



# Parent Pages



RESOURCES FOR CHRISTIAN PARENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

**CREATED IN HIS IMAGE:**

## Teens and Body Image

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**I**t is not big news that teenagers can be preoccupied with their bodies. In my day, adolescents spent time looking in the mirror. Now, teens create a permanent record by posting selfies on social media. Given that teenagers are in the midst of dramatic change, this preoccupation is not a surprise. Young people are looking for anticipated body changes, are adjusting to new appearances and are comparing themselves to unrealistic media standards.

Body image is an individual's assessment of personal appearance. Body image is a strong predictor of global self-esteem; an adolescent who feels good about the way he or she looks also feels good about other abilities. Puberty is not only a time for changes in the body but it is also a time for changes in the brain. Young children are not as good at abstract thinking and are not as concerned about what others think about them. Adolescents, on the other hand, have become very good at this, but do not yet have the experience of adults to put a good perspective on that judgement. It is a challenging time of life.

A positive body image includes an accurate perception of the body along with acceptance. Such a teen will spend a reasonable amount of time focusing on healthy eating and exercise. This is a youth who feels both comfortable and confident. A negative body image results in a distorted perception of body size and shape. These adolescents are convinced of their unattractiveness and see it as a personal failing, experiencing anxiety and shame.



While all teens experience some episodes of negative body image, it becomes a concern when body image is consistently and persistently negative. Negative body image can be a forerunner to an eating or exercise disorder. While most victims of eating disorders are female, males are also known to suffer. Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa are commonly known eating disorders. Anorexic patients have a distorted body image and feel they need to drastically restrict calories to compensate. Those with Bulimia will binge eat and then try to rid themselves of food through vomiting or the use of laxatives. Both disorders are dangerous and require urgent and sometimes extensive medical care. Muscle

dysmorphia is a lesser known body image disorder that typically affects boys. It causes teens to over exercise in order to increase muscle mass.

Helping children to develop a healthy body image begins much earlier than the teenage years. Research indicates that a cohesive family setting will positively impact self-esteem. Children do not need a perfect family, but they do need a family that spends time together, shares values, establishes healthy eating and exercise routines and supports each other. Strong families spend time in discussion, show affection, give help and monitor freedom and limits as children mature. A stable family gives a strong foundation that makes other problems less likely to happen, or at least more likely to be caught early.

Suggestions for navigating through the rough waters of adolescent body image formation focus on perspective, which is what is lacking in the developing adolescent brain. It is important to address negative self-talk. While teens can make it sound as if they are joking when they criticize their bodies, such talk can grow when repeated mentally. Instead of simply trying to stop such behavior, take time to talk with your teen about the “why” behind the words. Listen with patience and encourage perspective taking.

Redirect negative talk toward a focus on the positive. Your teen will need much assurance that this time of change is temporary and encouragement that uniqueness is to be cherished. Adolescents are susceptible to exposure to phony perfection in the media, so effort needs to be put into helping them see and appreciate the real people around them.

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (GEN. 1:27).



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

As Christian parents we have another tool. Young people who fall victim to eating disorders tend to be perfectionists. They are practicing control over a body that is changing on them. We have the blessing of teaching our children that God is in control. Our trust is in Him and not in extreme diets or exercise. God created us and loves us.

### For Further Study

Use this eating disorders screening tool to begin a conversation with your adolescent:  
[nationaleatingdisorders.org/screening-tool](http://nationaleatingdisorders.org/screening-tool).

Remember that while a screening tool can indicate a need for further care, it cannot guarantee that all is well. Do not hesitate to seek medical attention if you suspect a problem.

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