



# *Reflections on Body Image*

The ETFO Body Image Project



Elementary Teachers'  
Federation of Ontario

Fédération des enseignantes et des  
enseignants de l'élémentaire de l'Ontario



## “The Moon”

The moon is a cool and lonely place,  
Peacefully revolving,  
It doesn't always show its face,  
A mystery worth solving.

Whether new moon, half-moon, or crescent moon,  
It's only an illusion,  
The full moon is its one true form,  
It causes some confusion.

I am so much like the moon,  
There is only one true me,  
Whatever I may look like,  
I'm much more than what you see.

*by Rachelle North*

## The Elementary Teachers'

Federation of Ontario is committed to improving the quality of life of children in Ontario. To this end, ETFO funded a substantial world-wide research study to develop an overview of current knowledge about the causes of eating disorders and to identify effective school-based prevention programs.

The purpose of this resource is to share some of this important information with parents, teachers, children, and the public. This pamphlet is part of a comprehensive educational project for students in grades 1 – 8 to address the complex issue of body image.

# What is Body Image?

Body image is a person's inner perception of their own body.\* Body image includes physical appearance such as weight, height, facial features, physical maturation, race and ethnicity, other diverse body features, as well as abilities.

## Why Should You Be Concerned About Body Image?

Negative body image may result in:

- poor self-esteem;
- the desire to be “fixed”;
- less participation in physical activity;
- withdrawal from other life activities;
- barriers to learning;
- limiting of food choices;
- extreme weight change;
- disordered eating, e.g. binge-eating or dieting;
- dangerous cosmetic surgery; and/or
- anxiety, depression, and in some cases, suicide.

## Body Image: Age and Stage

Body image concerns and eating disorders do not begin in puberty. They develop at an early age where some children are already being conditioned to develop unrealistic attitudes towards their bodies. A strong message that emerged from the research was that *parents play a key role in their children's body image perceptions.*

\* Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, Teanteleff-Dunn, 1999

Research tells us that at a very early age, some children are being conditioned to develop unrealistic attitudes towards their bodies and that by:

**Age 4** A child's physical concept begins to emerge.

**Age 5** When asked to select a preference, girls prefer thin figures.

**Age 6** Children develop negative attitudes towards large body types and begin to assign negative values to their own physical differences and disabilities.

**Age 7** Boys and girls demonstrate an emerging desire for thinness, but girls internalize it.

**Age 8** Girls demonstrate significantly higher levels of body dissatisfaction than boys.

**Ages 8-9** Weight and disability-related harassment become more pronounced at this age, continuing into the teen years.

**Age 10** Parents' negative comments and feelings about daughters' weights increase girls' drive for thinness and disordered eating patterns.

**Age 11-12** Racial and sexual harassment coupled with objectification of girls' bodies can trigger shame, body monitoring, dissatisfaction, and general anxiety about body image.

**Age 13-14** Girls report that media exert the strongest pressure to be thin, sending messages that are reinforced by families and peers.

**Age 15** Many girls demonstrate high levels of extreme weight-loss and binge-eating which are tied to teasing/harassment.

**Adulthood** Binge-eating, weight loss, and similar activities associated with body image can have an impact on health throughout adult life and pregnancies.

## Research Challenges the Myths

Only children whom society deems to be overweight, physically disabled, or with facial differences will develop a negative body image.

**False** – Any child, regardless of appearance, may develop a negative body image.

Good eating habits and exercise result in the “perfect” body shape.

**False** – It is very important that children receiving information about healthy food choices and exercise understand that these choices will not necessarily lead to a specific body weight and shape.

Children aren’t capable of knowing when they are hungry or when they are full.

**False** – Parents can trust children’s hunger and fullness cues.

Talking about bulimia and anorexia with your children is a good method of prevention.

**False** – Specific discussions emphasizing eating disorders can inadvertently lead to glamorizing and normalizing eating disorders.

## How’s Your Body Image Bias Quotient?

- Do you comment negatively about your own or another’s weight, shape, race, or ability?
- Do you control your child’s food intake?
- Do you comment on a girl’s food intake, weight, shape, race, or ability more than a boy’s?
- Do you indicate to your child that healthy food choices and exercise will lead to a specific body weight and shape?

# Ensuring Your Child's Good Body Image

All parents want their children to be physically and emotionally healthy. Healthy children and adults come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. A positive body image can lead to good self-esteem, creating a well-adjusted, emotionally stable, and happy child who has the confidence to engage in life's opportunities. Ensuring your child's positive body image can be accomplished using a variety of strategies:

- Help children understand that genetics play an important role in determining a person's weight, size, and body type.
- Promote exercise and healthy eating as a means for physical well-being and enjoyment, rather than weight loss.
- Trust children's internal hunger and fullness cues.
- Repeated exposure to non-dieting, weight-acceptance, and body-acceptance messages are necessary.
- Reinforce that all bodies are acceptable.
- Engage your child in discussions that challenge media messages for "socially acceptable" physical appearances and the under-representation of certain bodies in the media.
- Avoid teaching girls how to change their bodies.
- Challenge put downs and bullying based on body image in your home and community.
- Consider friendship cliques and the impact of peer pressure within your discussions.
- Be a role model who is positive and accepting of your own body.
- Refrain from making negative comments about your own or others' appearance.
- Comment positively on your children's ability, character, or on areas your children excel in, rather than their appearance.
- Celebrate the uniqueness of all people.

# Resources

## Websites

**Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario** [www.etfo.ca](http://www.etfo.ca)  
**Body Positive Organization** <http://www.body-positive.com>  
**Dad and Daughters** <http://www.dadsanddaughters.org>  
**Fight Hate and Promote Tolerance** <http://www.tolerance.org/index.jsp>  
**Media Watch** [www.mediawatch.ca](http://www.mediawatch.ca)  
**National Eating Disorders Information Centre** [www.nedic.ca](http://www.nedic.ca)  
**About Face** [www.aboutfaceinternational.org](http://www.aboutfaceinternational.org)

## Books

- *Children and Teens Afraid to Eat – Helping Youth in Today's Weight-Obsessed World.* Frances Berg
- *Embodying Equity: Working with Young Women at the Crossroads of Their Bodies and Society.* C. Rice and V. Russell
- *No Body's Perfect: Stories by Teens About Body Image, Self-Acceptance and the Search for Respect.* Kimberly Kirberger
- *Raising Confident Girls – 100 Tips for Parents and Teachers.* Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer
- *The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander.* Barabara Coloroso
- *When Girls Feel Fat – Helping Girls Through Adolescence.* Sandy Friedman

## Videos

*Reflections of Me...The ETFO Body Image Project*

Note: A summary of the research and an extended resource list can be found in *Reflections of Me...The ETFO Body Image Project* Kit produced by ETFO.



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