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4 Tips to Help Cultivate a Supportive Body Image Environment

Empower your family to embrace joy and acceptance

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Does summer have you or your teen stressing about body image? It's typical for this time of year to bring increased focus on size and shape, affecting self esteem. Body comparisons and "shoulds" can increase feelings of anxiety, irritability, worry, sadness or even fear. Studies show children as young as age 6 are concerned with their bodies and begin to worry about being perceived as fat and these concerns can last throughout the lifespan. So what can parents, caregivers, teachers and coaches do to cultivate a supportive body image environment and empower loved ones to embrace and accept their body?

1. **Modeling**
   Adults can be such a powerful ally and role model for kids and teens. Help to challenge any thoughts of doubt and build a helpful self-talk inner monologue for kids through modeling. Model joyful movement and experiences by putting on that bathing suit, jumping in the pool and saying things like " I love the feel of swimming underwater." Go out for ice cream for no reason (other than it's delicious and fun to be together) and have everyone talk about their favorite ice cream flavor. Sharing positivity around food and body help to broaden that positive association.



2. **Quality Time**
   Your child is amazing. Remind them of all the parts of them, their strengths, and the quirky things that make them their wonderful selves. Identity can get too wrapped up in the physical aspects of body image. Spending quality time together helps build connection, strengthen attachment and build self-esteem to help steel against body image concerns. 20 relationship-building minutes together and comments like, "I love spending time with you,"or "you are such a great problem solver" can go a long way.

3. **Comments**
   We live in diet/wellness culture. Through weight loss commercials, social media ads, news stories and celebrity gossip headlines, we are all bombarded with unhelpful messaging on a daily basis. With helpful, empowering comments, adults can help kids and teens challenge these unhelpful messages and begin to gain mental space to see they are so much more than how their body looks. Lean in to comments like "I love your energy today" or "I am so happy we get to catch up" over "I remember when I used to be small like you" or "Wow! What do you eat!?!" Also watch comments directed toward others like, "she looks so great after having the baby" or comments toward yourself like "got to work on my 'summer bod'" or "once I lose weight…"

4. **Neutral is okay**
   Positive body image does not have to be the goal. We DO NOT have to love our bodies and it is 100% okay to embrace a neutral view. Bodies are amazing and resilient and can help be a vehicle for us to pursue our dreams. But if a body is just a body; not horrible, not phenomenal, that is absolutely okay. Pushing for overwhelming body love can feel disingenuous and can invalidate feelings. A focus on facts

(my hair is brown) and physical sensations (my arms feel cold) can not only help connect mind and body but can begin to remove judgment and negative feelings, moving towards a more neutral attitude.

Sometimes body image stress can lead to concerning behaviors. If you are concerned your loved one is showing signs of disordered eating or exercise (dieting, skipping meals, excluding categories of food, excessive body checking, rigid exercise habits) our eating disorder specialists are here to help. Contact our office today to schedule an evaluation to collaborate on the next steps toward healing your loved one's relationship with food and their body.