, this can lead to greater body dissatisfaction.

However, there are things that parents can do to counteract negative media messages. These include:

- Minimising the availability of print media (e.g., magazines, newspapers, books) in the home, which promote the ideals of beauty, thinness or muscularity.
- Teaching their child that images in magazines are computer-modified.
- Encouraging children to look at age-appropriate media that have healthy weight and shape messages.
- Monitor what media their child is watching.
- If their child is using the internet, monitoring their use to ensure they are accessing appropriate material.
- Talking about personal qualities that are more important to you than appearance.



# Healthy eating patterns

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When we hear the term 'healthy eating' most of us think of the food pyramid or fruit and vegetables. We understand that it is important to eat a balanced, variety of nutritious foods, and to limit those that are less nutritious. **But healthy eating also includes the way we eat and how we feel about food and meal times.** While it is important for parents to be aware of what constitutes nutritious food and drink, and to encourage their child to eat two serves of fruit, five serves of vegetables and nutritious snacks each day, it is also important for parents to understand how they can encourage their child to develop healthy eating patterns and a healthy attitude to food.

As a child's food preferences are established early in life, and influenced by the food made available to them, parents should try to continually introduce new flavours and textures of nutritious foods to young children. Children have different eating habits from adults, for example they often need to eat more frequently, and their nutritional needs will change over time, especially when they go through a growth spurt, have been ill or are very active. So it is important to be flexible and responsive to your child's needs.

For more information on what types of foods, serves and recipes are considered healthy for your family, please see the Resources section at the end of this guideline.

## How to encourage healthy eating patterns

Sometimes getting children to eat healthy is hard. Children are more likely to have healthy eating patterns if the whole family is involved. Here are some tips parents can use:

- Be good role models by consuming a balanced variety and amount of nutritious foods and drinks.
- Make nutritious food options readily available at home.
- Involve children in planning and preparing nutritious meals.
- Encourage children to pick a new fruit or vegetable to try.

- Encourage breakfast every day by providing nutritious breakfast options, as children who eat breakfast tend to have healthy eating patterns.
- Set a good example and eat breakfast every day too.
- Do not talk about foods as 'good/bad', 'sinful/cleansing', 'junk food/healthy'.

Other strategies for encouraging healthy eating patterns include having family meal times, teaching children about healthy eating patterns and encouraging children to listen to their body's signals of hunger and fullness.

## Have family meals

Family meal times are when people in the household sit down to share a meal together. Not everyone needs to be there, especially if one parent is often at work or cannot eat at home. Sometimes family meals might also involve extended family or friends. Dinner is most often the main family meal time, but it can be at other times, such as breakfast or weekend lunch. Given how important they are, if there are obstacles to having family meals, parents should encourage the family to work together to overcome these.

Family meals provide a great opportunity to develop healthy eating patterns. Other benefits include:

- Providing opportunities to talk as a family.
- Creating time for family bonding.
- Building parental support for the child during difficult times.
- Better emotional and physical wellbeing in children who experience regular family meals.

Some things parents can do during family meals include:

- Gently encouraging children to try new foods.
- Role modelling enjoyment of a balanced diet.
- Presenting a relaxed attitude to meal times.
- Making meal times pleasant by focussing on conversation and connecting with their child rather than only on what or how much their child is eating.
- Limiting distractions during family meals by turning off phones, computers and TV screens.

## Healthy eating patterns continued

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### *Teach children about healthy eating patterns*

Healthy eating is not all about apples and broccoli. It is also about our behaviours and emotions. Research suggests that parents should teach their child about healthy eating patterns, rather than focussing on 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' foods. This means parents can try to:

- Avoid labelling foods as 'good' and 'bad', as this may lead children to desire 'sometimes' foods more and feel guilty when they are eaten.
- Explain to young children the difference between 'every day' foods and 'sometimes' foods.
- Understand that 'sometimes' foods are part of a healthy, varied, balanced diet if they are eaten on some occasions and in small amounts.
- Allow children to eat 'sometimes' foods in moderation, as banning these foods may lead their child to over-eat them when available.
- Model eating 'sometimes' foods in moderation, without talking about being 'bad' or feeling guilty.

'Every day' foods are grains, vegetables and fruits, lean meats and dairy. 'Sometimes' foods are highly processed or contain lots of salt, fat, or sugar, such as take-away meals, cakes, sweets and crisps.

Healthy eating can even include indulging on special occasions, such as Christmas, and a child should not be made to feel guilty or ashamed when this occurs. Allowing children to develop a relaxed yet balanced attitude towards 'sometimes' foods is a very important part of establishing healthy eating patterns.

