Help your child be RESILIENT to unhelpful messages and images in the media

Body image and the influence of media

Media includes TV, movies, billboards, advertisements, newspapers, magazines, gaming and social media. Media often presents "ideal" characters or people with "ideal" appearances that are unrealistic for most people. Ideals can vary according to culture, gender identity or interests (e.g., the ideal yoga, swimming, athletics, ballet, footy, rugby body or fitness physique).

Research shows that the more children are exposed to western ideals (e.g., thin for girls and muscular for boys), the more likely they are to judge their own appearance against these ideals. This puts them at greater risk of developing:

- body dissatisfaction
- poor self-esteem
- increased weight bias (and negative attitudes towards large body sizes)
- unhealthy weight control and appearance-changing behaviours (e.g., dieting, extreme exercise and cosmetic surgery).

Media literacy skills help children to deconstruct and challenge the messages and images they hear and see. The good news is that parents/caregivers can help their children develop these skills at home.

Parents/caregivers can help children to build important media literacy skills by getting them to think about:

1. **Who** created the message? *(Authorship)*
2. **What** is the message about? (*Content*)
3. **What** technical tricks (like filters and digital editing) were used to create what they see? *(Format)*
4. **How** might different people experience the message differently? *(Audience)*
5. **What** is the media message or image trying to do – entertain us, make us buy something, or think/feel a certain way? *(Purpose)*

Thoman and Jolls (2008)

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Tips for promoting positive interaction with media

Try	Avoid
✓ Ensuring your child is viewing age-appropriate media.	✗ Introducing media that is not age-appropriate: TV shows, movies, social media platforms, print media and other content.
✓ Taking the opportunity while watching TV shows, cartoons or adverts to ask what, why, how and who to build media literacy.	✗ Using judgemental or shaming language regarding appearance and bodies. Never suggest that *any* body is wrong or broken – bodies are simply different!
✓ Modelling positive language and dialogue about things other than appearance when viewing media.	✗ Exposing your child to a high volume of media that includes stereotypical body and appearance ideals for boys and girls.
✓ Using positive language regarding visible physical differences (e.g., 'All bodies are different' 'Bodies work in different ways'). Ensure language and questions invite curiosity and are non-judgmental/shaming.	✗ Your child using apps that alter appearance or add filters to 'improve' appearance (e.g., Snapchat).
✓ Focusing on the settings and key messages of a story/show, or celebrating what someone is doing, rather than their body or appearance.	✗ Celebrating the societal appearance ideals presented in media (e.g., 'Wow, look at how toned they are' 'She's so pretty' 'He's so ripped' 'Why on earth would they wear that?')
✓ Learning about the different platforms and many digital tricks that are applied to media. Help your child to understand that what they see might not always be real!	✗ Shaming (or allowing your child to shame) someone's body or appearance in the media. Instead, encourage their critical thinking skills by asking what, why, where, who and how questions about what they are seeing (e.g., 'I wonder if any digital filters/ airbrushing has been used?').
	✗ Shaming celebrities, or other adults, for having cosmetic surgery or procedures (these decisions are influenced by the complex ideals and expectations placed on people).
	✗ Discussing celebrity weight or weight loss. You don't want to reinforce harmful messages such as 'thin is better/more muscular is better'.

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ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA

What is social media and how does it influence body image?

Social media includes websites and apps (applications) people (users) use to create and share content - to participate in social networking. Rules for each site or app differ, but typically, users become friends, followers or subscribers, and are invited to like and comment on posts and content created by others.

Social media platforms can help people to connect, share and inspire. But when it comes to body image, research suggests social media can do more harm than good. This is especially relevant to sites that allow images to be posted: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube. While a minimum user age of 13+ applies, many younger children use them.

How can you support your child to use social media positively?

- Know which social media platforms are available, especially the ones your child uses (or wants to use) – which may differ from platforms that you use.
- Make sure you know the features of the platforms.
- Establish boundaries and 'guidelines' early.
- Ensure your child understands cyber-safety. Many schools teach this already, but it's important that parents/caregivers are consistent with this at home. The Australian Government's e-Safety Commission gives parents access to free information and resources to help them support their child online, including social media. www.e-safety.gov.au/parents
- Do your best to adhere to the recommended age guidelines that have been established to protect children. When your child starts using social media, ensure the boundaries are clear and strong from the start. It's much harder to introduce 'rules' around usage later, and many parents wish they had set things up better from the start.
- Model positive social media use.

What does a positive social media experience look like?

The best way to encourage children to use positive social media behaviour is to model it yourself.

- **Check in with yourself and your body image –** while using social media, do you feel grateful, content, and satisfied with yourself or your body, or do you feel competitive, unhappy, annoyed, or increasingly comparing yourself to others? Trust your feelings – if a particular page or person isn't helping you to feel good, unfollow or mute their page.
- **Post and engage authentically –** what you post and how you engage with others (liking and commenting) is important. Be genuine and real – it's important. If what you are posting is not very kind, it's better left unsaid.
- **Reduce appearance-based comments –** just like in real time, it's important that we reduce the number of appearance-based comments we make. Instead, comment on the colours, the activity, the setting, a smile. If it's only a selfie, maybe just a 'like' will suffice.
- **Keep the number of likes and your self-worth separate –** it can be easy to attach self-worth to the number of likes, comments, friends or followers you have on social media. Turning notifications off when you post can help to reduce the frequency that you check the numbers.
- **Diversify what you see -** follow a range of people, pages and interests. It can help you avoid body comparisons if your feed includes non-appearance imagery.
- **Filter less –** it will help you stay authentic if you don't filter your own appearance and avoid taking multiple selfies before deciding on one to post.
- **Stay savvy -** help your child to strengthen their critical thinking skills. Encourage them to challenge what they see and to see beyond the image/post and comments.
- **Set time-limits –** social media platforms are designed to be addictive. Set time-limits for your use (use the timer on your phone) to keep you in control of the platforms, rather than have them control you!
- **Take a break and have some time away –** FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) is a very real thing for many young people - and adults. Taking a break from social media can have a really positive effect on mental health. You'll always be able to 'catch up' when you return.
- **Keep it fun -** If it's not helping you to feel good about your body or appearance, listen to your body, take ownership and take some time out.

Resources for parents:
- e-Safety Commission - www.esafety.com.au

- Instagram Toolkit for Parents - https://butterfly.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Instagram-Parents-Guide.pdf

- Instagram Toolkit for Young People (aimed at 13+) - https://butterfly.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Instagram-Toolkit-for-young-people.pdf