

a healthy perspective on body weight and shape - how to promote a healthy body, rather than an 'ideal' body

This fact sheet aims to help you promote the importance of an active and healthy body, rather than a thin or lean body, and to help you understand the relationship between weight and health.



There are many strong and influential messages that can lead people to believe that a healthy body comes in a certain size and shape. This is problematic because (1) people who do not fit this shape may be more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviours to try to fit the 'ideal' shape, creating a battle with food, weight, and body image; and (2) people who do fit this 'ideal' shape may assume they are healthy simply because of their body size rather than due to healthy eating and physical activity.

Body mass index (BMI) is most commonly used to assess whether a person is underweight, a normal weight, or overweight for their age and height. BMI-for-age charts for children

offer us only one part of the picture and are not necessarily a good reflection of overall health. What is considered a 'normal' weight can vary considerably among same aged children, and is influenced by height and body shape. Genetics play a role in determining a weight and shape that is most healthy for a person, so naturally this differs for each person. It is normal for people to be quite different from one another; this is something to celebrate rather than try to change.

"A healthy body" is one that, whatever shape, size, or weight, is in a state of wellbeing, which allows a person to achieve their goals and participate in life. A healthy body is therefore not merely the absence of illness or injury. Healthy bodies can come in a variety of weights, shapes, and sizes, and this is true for both children and adults.

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a healthy body for your child

A healthy body is important for everyone, but especially for children who need energy for growing and everyday activity. Parents are in a great position to help their child understand that "health" is different to body shape and size. To develop your child's healthy body, you can encourage healthy eating and exercise patterns, and support your child to accept their natural body, whatever shape or size it may be.

physical activity

Moving the body comes naturally to children and is very enjoyable for them. Children can really benefit from general activity, such as playing at the park. Encourage your child to be proud of their body by talking to them about the amazing things it can do (see Activity 5). If children are encouraged to engage in regular, enjoyable physical activity, suited to their age and development, their body will naturally develop according to their most healthy weight, size, and shape.

what can I do if I am concerned about my child's weight?

This is a valid concern for parents. Encouraging your child to be a certain weight, size, or shape, is not the best way to ensure they have a healthy body. Rather ensure they have access to a variety of nutritious foods, and opportunities and encouragement to participate in general physical activity. And make these changes as a whole family without focusing on weight or appearance. Please refer to p.50 of the Parent Book or the support contacts page for more information.

healthy eating

The food a person eats plays a role in the health of their body. Eating a variety of foods with different nutrients gives the body the ingredients it needs for daily activities. Unfortunately, many messages in our society focus on how food affects our body shape rather than our health. So when talking to your child aim to focus on how food benefits their body on the inside and provide exposure to foods for pleasure, fun, and celebration. If children are provided with a balanced variety of foods and encouraged to eat according to their natural appetite, their body will naturally develop according to their most healthy weight, size, and shape.

accepting a natural body shape and size

Talk to your child about the importance of having a healthy body, and make it clear this does not mean having a particular weight, size, or shape, to give your child a strong foundation for positive feelings about their body. Be a good role model by working towards your own healthy body, and accepting your own natural weight, size, and shape, to encourage your child to be healthy and body confident too.