### *Encourage children to listen to their body*

Children are born with the ability to gauge their body's need for food, but over time they can learn to ignore these signals, which may contribute to

weight gain. When considering how much their child should eat, it is important that parents encourage their child to eat when they are hungry and stop when they are full, rather than counting calories or measuring portion sizes. Parents can help their child to eat the right amount for them by:

Trying to:

- Encourage their child to listen to their body.
- Trust their child to eat when they are hungry and stop when they are full.
- Create a non-distracting eating environment for the child by having meals with the TV turned off.

Avoiding:

- Being controlling or permissive about their child's eating as this can contribute to weight problems and disordered eating.
- Encouraging or forcing a child to eat all the food on their plate, as this may teach them to override their feelings of fullness.
- Rushing through meals without allowing the child the opportunity to feel full.
- Using food as a bribe or reward as the child may learn to eat for reasons other than hunger.
- Pressuring their child to eat or overeat.

Sometimes children may report feeling hungry, when in fact they are feeling some kind of emotion (e.g., boredom, loneliness). For parents, it is important to encourage their child to listen to their body's signals of hunger, thirst and being satisfied or full, rather than feelings or emotions. This also means that parents should avoid using food to soothe a child when they are upset, or to encourage them to behave in a certain way. In addition, helping a child to express and manage emotions will not only protect against eating issues, but also against the development of a range of mental health problems, including body image problems.

# Healthy body weight

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What a healthy weight is for one person might be very different for another. **You cannot judge a person's state of health from their body shape or size.** For example, some skinny people have very poor diets and can experience heart problems, while some large people can engage in regular physical activity and be healthy and fit. So, when encouraging children to be healthy, it is really important for parents to focus on healthy behaviours, such as balanced eating, few sweetened drinks, regular physical activity and minimal screen time (e.g., TV, computer or electronic games), rather than on weight and dieting.

A healthy body is one that, whatever shape, size, or weight, is in a state of wellbeing, has enough energy, strength and stamina to be active, allows a person to achieve his or her goals and participate in life. A healthy body is not merely the absence of illness or injury. Healthy bodies come in a variety of weights, shapes and sizes, and this is true for children and for adults.

## How to encourage healthy body weight

To be healthy, all children need healthy eating patterns and regular physical activity, not just children who are overweight. It is also important for all parents to minimise their child's screen time, because screen time is associated with a range of unhealthy outcomes in children.

Although adults often try to lose weight and be healthy by going on a diet, dieting is never healthy for children. For both adults and children, **the negative consequences of extreme weight loss**

**behaviours, such as dieting for weight loss (i.e., limiting what you eat to only some food groups or types of foods), include: binge eating, eating disorders and nutrient deficiencies.** For children in particular, these consequences can have lifelong impacts on health and development. Parents should never put their child on a weight loss diet and instead encourage a healthy balanced diet and regular physical activity.

## Discourage dieting

Parents should discourage their child from dieting as a way of losing weight and also from believing that losing weight will lead to improved self-esteem and self-confidence. Some tips to help parents do this include:

- Be a good role model and replace any extreme eating and exercise habits with moderate ones.
- Avoid dieting and talking about dieting, calories, weight and appearance, as this may encourage similar behaviours in children.
- If they are concerned about the negative impact the language or behaviour of an important adult is having on their child (e.g., grandparents, sporting coaches), parents can speak to that adult about the importance of promoting healthy attitudes towards eating and body image in children.



# Physical activity

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Children are naturally very physically active and parents can help develop lasting fitness habits in their child by encouraging this activity. Physical activity is important in developing health and fitness, but also positive attitudes towards the body and healthy body image, confidence, self-esteem and healthy eating patterns.

## How to encourage regular physical activity

It is important for parents to provide their child with plenty of opportunity to be active, for example, by providing equipment, taking them to playgrounds or other places of physical activity. But it also doesn't have to be complicated. Parents can make being active a fun part of the family's daily routine (e.g., by walking to the shops instead of driving, or playing in the park instead of watching TV). Just like introducing young children to healthy eating patterns is important, engaging children early in life in regular family physical activity is also important, so that children regard it as a normal everyday routine.

