



CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Parents can help teens with body positivity

By Jane Sutter

There's a lot of pressure on social media these days for adolescents when it comes to what they should look like.

According to the online learning platform The Social Institute, many social media influencers and celebrities are using social media to document their cosmetic surgeries and other beauty transformations. That can create unrealistic beauty standards for teens, with 45 percent of Gen Z (ages 11 to 26) believing there is too much pressure to be perfect online, according to the market research company GWI. Add on the social media posts about exercising and training to get the so-called perfect body, and it can add up to a lot of pressure on teens.

In fact, when The Social Institute asked students if they spend more time thinking about what they dislike about their appearance, compared to what they like about it, 53 percent said nearly all the time or sometimes they focus on their dislikes.

So what's a parent to do to help their children to love their bodies and adopt a healthy lifestyle?

The authors of the book *Raising Body Positive Teens: A Parent's Guide to Diet-Free Living, Exercise and Body Image* (2022, Jennifer Kingsley Publishers) offer a wide-range of information and guidance on this topic.

The co-authors are Signe Darpinian, a Certified Eating Disorder Specialist (CEDS); Wendy Sterling, a Certified Eating Disorder Registered Dietician and Approved Supervisor (CEDRD-S); and Dr. Shelley Aggarwal, M.D. board-certified in pediatrics and adolescent medicine with expertise in teen development and eating disorders. (All are based in California. Sterling is a native of New York State and a graduate of Cornell University.)

The trio previously wrote *No Weigh! A Teen's Guide to Positive Body Image, Food, and Emotional Wisdom* (2018, Jennifer Kingsley Publishers). They were motivated to write *Raising*



Body Positive Teens after they heard such a positive response from the parents about the first book.

What message do the authors want parents and teens to get from their books? "All bodies are good bodies but we do have conditioning around what the right body is supposed to look like," Darpinian said.

She remembers specifically what people said to her about her body when she was a teen. "I remember each incident. Things get imprinted differently when things are emotionally charged and that stage of life is so emotionally charged." Parents should think about their experiences and how they are imprinted on them and be compassionate toward their adolescents.

The authors point out that teens really value their friendships, and they want teens to have a friendship with their bodies in the same way. Body image is on a spectrum and the way a person feels about their body varies from day to day or even at different points in a

day, Darpinian said. A teen might feel one way about his or her body when in a locker room and another way when putting on an oversized T-shirt while getting ready for bed.

While there's a lot of emphasis in the U.S. culture on weight, all three authors firmly stated in interviews with *Creating a Safe Environment* that weight is by no means an indicator of overall health.

Aggarwal said her first message to parents is to back off on a conversation about weight, and instead think about their teen's behavior, and how to help them with behaviors that support a much larger picture of health and not just weight.

"Weight is not a primary biomarker of health. ... There are certain eating patterns and behavior patterns that have health consequences but that's a very different thing from talking about weight as the primary thing that needs to be addressed," Aggarwal stated.

Instead, parents should be looking at ways

to support their kids in behavior changes, so they are eating in such a way that it nourishes their bodies and aligns with their values and culture. Parents should look at whether their kids are moving their bodies in a way that's playful and meaningful for them and living a life that has balance and rich relationships, Aggarwal said. "Those are the things that define health and wellbeing, not whether or not you weigh a certain number."

Aggarwal pointed out that adolescence is the second most important growth time for a child, so weight gain is not only expected but needed. The message that adolescents need to hear is "Your body is going to change its shape and its size. That's normal." So when people stigmatize weight and body and have narrow ideas of what it means to be "healthy," which Aggarwal says is code for skinny or thin, that's damaging.

Teens need to understand that their body is going to gain height, weight and muscle mass and that's ok, and so is having a "robust appetite," Aggerwal said. That holds true for girls as well as boys. The common stereotype is that boys "will eat you out of house and home" but parents need to recognize that girls should have a large appetite too, as they also are growing.

'All foods are fitting'

Sterling advocates that adolescents eat three meals and two snacks every day. She advocates for a concept of making food equal in availability in the household. This is similar to saying that "all foods are fitting." Parents should have foods available in the refrigerator that make it easy for kids to get nourishment when they walk in the door after school or an activity, whether those foods be fruit or cut-up vegetables or all the fixings for a turkey sandwich, Sterling said. Snacks should also be placed where kids can get them when they are hungry, such as in their backpack or the car.

