



10 Ways to Help Your Child Have a

# HEALTHY SELF-IMAGE



Just about every parent who has had a child reach the teen years understands the difference those few years can make in one's appearance. Parents go from struggling with their child about brushing their teeth and taking showers to having teens who often become obsessed with their appearance. There is a lot that changes between the pre-teen and teen years which prompts them to care more about how they look to themselves and others.

How a teen feels about their own self-image is important for numerous reasons. If a teen doesn't feel good about their self-image, they are more likely to become withdrawn, be depressed, and be bullied, as well as be at risk for a variety of other factors. Those pre-teens

and teens who have a healthy self-image are more likely to get involved in social activities, get along better with others both inside and outside their home, and have a better quality of life.

The good news is that there are a number of things that parents can do to help their kids develop a healthy self-image. It's something that doesn't happen overnight, but for those parents who begin laying the foundation at a young age and continue to be consistent, they will find that their teen has a healthier self-image. Helping them build that foundation is easier than it may seem, but it does take some consistency over the years as they encounter a barrage of outside images and messages that send their thoughts in the other direction.

## Growing Minds

In the world of psychology, adolescents' self-image is important to their overall well-being. How they see themselves makes a lot of difference in how their days will go. There are two major self-esteem milestones that kids will hit during these years. The first comes between the ages of 9–13, when kids are beginning to shed their “childish” skins. They start to leave behind the things they find to be childish and begin maturing. Along with their body maturing as they go through puberty, their mind does as well, and their interests take a more mature turn.

The second milestone comes at around age 18, when kids are confronted with independence. While it's something that most have longed for, most also tend to feel a bit overwhelmed with all of the new responsibility. They may come across challenges that lead them to question their abilities. Self-esteem and self-image are going to play a big role during these years as they begin going to college, attending job interviews, and looking for dates and potential mates.

In the August 2016 issue of the *Journal of School Health*, researchers reported that adolescence is a criti-

cal time for the development of psychological well-being. They also stated that weight gain and the emergence of body image concerns during this period can lead to the development of negative psychological states.

Many adolescents may have oral health issues that are impacting their self-image in a negative way. In *The European Journal of Orthodontics*, researchers shared their findings on whether or not improving one's aesthetic dental appearance would lead to a greater self-esteem and social well-being. Teens who were unhappy with their teeth reported that they tended to hide their smile. The study was conducted on 410 teens ages 14–16. They first asked the teens if they were satisfied with how their teeth looked, as well as measured their self-esteem. The teens were each given oral treatments to improve their teeth's appearance. The result of the study was that students who had received orthodontic treatment had significantly higher self-esteem than those who had not received treatment. Their findings concluded that an unattractive dental appearance has a negative social impact on an individual.

## Did You Know?

According to the Social Issues Research Centre, concerns about appearance are normal and understandable, and attractive people have more distinct advantages in society.

They report that children considered attractive are more popular with peers and teachers, and that the bias for beauty operates in almost all social situations. In other words, society reacts more favorably toward those seen as being attractive. They also report that studies have shown that even children as young as age seven were already unhappy with their body.

**Helping children develop a positive and healthy self-image from the start is ideal and will benefit them throughout their life.**





## Making Healthy Changes

How a child, and especially one entering the pre-teen and teen years, feels about their self-image makes a world of difference. It influences their level of confidence as well as how they get along with others. Here are 10 ways that parents can help their child develop a healthy self-image:

- 1. Stop criticizing so much.** There are a lot of things that adolescents do that can get under a parent's skin. But the truth of the matter is that they are learning and growing. They are going to make mistakes. Avoid being overly critical so they don't start feeling like everything they do is wrong or every day they look the wrong way. They are at a vulnerable age, so the criticism they receive is going to help define their self-image. Be gentle and keep the criticism to a minimum.
- 2. Be a good role model.** How a parent feels about their self-image is setting an example for their kids, whether positive or negative. If parents have a positive self-image they are more likely to demonstrate

those behaviors and beliefs to their family, thus setting a good example. Show them how to feel good about themselves, and in doing so how it improves your own overall psychological well-being.

- 3. Change what can be changed.** It's important that kids learn that not everything can be changed. Help them identify those things about themselves that they don't like, that may be causing them to have a low self-image, and determine if it's something that *can* be changed. If what they want changed is reasonable, such as they don't like how their teeth stick out or their hair style, help them make the changes that will help them to have a better self-image. If there are things they don't like that *can't* be changed, such as how tall they are, teach them to find peace with who they are and focus on the positives about their body and personality. There are plenty of things that we can do to improve our self-image if things really bother us, but there are some things that can't be changed that we need to learn to accept about ourselves.