There are many ways parents can encourage their child to be physically active. These include:

- Exposing children to a variety of physical activities.
- Trying physical activities that are suited to the child's age, interests and abilities, and are fun for the child.
- Finding physical activities that the child feels comfortable with (e.g., consider the type of activity, place and coach).
- Looking for physical activities that provide encouragement and praise for children as they improve their skills.
- Encouraging their child to engage in free play by letting the child choose the physical activity, within a safe environment.
- Encouraging their child to spend time each day engaging in unstructured free play activities.
- Helping their child replace sedentary time (e.g., watching TV, on the computer), with physically active time.
- Actively trying to create a healthy lifestyle for their family by identifying and working to overcome barriers that prevent them and their child from being physically active.

Physical activity is really important for all children, no matter what their shape or size, so parents should not wait until their child is at an unhealthy weight to start physical activity with their child. Other strategies for encouraging physical activity include making it about fun, being a good role model and getting involved in structured sport.

...parents should avoid suggesting physical activity be used to become thinner or more muscular. Instead, physical activity should be encouraged in children because it is fun...

## *Make it about fun*

The best motivator for physical activity is making it fun. Although physical activity can help a child improve body image and maintain a healthy weight, parents should try not to promote physical activity as a means of losing weight. For example, **parents should avoid suggesting physical activity be used to become thinner or more muscular. Instead, physical activity should be encouraged in children because it is fun**, associated with setting and achieving goals, and part of a healthy, active lifestyle.

## *Be a good role model*

It is better for parents to model enjoyment of regular physical activity, than to discuss its benefits with their child. Simply telling a child to 'go out and play' because it is healthy, or to 'go for a run', is unlikely to be helpful. Instead, parents can be good role models by engaging in regular physical activity that they enjoy.

While role modelling physical activity, it is important not to send the message that you as a parent enjoy 'going to the gym' or 'for a run' because it makes you look a certain way or helps you to lose weight.

## Physical activity continued

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Instead, you could focus on the other benefits, such as making you feel healthy and confident. Perhaps **the best approach though, is to find activities that you enjoy doing as a family**, which emphasise your time spent together and the skills you enjoy, rather than the reasons why you are being active.

### *Get involved in structured sporting activities*

Structured sports can be a lot of fun for children, even in the preschool years. However, parents need to be careful not to push their child to achieve before they are ready. Some children may find that competitive environments discourage their enjoyment of physical activity. Some tips for parents around encouraging structured sports include:

- Remind children that sport should be fun, even when it is competitive.

- Talk about how to handle setbacks or disappointments when playing sport.
- If a child is not enjoying a sport, try something different.
- If discussing a change of activity with their child, parents should try to do so without suggesting the child has failed.

A child's coach or sporting instructors can influence the development of children's attitudes to appearance, weight and shape. If parents believe that the language or behaviour of an important adult, such as a coach, is having a negative impact on their child's body image or eating patterns, parents should try to talk to that adult about the importance of promoting healthy attitudes towards eating and the body in children, even in the sport setting.



# Helping your child to be who they are

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Helping your child to develop a healthy thinking style and healthy relationships is just as important as helping them to develop healthy body image and healthy attitudes to food and weight. Children learn relationship skills by observing how their parents resolve relationship problems, so as always, being a good role model is important. Other strategies for helping children include:

- Not placing unrealistic expectations or perfectionistic ideals on the child's behaviour or achievements.
- Allowing greater levels of autonomy as the child develops.
- Helping the child to follow their own values rather than popular ideas.

## Help children cope with negative emotions

Part of developing a healthy thinking style is learning how to cope with adversity and to manage difficult emotions. Food and emotions are strongly linked in our society. We often use food to celebrate and to commiserate. While this is not a problem when it is done on special occasions, teaching a child to cope with difficult emotions or situations in life, by using food, can lead to problems with body image, eating and weight. To avoid this, parents can:

- Encourage their child to communicate their feelings.
- Let their child know that it is OK to express negative emotions such as anger, frustration and sadness.
- Teach their child coping skills to manage stress (such as mindful breathing, reading stories or quiet time) so that they do not use food or dieting as a way of coping.
- Encourage their child to communicate their feelings in constructive ways, such as doing a drawing.
- Help their child develop strategies for coping with, and responding to, negative comments from others.
- Not use food to calm or soothe the child.
- Role model effective strategies for coping with difficult emotions or stressful situations.

While all these are great strategies for parents, it is also important to note that sometimes just listening and being supportive is more important than trying to fix a child's problems.

