



8 Things Parents Should Know

# ABOUT TEEN SELF-IMAGE



# Parents overwhelmingly want what is best for their kids.

They start out seeing their little bundle of joy and finding them to be absolutely perfect. As they make their way through infancy and toddlerhood, parents gush over how adorable they are, which in turn ends up helping most young children to feel pretty darn good about themselves. Children reflect what those around them are showing them, which is a lot of smiles, laughs, and nonstop adoration for how cute they look at just about everything they do. But as time goes on, something serious takes place—and with heavy implications—that parents need to be aware of.

## Taking a Look

A child's self-image—which includes their body image—is largely influenced by what goes on around them. There is a lot that goes into influencing how a child will feel about their self-image as they grow into a pre-teen and teen, and later on into adulthood. When children head off to school, they begin to be more heavily influenced by peers, teachers, and other outside sources. Each of these can either help or hinder a teen's self-image and can have a major impact on other areas of their life, including their self-esteem and confidence.

The more parents and other adults understand the fragile situation that makes up a teen's self-image, the better equipped they will be to help prevent problems, address situations that can be adjusted, and get help if their teen needs it. In today's world, teens have access to a wide variety of things that influence how they feel about themselves, making it an even more serious subject than in prior generations when external influences were a bit more limited.

Teen self-image is a topic that every parent who has a growing child should take the time to consider. Even if their child is still in preschool, the foundation for a healthy self-image is already being laid, or should be. Psychologist Erik Erikson came up with stages of psychosocial development that take place during child development. He believed that adolescence was an important time because children during those years, 12 to 18, are making a transition from childhood to adulthood. He also believed it was a critical period when adolescents are determining who they are, struggling between role confusion and identity crisis.

It's during the important adolescent years that youth are learning to either love who they are, or loathe it. They will either develop a healthy self-image, or they will develop an unhealthy one that makes them question their abilities and place in society, and leave them lost as they try to find their way. It's also during the adolescent years that peers play a powerful role in helping to shape a teen's self-image.

## So Much Influence

Many people think that a self-image is developed simply by what someone may say to another person about their looks. While that may play a role, there is actually a lot more that can play a role in shaping the way people see themselves.

Here are eight things that parents should know about teen self-image:

**1. Bullying.** According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 28 percent of all students in grades 6-12 have experienced bullying, and nearly 71 percent have seen bullying take place at their school. Additionally, 15 percent of high school students have been cyberbullied, which is bullying that takes place on electronic devices (e.g., receiving texts, someone posting things about you on social media, etc.). Additionally, in *The Journal of*

*School Health*, researchers studied the relationship between cyberbullying and self-esteem. What they report is that students who experience cyberbullying, both as the victim and offender, had significantly lower self-esteem than those who had little to no cyberbullying experience. Bullying has become a major problem in schools around the country and it is one that has a huge impact on a child's self-image.

**2. Number of risks.** In the journal *Academic Pediatrics*, researchers reported that low self-esteem in adolescents is associated with a number of modifiable risk factors, which include obesity, television time, team sports participation, school performance, and parenting style. How kids feel about their image—including whether they think they are overweight or they don't like the way their teeth look—can make a big difference in how healthy their overall self-image may be.



**3. Teen girls.** While negative self-image problems take place with both boys and girls, it appears that girls take the larger hit. The NYC Girls Project, a public education campaign geared toward girls 7-12, reports that by middle school, up to 70 percent of girls are unhappy with two or more of their body parts, and body satisfaction hits a rock bottom between the ages of 12 and 15. They also report that a girl's self-esteem often plummets around the age of 12 and doesn't improve until they are around 20, with their unhappiness being attributed to their appearance. Having said this, it's important not to overlook boys. They too struggle with their self-image. Just as it is an issue that parents of teen girls should be concerned with, those with boys should also keep an eye on it to ensure their boys are growing up with a healthy self-image.

**4. Depression.** In one year, the NIH found that over 11 percent of the teen population in the country had experienced major depression. It's also estimated that teen girls experience depression at a rate three times that of teen boys. Research has shown that adolescents who have a negative body image are more likely to become depressed than those who are not dissatisfied with their appearance.

**5. Social media matters.** The Pew Research Center issued a report in 2015 which found that 24 percent of teens go online "almost constantly." Their report also stated that 92 percent of teens report going on daily, and 56 percent report that they go online several times per day. Additionally, they found that Facebook is the most popular and frequently used social media platform among teens, and that 71 percent of them use more than one social media platform. Psychologists are warning parents that a major problem with that—security issues aside—is how social media usage by teens can have a negative impact on their self-image. Not only are they being exposed to images and videos that make them feel bad about themselves, but it puts them at higher risk for cyberbullying, and many people close out of Facebook feeling bad about themselves. Social media sites tend to paint a rosy picture of life, and many people feel as though they or their life don't quite measure up to what they see on Facebook.



