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Bodies of All Shapes and Sizes

Helping your daughter love her own

Ages 7 to 9

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She looks in the mirror just a little bit longer than usual. Or you catch her looking at others' bodies in a more curious or even critical way. Maybe she even casts out lines like, "Have you noticed Mrs. Jones? She's really big!"

Girls ages seven to nine are becoming more aware of their own bodies and the bodies of others. They're forming conclusions about how their bodies look—and how they "should" look. Your daughter's concern about her body doesn't have to be a bad thing; she's at an age when learning healthy habits is key. But she's also at an age when a *negative* body image can begin to develop, and once those seeds are planted, like weeds, they're very hard to get rid of.

Consider this: in our society, we now have record numbers of both obese and eating-disordered youth. What can parents do to help children take care of their bodies and build a strong self-image? A lot. First, aim to create a culture within your home in which your words and actions emphasize being *healthy*—not being thin.

Start by watching what you say about yourself. Comments such as "I'm so fat" and critical messages on the fridge, meant to curb your own eating, can harm your daughter. If you diet, do so discreetly. Take time to examine your attitudes about weight. If you have a love-hate relationship with your body, work hard not to pass on those feelings to your daughter.

Avoid making comments about your child's body. Affectionate nicknames such as "waif" or "beanpole" may seem harmless now but could set your daughter up for hurt later. As her body starts to change, she may question, "Am I still going to get attention for how I look?" and she may feel pressured to retain her childlike thinness. Conversely, being called "chunky" or "pudgy" may not get a reaction from her now, but soon, these words will take on a hurtful connotation, and she may end up feeling betrayed by you.

Talk with your daughter about diversity in terms of body differences and about "not judging a book by its cover." As a rule, avoid making comments about others' bodies in the presence of your child. If she makes comments about others, explain that body shape comes from our ancestry and the culture within our homes. Just as you don't make fun of someone's ethnicity, criticizing others' bodies is flat-out unacceptable.

Give your child the "gift" of regular exercise, and frame it as such. Describe exercise as enjoyable and relaxing. Use words such as "heart-healthy," "fun," and "feels so good" rather than "the price you have to pay to be thin."

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Raise an informed consumer. Routinely mute commercials and/or comment on advertisements that confuse emaciated with attractive. Point out how advertisers target girls' insecurities to get them to buy their products. Ask questions such as, "Do you think that buying that makeup will really change her life?" and "What messages do they want you to buy into in this commercial?" These conversations should be easy to have now, but in a few years, the pull from her peers may compete with your words. Remember, you are laying the groundwork today for the pressure that will hit later.

Challenge your daughter's negative comments about her own body. Teach her that there will always be "those with bigger bodies and those with smaller bodies, but what matters most is that you like who you are." Which of her physical features does she like best? Help her to see that it's our differences that make us interesting. Accepting herself and being proud of what makes her unique will help her weather the storms ahead.

Your daughter is growing and changing so fast, and her view of herself and of the world is expanding. With guidance from you now, she can learn to resist the cultural messages that aim to capitalize on her insecurities, and she can grow to be a happy, healthy young woman.

—Patti Kelley Criswell is the author of American Girl's Smart Girl's Guide to Friendship Troubles: Dealing with Fights, Being Left Out, and the Whole Popularity Thing. She is a social worker in private practice, specializing in adolescent and family counseling.