Sterling doesn't believe in using language such as "good" or "bad" to define foods. "When there's a 'good food, bad food' dynamic that happens and someone eats something that a parent or society deems as bad, that trickles into body image and then they feel guilty and they feel like they have to compensate and do something. So that's when you get into that toxic dynamic that's so well-known, unfortunately, in society."

When Sterling does public speaking events, parents often complain about their kids craving sugar. She finds in her practice that if that's

Tips from the books *Raising Body Positive Teens* and *No Weigh!*

Benefits of movement

- Improves mood, makes you happy
- Keeps emotions stable
- Reduces stress
- Improve cognitive concentration
- Helps with sleep
- Provides an opportunity to socialize with others and try out new things

Strategies for improving your body image:

- Treat your body with respect
- Expand your definition of beauty
- Reduce "body-checking" behaviors
- Adopt a hopeful mindset

Signs of excessive exercise

Parents should be aware of the dangers of excessive exercise as it can lead to unhealthy behaviors. Signs of that:

1. Not taking a rest day
2. Training through pain, injury or sickness.
3. Having only one gear like fast and intense as opposed to slow and moderate.
4. Exercising at odd times to get it in or feel stressed if they didn't exercise.
5. Not eating enough to meet their energy demands
6. Focusing on modifying appearance and burning calories

happening, then the kids are missing something in their day, such as skipping breakfast, eating a small lunch, or doing physical training and not following a proper recovery protocol. In her work, she finds that sugar cravings subside if kids eat more during their day. (Sterling has also been a nutrition consultant for a variety of sports teams, including the New York Islanders and New York Jets.)

Sleep is a vital component necessary for overall health, the three authors said. "Sleep is very foundational and it's really hard to feel great about anything or do well academically or in sports or feel good about yourself if you're sleep deprived," Sterling stated.

Parents need to help their kids implement a "wind-down" routine, which involves getting off screens and getting ready for bed and being in the mood to go to sleep, Sterling said. It's hard for a teen to be going "100 miles per hour" and then go to sleep.

As for sleeping in on the weekend and how that affects food intake, Sterling is fine with kids sleeping in on a Saturday but she also wants them to still eat three meals and two snacks, but with the schedule pushed later into the day because they got up later.

Morality of movement

In their book *Raising Body Positive Teens*,

the authors state: "There is an insidious, not-often-talked-about morality associated with moving. You're 'good' if you have exercised that day and 'bad' if you haven't." Sterling says that idea "really creates a lot of shame for people around their bodies ... That creates a poor relationship with moving and a poor relationship with one's body." It's also not effective.

"We know that when people are exercising for internal reasons, they're more likely to sustain an exercise program than when they are doing it for external reasons like weight loss or body image reasons," Sterling said. "Nothing makes people like exercise less than when they're forced to do it or when a parent makes them do it."

When people exercise to burn calories or lose weight, it teaches them to have a bad relationship with food, Sterling said. "It really prevents food from being enjoyed just as it is and indirectly sends the message that we need to worry and do something about our weight and our food."

It's important for parents to emphasize joyful activity, which can take a variety of forms, not just playing on a sports team. Encouraging kids to find things they like to do, which may take some time, is important as is finding out if there are reasons a teen doesn't like to

Continued on page 3

move. It could have to do with discomfort with the skills needed, or the clothing, or teasing or bullying that's going on.

Body scrutiny

Darpinian said that in her practice of working with people with eating disorders, she sees one of two different behaviors. One is body avoidance, where the person avoids looking at their body. They might get dressed in the dark or wear bulky clothes.

The other behavior is incessant body checking. Darpinian said that there is a risk factor with scrutinizing. If a person is looking for flaws, he or she will find them. "Scrutiny breeds dissatisfaction." For example, she has a client who every time she begins to walk into the bathroom, she pulls up her shirt before she even gets in there, and then once in there, looks at her midriff. "Body checking can be a behavior that becomes really habitual" and it can be a prompt that leads the person to want to do something. Her goal in working with these clients is to reduce how much time they spend checking their body.

Darpinian says that parents need to think about their own relationship with food and the messages they send to their children. A major message from all three authors is that diets don't work; studies show that a majority of people regain weight when they go off a diet.

Parents should do an inventory of their relationship with food and note if there are ways they'd like to be thinking and feeling differently. "That will inform the messages they give to



their child because we don't want there to be an incongruity between what they're feeding to their child and what they are doing."