- 4. Keep communicating.** Often, parents can tell that their teen is struggling with their self-image, even if they don't say anything specifically about it. Try to keep the communication open so they feel comfortable talking about it if they need to. Also, focus more on trying to be positive rather than talking about the negatives. Positive parenting takes kids further and helps them feel better about themselves.

- 5. Give compliments.** Letting people know when they have done something right or look great goes a long way toward helping boost their self-image. While you don't want to overdo it by showering them with compliments, you do want to notice those times when you could offer a sincere compliment. Offering too many compliments will cause them to zone out and assume you are just saying them without really meaning them. But sprinkle them in here and there and they will certainly be noticed and appreciated, and that will help them learn to focus

more on their strengths. Look for those things they are good at or have done right and be sure to let them know about it. Catch them doing good, looking good, and behaving well, and then compliment them for it.

- 6. Let them try their own styles and be unique.** Teens are often struggling with trying to figure out who they are and where they fit in. They try out a few different clothing or hair styles to see which one feels right and suits them. While you may want to keep some limits, try to give them some space to explore the looks they want to try. Often times, the new styles will be short-lived and they will move on to something else; yet throughout each one they will learn something more about themselves. Plus, by trying out new styles they are likely to gain some confidence and feel good about their ability to be different or unique. It takes courage to make a clothing or hairstyle change. Try to be supportive so their self-image comes out healthier in the long run.





**7. Watch what you say about how others look.**

Some parents have a tendency to ridicule others in earshot of their kids. When parents are overly critical about someone's appearance and the kids hear it, they may begin to look at themselves and wonder if you think the same thing about them, or if others think such things about them. Rather than say that someone is fat, for example, perhaps it's better to say that people come in all shapes and sizes and that's just fine. Being accepting of others and what they may look like will help your kids grow up to be more accepting of what they and those around them look like, too.

**8. Teach them how to properly handle negative encounters.**

No matter what your teen looks like, they are bound to receive some comments here and there from others. Peers can be brutal, especially in today's world where bullying seems to be at an all-time high. They may get teased about everything from their hair to the way they talk or walk. Arm your kids with the ability to know what to do if that happens. Rather than let it damage their self-image, teach them how to see past such bullying and teasing. The last thing parents want is to let their child's self-image be formed by their peers who are often quick to point out their flaws and tell them they don't measure up. Having a healthy way to deal with those comments and not letting them internalize is always a good route to take.

**9. Keep media in check.**

The images that teens see all around them have a big influence in how they feel about themselves. Whether it's pictures and ads online, videos, television shows, or magazine ads, they are barraged daily with images of what society is telling them is "beautiful." When they see these images—which are usually airbrushed

and not representative of reality—they may begin comparing themselves and feel bad about their own self-image. Try to keep the exposure to the images at a minimum if possible, and discuss them with your teen when you can. For example, while watching a television show together, discuss some of the images and ads so they realize they are not always representative of reality. Even celebrities have their own flaws, which are usually hidden, and most of the images have been digitally enhanced so that the people look better. Discussing these images will help them learn to discern between reality and what's healthy, and what's being used to push a product.

**10. Be patient.**

Helping your child develop a healthy self-image is not something that happens overnight. It takes time for people to develop a healthy self-image. Over time, they pick up on what goes on around them, what is said to them, and how they feel about themselves, and combined they develop a self-image that is either going to be positive or negative. Staying consistent over the years is the best way to help them come through those teen years stronger. Even if it gets frustrating at times, know that your efforts are not wasted and will most likely pay off as time goes on.

**BONUS TIP:** One thing that is important for parents and teens to realize is that *most people are their own worst critics*. We often pick out our shortcomings and focus on them, making it seem as though they are a much larger issue than they really are. Those same issues may be something that others don't even notice in the person or may not see as nearly as big of a problem as the person who has it. **Learning to be a better, gentler self-critic is important for everyone, parents and teens alike.**

# Going Forward

**The pre-teen and teen years can be quite a challenge.**

It's an especially vulnerable time when people are trying to fit in and deal with the mental and physical changes that come with puberty and growing up. There are things we can change about who we are, and there are things we need to embrace that we can't always change. Learning to change the things we can and find peace with the ones we can't will go a long way toward helping teens to like who they are and to develop a healthy self-image.

Having a healthy self-image is important for many reasons, not only during the tween and teen years, but well into adulthood. The foundation for a healthy self-image starts during childhood when kids begin to see themselves and where they fit into the world. Helping them get off to a healthy start and giving them the foundation for a healthy self-image is going to help them have a better personal well-being throughout their life. Parents and teachers can play a big role in helping to do just that.



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### **Caggiano Orthodontics**

316 Parsippany Rd  
Parsippany, NJ 07054

PHONE: 973.887.8780

FAX: 973.887.9045

