



BUILDING RESILIENCE

Body Image in Kids with Limb Difference

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Many people assume that body image just refers to the way that a person feels about their appearance. While this is one aspect of body image, another important aspect is how a person feels about the things that they can do with their body.

Having a healthy body image means being comfortable with the way you look, most of the time. It means being satisfied with what you can do with your body, most of the time. And it means accepting yourself as you are, most of the time.

It's important to remember that everyone has bad days. Just because you feel frustrated with yourself sometimes, doesn't mean that you have an unhealthy body image! The same is true for children. Children will have bad days when they feel disappointed or unhappy with themselves and their bodies. Unless this is the case most of the time, they probably do not have poor body image.

BODY IMAGE DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN

Body image begins to develop in children around the age of three. But it's not until the ages of about five to eight years old that children begin to compare their body to others and become aware of the ways that they are similar and different from others.

And while there is no simple answer to the question of definitive contributors to body image in kids, it is a combination of factors including parents, children's peers and the media.

Parents can be influential in

shaping their child's views about the importance of physical appearance. In addition, research shows that children copy the attitudes that parents have towards their own bodies. Teasing from peers can also have an impact on children's feelings towards their body. And of course, children are inevitably exposed to various types of media such as television shows, movies, advertising, online games, etc. Unfortunately, media tend to create an impression that only one kind of body shape is 'ideal'.

It is impossible to shield children from all of the factors that may have a negative impact on their body image. Media is pervasive and everywhere. It's difficult to protect children from the insensitivity of other children. And as for modelling, even the most well-meaning parents will occasionally be critical of their body in front of their children.

The best way to protect children from these influences is to build-up their self-esteem, resilience and body image, so that they are not as vulnerable to these pressures.

FIVE SIMPLE STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

1. Reinforce the message that "everybody is different and that is ok."

For parents of children with limb differences, it can be difficult to hear their child talk about the things that they feel they can't do. Sometimes, the natural reaction is to change the subject or dis-

tract the child. However, it can be stressful for the child if their feelings about their differences aren't validated. So, if your child wants to talk about the ways they are different, use it as an opportunity to discuss the ways that no two bodies are the same and that is okay.

Celebrate diversity with your child by discussing ways that everyone has different characteristics and personal qualities (an activity example: with your child, help them to list all characteristics that they have in common with other family members, and then ways that they are unique from other family members, and finally how other family members are unique from each other).

It's also important to demonstrate to your child that everyone has something special to offer regardless of their size, shape, appearance and abilities.

2. Stress that people are valuable for who they are, not what they look like or what they can do.

Encouraging children to focus on their strengths in areas other than their appearance and physical abilities will ensure their self-esteem is not as vulnerable to appearance-related pressure. There are some simple ways that you can encourage your child to





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value and accept themselves for who they are.

Remember that you are a role model. Try to speak respectfully about your own body and appearance and other people’s appearances. Children copy the attitudes that parents have towards their own bodies. Also remember that most of us are very self-critical, so don’t worry too much if you slip up now and again!

Praise their personality traits, behaviours and skill development. For example, in addition to saying things like, “you’re so strong” or “you look pretty”, it is important to also praise their personal qualities, “you are so kind” or “you’re a fantastic reader”.

3. Build their self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy relates to a person’s belief in their ability to succeed in their activities and goals. It determines how we approach tasks, challenges and goals in our lives. It’s important to foster children’s confidence in their abilities, particularly children with limb difference. Help your child find the things they are good at. Every child should feel like they are good at something. Allow your child to try different activities until they find some things that they enjoy doing and feel that they are good at. They can be simple things like drawing, painting, singing, storytelling, etc.

4. Prepare your child for their peers.

Children are naturally curious and unfortunately, they can be insensitive in the ways they ask each other about their differences. Therefore, it’s important to prepare your child for questions about their limb difference to help with confident responses to their peers. Help your child find ways to explain their limb difference that is age-appropriate and comfortable for them. This can be empowering for them and encourages a feeling of openness and acceptance of diversity for your child. Also, be mindful that children will listen and take-on-board the ways their parents talk about their limb difference.

5. Encourage your child to use ‘helpful’ thinking strategies.

All children will have days when they feel badly about something that has happened, something that someone has said, or something they feel they can’t do. While this is unavoidable, there is something you can do to make it easier for your child and improve his or her outlook. Help your child to restructure how they think about their strengths and weaknesses as a strategy to use when a difficult situation arises.