

Community Institute for Psychotherapy

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2024-2025 News & Notes



May 2025 News & Notes

Body Image in the Digital Age

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

Body Image in the Digital Age: Supporting Teens

Throughout her presentation, Erika Bent LMFT, LPCC, CEDS-S, stressed the importance of parents engaging with their teens in respectful conversations on important topics. Whether discussing internet rules, difficult feelings about body image, or other issues, it's important to let teens feel heard and respected. Parents can model healthy communication by being open—ready to listen and validate their children's feelings.

Social Media

Parents can play a big role in helping their children navigate the internet safely. First by setting reasonable guidelines for its use, based on household values and the age of the child. The goal, Bent explained, is to balance safety with age-appropriate freedom.

Again, parents should have a conversation with their teen to discuss these guidelines and make clear the reasons for them.

Second, parents can help teens become more aware of the risks as well as the benefits of the internet. This includes parents paying attention to what their child is posting online, and how to look more critically at the information and images they see (for example, to

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understand that much of it is advertising). Bent encourages parents to discuss how information is manipulated and that what appears is not always real. Teens should be encouraged to pay attention to whether a site is supportive or whether it makes them feel bad, and follow or unfollow a site accordingly.

Embodied Living & Intuitive Eating

Embodied living, Bent explained, involves respecting our unique body and honoring its messages, whether a need for food, sleep, or other care. It means trusting our body to find its own healthy balance. Embodied living gets away from objectification of the body, instead enabling us to enter into it, appreciating its strengths and capabilities, with gratitude.

Parents should also consider their relationship to their own body. What do they communicate to their teen about body image, food, and weight? What can they do to promote body respect?

Intuitive eating, similarly, is responding to the body's needs without imposing restrictions, trusting that every body will be healthy in its own way. Weight alone is not an indication of health.

Ten principles of Intuitive Eating

Reject Diet Culture
Honor Your Hunger
Make Peace with Food

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Discover the Satisfaction Factor
Feel Your Fullness
Challenge the Food Police
Cope with Your Emotions with Kindness
Respect Your Body
Movement—Feel the Difference
Honor Your Health—Gentle Nutrition

Body Image & Puberty

Puberty is a time of great changes in the body. On average, children gain between 40 and 50 pounds during puberty. The weight gain is first, then the increase in height. It's important to help children to understand that these, as other changes, are normal. Again, Bent recommends talking to your child about these changes in a thoughtful conversation. Ask them, "How are you feeling about these changes?" When hearing their response, be cautious about expressing negative messages about weight and stigma.

Positive Affirmation

Bent advised parents to direct their praise for children less on appearance and/or outcomes (e.g. grades), than the effort and the personal qualities their child brings to a task: "I'm so proud of your strength and courage!"

Encouraging children's interest and involvement in a range of activities will help them build connections and acquire new skills. The more

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experience they gain, the more well- rounded an individual they will become.

When Should Parents Seek Help?

Eating disorders often begin in childhood as dieting. Parents should recognize this behavior as a sign that something needs attention.

Begin by starting a conversation with your child, validating their feelings by making space to talk about them. Don't be reactive. Again, acknowledging their feelings does not mean agreeing with them. ("I hear you are...") Thank them for their sharing.

If you have concerns about your child around food, body image, or other issues, begin with a consultation with your pediatrician or school counselor.

Erika Bent, LMFT, LPCC, CEDS-S, is the founder and clinical director of the Cypress Wellness Clinic in San Francisco, California.