## Think about gender

Gender stereotypes, such as women are emotional and men are rational, or women are better suited to caring roles and men better suited to management, can be limiting for children and families who do not fit these moulds. When talking about bodies and appearance, coping strategies and emotions, it can be helpful for parents to think about the language they use and how this language might apply particularly to girls or women, or particularly to boys or men. For both parents it is important to:

- Help children to expand their definition of masculinity to include nurturing and caring.
- Help children to expand their definition of femininity beyond beauty, appearance and caring, to include intelligence, strength and leadership.
- Help children develop assertiveness skills to resist peer pressure to conform to norms about appearance.
- Do whatever they can to help their children to feel good about themselves in all spheres of their life (e.g., intellectual, social).
- Strive to give opportunities and encouragement to children to engage in a range of tasks and activities that cut across traditional gender roles.

Although body image and eating problems are often thought of as a 'girl's problem', boys can be affected by them and fathers can play an important role in protecting against them. For fathers in particular, it is important not to react negatively if their son is not interested in traditional male activities, but should support his choices and achievements. In addition, modelling qualities such as patience, compassion, and listening skills to their sons, helps to dispel the idea that these are only for women, and to develop their son's relationship skills. For mothers, it is also important to encourage their daughters to engage in activities that they enjoy and give them confidence, even if these are not traditionally female roles.

## The last word

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Developing a healthy body image and healthy eating patterns are really important for preschool children. For parents, being good role models is more important than talking about these things. Getting the whole family involved in having a relaxed attitude to food, listening to the body's signals of hunger and fullness, eating a balanced diet, expressing positive feelings about the body and doing fun physical activity, are just some of the ways parents can create a positive environment for their developing child.

But it is not all about food and the body. Helping a child to express and manage emotions will protect against the development of a range of mental health problems, including body image and eating issues. Coming up with strategies together to respond to teasing or negative comments can also build confidence and resilience.

Despite all of this, and despite the important role of parents, children are influenced by many different things. Sometimes children will have problems with their eating or body image, even with great parenting. If changes in a child's body image, emotions or behaviour become a problem (e.g., the child is skipping meals, exercising excessively, or experiencing negative moods), parents should discuss these with their child and seek professional help if necessary.

For more information about how to talk to your child or someone else you are concerned about, see the guidelines on [mental health first aid for eating disorders](#), available by clicking on the MHFA Australia link in the Resources section.

It is important to remember that when picked up early, body image and unhealthy eating patterns can be effectively treated and fully recovered from.



# Resources

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## *Australia*

Nutrition guidelines: [www.eatforhealth.gov.au/guidelines/australian-guide-healthy-eating](http://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/guidelines/australian-guide-healthy-eating)

Tips for healthy eating: [www.daa.asn.au/for-the-public/smart-eating-for-you/](http://www.daa.asn.au/for-the-public/smart-eating-for-you/)

Mental Health First Aid: [www.mhfa.com.au/cms/guidelines](http://www.mhfa.com.au/cms/guidelines)

Anti-Bullying: [www.takeastandtogether.gov.au/under8/index.html](http://www.takeastandtogether.gov.au/under8/index.html)

National Eating Disorders Collaboration: [www.nedc.com.au/treatment-and-recovery](http://www.nedc.com.au/treatment-and-recovery)

## *Canada*

Nutrition guidelines: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php)

Tips for healthy eating: [www.healthycanadians.gc.ca/kids-enfants/food-aliment/tips-conseils-eng.php](http://www.healthycanadians.gc.ca/kids-enfants/food-aliment/tips-conseils-eng.php)

Mental Health First Aid: [www.mentalhealthfirstaid.ca](http://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.ca)

Anti-Bullying: [www.stopabully.ca](http://www.stopabully.ca)

National Eating Disorder Information Centre: [www.nedic.ca](http://www.nedic.ca)

## *United Kingdom*

Nutrition guidelines: [www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood)

Tips for healthy eating: [www.nhs.uk/Livewell/childhealth6-15/Pages/child-health-measurement-programme-healthy-weight-advice.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/childhealth6-15/Pages/child-health-measurement-programme-healthy-weight-advice.aspx)

Mental Health First Aid: [www.mhfa.org.uk/en](http://www.mhfa.org.uk/en)

Anti-Bullying: [www.bullying.co.uk](http://www.bullying.co.uk)

Beating Eating Disorders: [www.b-eat.co.uk](http://www.b-eat.co.uk)

## *United States*

Nutrition guidelines: [www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines](http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines)

Tips for healthy eating: [www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)

Mental Health First Aid: [www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org](http://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org)

Anti-Bullying: [www.stopbullying.gov/](http://www.stopbullying.gov/)

National Eating Disorders Association: [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)