

Helping Our Kids Build a Healthy Body Image

Body image is a growing concern for many children—girls and boys alike—and it’s showing up earlier than ever. Research shows that a third of five-year-old girls already express concerns about their weight. Even before they can confidently cut their food with a knife and fork, many are worrying about keeping food *out* of their mouths.

And the pressure is growing. The pull of the perfect body starts young and builds thanks to social media (the super-peer). And fewer of our children - both boys and girls - grow up feeling comfortable in their own skin.

Here’s what you need to know:

Why Body Image Matters

Body image isn’t just about looks. It can affect kids’ confidence, relationships, and even mental health. Girls especially are taught from a young age—often unintentionally—that how they look is tied to their worth. By adolescence, many girls link their self-esteem and social success to how attractive they are.

Boys aren’t immune. Increasingly, boys feel pressure to be lean, muscular, and “manly” in appearance. These pressures—reinforced by media, social media, advertising, and even well-meaning comments at home—can lead to body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, disordered eating, and anxiety.

What Can Parents Do?

Here are some practical strategies, grounded in psychology and parenting research, that you can start using today:

1. Make Your Home an Appearance-Commentary-Free Zone

Avoid commenting on weight, shape, or appearance—your own, your child’s, or others’. This includes compliments like “You look so skinny” or criticisms like “I look terrible in this.” Kids are listening, even when we’re not talking to them.

Instead, shift focus to what bodies can do and build capacity as much as you can. The more their body can do, the more delight they’ll find in life (and in their body). And if their body doesn’t work “normally”, it still hears or sees, laughs, or hugs. Find what they can do, celebrate it, and enlarge it.

2. Dress for Doing

If we want kids—especially girls—to feel powerful and free in their bodies, we need to make sure they can move, play, and explore without restriction. That might mean prioritising comfy shorts over frilly skirts, or letting go of clothing that’s more about appearances than activity.

3. Change the Conversation

Talk about books, ideas, creativity, friends, science, sport, kindness—anything other than how someone looks. Help your child discover passions and interests that have nothing to do with appearance. This is especially vital in the tween and teen years when social media ramps up the pressure to look a certain way. Usually how a person looks is the least interesting and important thing about them.

4. Talk About the World—Not Just Their World

For older kids, especially teens, don't be afraid to introduce a little righteous anger. Ask them:

- “Who benefits when you hate your body?”
- “Why do so many companies make money from making people feel like they're not enough?”

This awareness can help teens push back against unrealistic standards and take pride in who they are—not just how they look.

5. Do Your Own Work

If you've spent years struggling with your own body image, it's never too late to change. Talk to your children about what you're learning, and commit to modelling a healthier approach moving forward. That honesty and vulnerability will be far more powerful than pretending everything's fine.

Our kids deserve better than a life spent fretting in front of the mirror. As parents, we have the power to change the conversation in our homes and help our children grow up feeling strong, capable, and enough—just as they are.

I want kids who use their bodies with confidence instead of constantly monitoring them. These ideas should help.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.