

HEALTHY BODIES, HEALTHY MINDS

A Tool for Working with Children & Teens



Children and teens hear and see many messages on health, body shape and size. Negative messages that focus on weight can harm their self-esteem, and lead to poor body image and unhealthy behaviours, like disordered eating.

As someone working with children and teens, you can play an active role in helping them have a healthy body and healthy mind by taking the focus off weight. We can achieve this by accepting ourselves and others as we are, role modeling healthy behaviours,

healthy ways of managing stress and providing healthy eating and physical activity opportunities for overall health. Think about your beliefs, attitudes and actions around stress, body size, eating and activity. Explore how you feel about yourself, and how this can affect children and teen's views of themselves and their world.

Below you will find ways to interact with children and teens that will shift the focus from weight to an overall focus on health and mental well-being. These tips can help them understand that there is much more to health than weight.

Active Living

Being active helps build self-confidence, relieves stress, improves sleep and is a fun social activity.

- ◆ Focus on having fun and feeling good, rather than burning fat and calories.
- ◆ Teach children and teens to notice how their bodies feel when they are enjoying being active.
- ◆ Encourage children and teens to explore a variety of different activities to find the ones they enjoy.
- ◆ Help children and teens be comfortable learning new skills and activities that challenge them (e.g., throwing and catching a Frisbee, track and field activities, diving or jumping in the water, gymnastics, and basketball).
- ◆ Avoid taking away physical activity as a punishment. Offer many opportunities for daily physical activity that are fun and rewarding.
- ◆ Let children and teens lead the activity, and explore their environment in an unstructured, natural and creative way.



Balanced & Healthy Eating

Eating regular balanced meals and snacks gives children and teen’s body and brain the energy they need to stay focused, be active, and be mentally and physically healthy.

- ◆ Enjoy and try to provide a variety of tasty and nutritious foods, including: colourful vegetables and fruit, whole grains, lower fat milk and fortified milk alternatives (e.g., soy beverage with added calcium and vitamin D), and lean meat and alternatives.
- ◆ Avoid labelling foods as “good” or “bad” as this can link emotions to food, and can lead to children eating certain foods to be “good” or avoid being “bad”. Instead, use words to describe the taste and texture of food (e.g., crunchy, salty, sweet, tasty, or soft). Refer to foods by their actual name (e.g., carrots, yogurt, bread, potato chips, banana, cookie, or chicken).
- ◆ Enjoy all foods in moderation and without guilt.
- ◆ Listen to your body and be comfortable eating when you are hungry and stopping when you are full. Encourage children and teens to do the same.
- ◆ Eat balanced and regular meals and snacks, including breakfast.
- ◆ Eat together when possible, away from screens and other distractions.
- ◆ Involve children and teens in meal planning, grocery shopping, food preparation and clean-up.
- ◆ Advocate for access to nutritious foods where children and teens play, learn and live.
- ◆ Use non-food items to reward children and teens and avoid linking rewards to food.

Mental Well-Being & Stress Management

Talking about and role modelling healthy ways to manage stress is helpful in building children and teen’s life skills and resiliency.

- ◆ Take care of your body and role model balanced eating, physical activity and sleep. Focus on overall health instead of weight, shape or size.
- ◆ Share positive ways to cope with challenges in life and maintain a supportive relationship with children and teens so they feel comfortable coming to you for help.
- ◆ Focus on feeling good about your body, talents and abilities. Recognize and encourage the same in children and teens.
- ◆ Encourage children and teens to compliment others on their talents and accomplishments.
- ◆ Understand that healthy bodies come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Talk about accepting and respecting all bodies. Avoid weight-focused messages such as “you’ve lost weight, you look great” or “I was bad today, I ate cake”.
- ◆ Listen to what children and teens say about themselves, others and media images. Use these opportunities to talk about their feelings and to address any potentially harmful talk.
- ◆ Teach children and teens that feeling stress, anxiety and anger is healthy and normal. Show them healthy ways to work through problems, learn and move forward again. They’ll grow up knowing that challenges can be overcome and disappointment can be resolved.