For example if parents want to have an "all foods fit household" and are telling their kids, "there are no good and bad foods and everything is there and eat whatever your body is calling for," but Mom and Dad are on diets, then the messages conflict.

Darpinian said she and her co-authors wrote *Raising Body Positive Teens* to give parents an image of what a peaceful relationship with body image and food looks like. "We've all sort of lost our way."

Media messages

It's up to parents to help kids navigate the messages of media, whether it be TV, movies, social media, etc. but doing so with a "lens of compassion," as Aggarwal put it. She calls it "an unprecedented time" with the current social norms and media that exist. It's imperative that parents and adolescents become critical viewers and thinkers.

Darpinian watches TV with her teen-age daughter, and occasionally Darpinian will comment on what she's observing regarding body size. For example, in one show a teen was wearing a fat suit and people were making fun of him. Darpinian noted that the implication was "that being in a larger body is not attractive, when in reality it's just conditioning. I might say, 'I like to watch *New Girl* but I don't appreciate it when they make fun of Schmitt being in a fat suit. There is nothing wrong with being fat.'"

Now her daughter occasionally notices messages about body size and points them out, such as recently noting that all the dancers on a TV show were the same size, Darpinian said.

Darpinian points out that a goal for parents should be to promote healthy behaviors in the home in a way that are good for all kids regardless of the kids' sizes. "All kids benefit from moving in ways that they love, all kids benefit from getting good sleep, all kids benefit from less time on their devices."

Jane Sutter is a freelance writer based in Rochester.

Other resources:

"Therapy Rocks" podcast:

Signe Darpinian is the host of a podcast called "Therapy Rocks" available on a variety of platforms. To listen to a podcast with her co-authors of *Raising Body Positive Teens*, go to <https://audioboom.com/posts/8088665-raising-body-positive-teens>

Darpinian has an interview with Dr. Jason Nagata, an expert on eating disorders, body image and muscle-enhancing behaviors in adolescent boys and young men. <https://audioboom.com/posts/7938240-boys-biceps-and-bulking>

The Ellyn Satter Institute

The Institute provides a variety of information, including for parents on how to transform family meals into joyful, healthful, struggle-free events, free from drama and conflict. For information go to: <https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/>

The Social Institute:

The Social Institute offers tips on how to make social media a more positive space. <https://thesocialinstitute.com/blog/20-tips-to-make-social-media-a-positive-place-from-the-team-at-the-social-institute/>

Watch for These Warning Signs of Abuse in Minors

No longer wants to see a **particular person** they had been close to

Declining **academic** performance

Tries to hide use of **technology**

No longer interested in **activities** they used to enjoy

Changes in **personality**

Demonstrates **aggressive behavior** or constantly angry

Tries to get minors **alone**



Commits physical and emotional **boundary violations**

Withdraws from family or friends

Keeps **secrets** with minors

Gives lavish **gifts** to minors

Allows or encourages minors to **break laws** or rules

Has **inappropriate** or suggestive conversations with minors

Is overly interested in **spending time** with minors

Does not believe the **rules** apply to them (or, does not follow rules or protocols)

Takes **photos** without approval, or asks minors to send them photos

... and These Warning Signs of Perpetrators



ROMAN CATHOLIC
DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:
Tammy Sylvester,
Diocesan Coordinator
of Safe Environment Education
and Compliance,
585-328-3228,
or Tammy.Sylvester@dor.org.

Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.

To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victims' Assistance Coordinator:

Deborah Housel
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,
ext. 1555
victimsassistance@dor.org.

All photos in this newsletter are for illustrative purposes only.

ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>
PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.

NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>
A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.

FOR PARENTS:

Common Sense Media

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>
A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education

Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepsafe.org/>
Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies

Faith and Safety:

<http://www.faithandsafety.org>
Safety in a digital world, a joint project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Greek Orthodox Church in America

LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Bivona Child Advocacy Center
(Monroe, Wayne counties):
www.BivonaCAC.org
585-935-7800

Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:
607-737-8449
www.chemungcounty.com

Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:
315-253-9795
www.cacofcayugacounty.org

Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program
(Ontario County):
www.cacfingerlakes.org
315-548-3232

Darkness to Light organization:
www.d2l.org

STEBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:
www.sthcs.org
716-372-8532

NYS State Central Registry
(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):
1-800-342-3720

NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)
866-313-3013

Tompkins County Advocacy Center:
www.theadvocacycenter.org
607-277-3203

Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:
585-786-8846

Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:
315-531-3417, Ext. 6