## Tips for Helping to Build Your Teen's Self-Image

■ **Set boundaries and stick to them** so they have a clear understanding of expectations and can feel good about living up to them. Teens need to have some responsibility and develop a sense of independence, but they also need some boundaries.

■ **Point out their positives** and give them praise when praise is due. Parents often focus on what kids have done wrong or forgotten to do, while overlooking all that they do right. There's nothing wrong with pointing out where your teen needs to make some changes or improvements, but be sure to also catch them doing good and give them some kudos for doing so.

■ **Encourage them to share their opinions** and help make decisions. By doing so, they feel that their opinions matter, which will help them become more confident.

**6. Peer pressure.** Anyone who has gone through adolescence knows that peer pressure is alive and well. According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, it's natural, healthy, and important for children to have and rely on friends as they mature. Peers can be a positive influence, but they can also be a negative one. The majority of teens with substance abuse problems, for example, report that they started doing drugs and alcohol as a result of peer pressure. Likewise, a child's self-image can be greatly influenced—for better or worse—by their peers.

**7. Mom's opinion matters.** Many parents don't realize that they help to set a self-image tone in their family with how they feel about their own body. A parent who is regularly cutting their looks down in front of their children will help their child become more critical of their own self-image. Parents play an important role in showing kids what it looks like to have a healthy self-image by focusing on the positives, taking steps to live a healthy lifestyle, and loving who they are.



■ **Let them know you are there for them** if they need someone to talk to. Become your teen's biggest fan so if they do have a bad day at school, they know they will always get a smile and support when they walk through the door.

■ If they don't like their body or appearance, **help them determine those things they can change and which ones they should learn to love.** Some things can easily be changed if your teen is feeling bad about them, such as crooked teeth, while other things may not be so easily altered, such as a birthmark.

■ **Teach your teen healthy ways to handle disappointment, anger, and sadness.** Often times, kids have these feelings and they don't know healthy ways to deal with them. If they have healthy outlets for dealing with them, they can work through the issues and come out stronger.

■ **Take pride in your teen's accomplishments.** Realize that being a teen in today's world is challenging and they have new hurdles to deal with that prior generations never had. A little understanding and support goes a long way.

■ **Be a good role model.** Parents need to learn to love their own bodies and have a healthy self-image, because how they feel about themselves influences how their child will feel about their own self-image. Set the example of how to love yourself, be the best version of yourself, and go through life confidently.

**8. Sexualization pressures.** The American Psychological Association reports that today's girls are being sexualized through a variety of ways, including by skimpy pop star clothing, reality television, and many of the images they see on a regular basis. They report that this sexualization of our nation's girls can have an effect on their self-image. They further report that the images are harmful to girls' self-image and healthy development. While the information is out there that these images have a negative impact on girls, it's often difficult for girls to get away from them because they are everywhere—on magazine covers, in television shows, videos, and more.

Of course there are many more factors that influence adolescent self-image, but these are some of the most common ones. Kids today have a lot thrown at them that helps shape who they are and how they see themselves. From bullying and media images to peer pressure, they have a constant barrage of influence telling them how they should look. If they don't live up to what they are hearing, then there can be some negative consequences as they begin to doubt themselves.





## Why it Matters

Since there are so many ways that having an unhealthy self-image can impact a child or teen, parents need to be especially concerned with the issue. Teens who have an unhealthy self-image are at a higher risk for becoming depressed, having eating disorders, being bullied, and living a lower quality of life. Those who have a poor self-image will be more likely to socially isolate themselves, not be involved in group activities, and more.

In order for people to have a higher quality of life and enjoy it more, they need to feel good about who they are. Self-image plays a significant role in that, because if we don't feel good about ourselves we don't want to engage and get involved. If we do feel good about ourselves, we are more likely to be confident, outgoing, willing to try new things, and more likely to succeed at whatever we undertake. Having a healthy self-image gives us the confidence to be who we want to be and achieve what it is that we want to do.

A healthy self-image also plays an important role in the relationships that people have. Those who feel bad about themselves are less likely to treat others well either, but if you feel good about yourself, then you are likely going to be nice to others. A person's relationships with other people are positively impacted by their healthy self-image. In other words, the better people feel about themselves, the better they treat themselves, as well as the better they treat other people.

Since a teen or growing child having a healthy self-image has only positive effects, it's important that parents, educators, and others who are around kids do what they can to help make it happen. A healthy self-image doesn't come from one specific place; rather there are layers of influence that go into how a teen ultimately feels about their self-image.

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