

Body Image During Puberty

Part of each person's self-concept is something we call a *body image*. Your body image is your concept or idea of how your body is put together, and what your appearance is like. A body image can be positive or negative, accurate or distorted. Most people have a reasonably accurate body image, but they are likely to be dissatisfied with some aspects of their appearance. One person doesn't like his nose. Another wishes she were taller. These

small dissatisfactions are a normal human experience. But part of self-acceptance is learning to develop a positive attitude toward your body, and not taking your dissatisfactions too seriously.

Tracey is unhappy with some aspects of her appearance. She thinks she's too large, and her face looks strange to her. Almost every morning she and her brother have a conversation like this one.



Adolescents often get teased about the amount of time they spend looking in the mirror. But it takes time to become comfortable with a new appearance, and

examining your reflection is one of the ways you do it. When young adolescents look in the mirror, however, they tend to exaggerate their small imperfections. As a result, they may

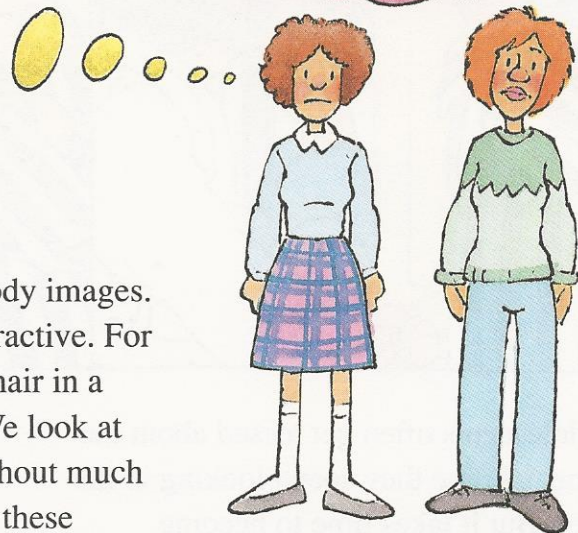
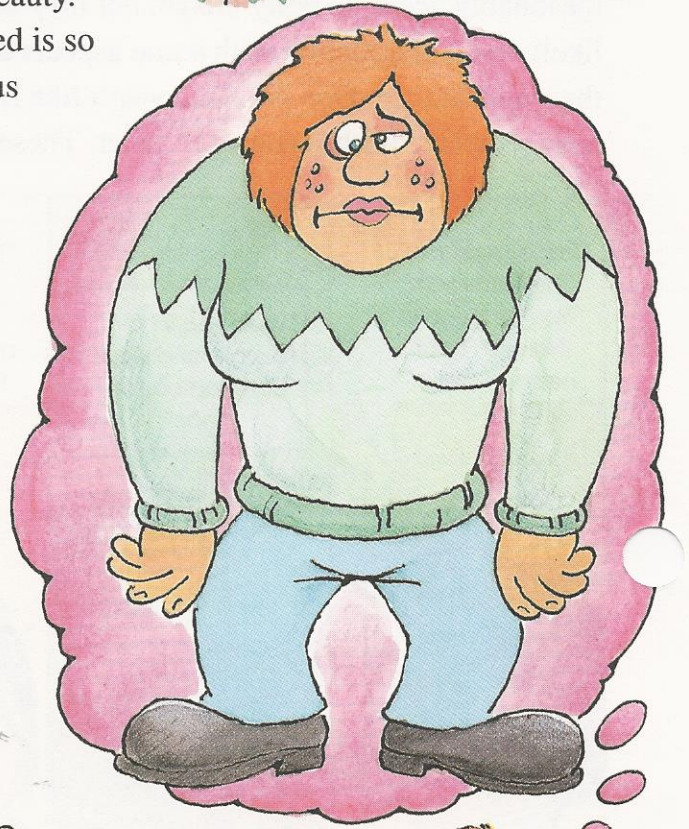
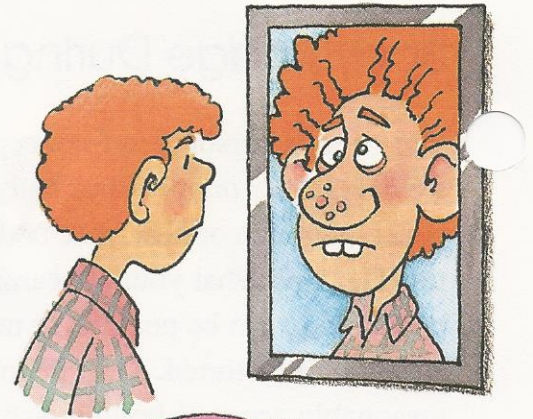
develop a negative body image. This in turn can have an effect on their self-concept. There are several reasons why this happens:

- During adolescence people often spend a lot of time thinking about their appearance. This is normal, but whenever attention is turned inward instead of outward toward others, inadequacies and weaknesses tend to be highlighted instead of gifts and strengths. Too often, people are inclined to see ugliness in themselves instead of beauty. That is why the experience of being accepted and loved is so essential. Others see our gifts and strengths and help us to turn our attention away from ourselves and our inadequacies.

- Adolescence is a time when being accepted is very important. Everyone wants to belong, to fit in with the group. But the physical changes of puberty happen at different times and at different rates. Adolescents are often unhappy with their appearance because they have not yet begun to develop, or because they are much more developed than most of the people around them.



- Media, and especially advertising, influence body images. Certain standards are set for what is considered attractive. For example, females must be very thin, or wear their hair in a particular way. Males must be tall and muscular. We look at these images and they become part of us, often without much thought on our part. We measure ourselves against these unrealistic standards of attractiveness, and become



dissatisfied. The more uncertain people are about their appearance or their attractiveness, the more influenced they will be by these images. Since it is natural to be somewhat uncertain about the body during puberty, media images often have a strong influence at this time and may contribute to a negative body image.

Understanding why people can develop a negative body image during puberty does not prevent it from occurring, but can help keep it in perspective. Physical appearance is only one aspect of self-concept. It's important not to let it take over your whole life.

Even though adolescents often worry about their appearance, they don't always give their bodies the basic care that is needed. Adequate rest and nourishing food are especially important at this time. It's easier to withstand the ups and downs of adolescence when you are well-fed and well-rested. Regular physical exercise is also important. Many young people have a tendency to become much less active during adolescence. This is unfortunate because exercise is necessary for the physical



health of the body, has a positive effect on people's moods, and contributes to an attractive appearance.

Caring for the body also includes personal hygiene, which becomes more important during puberty. As the sweat glands develop, the body perspires more, and this perspiration has a stronger odour. The glands beneath the skin also begin to produce more oil, affecting skin and hair. As a result, frequent showers or baths are much more essential than they were during childhood.

Health and Body Image

Weight is often a big issue for adolescent girls, and indeed for many adult women. It is normal for females to have more body fat than males. In fact, without a certain percentage of body fat, menstruation cannot occur.

When girls experience the rapid weight gain of puberty, they may become concerned, especially when they do not have the long thin body that they see in so many fashion magazines. For some girls, their dissatisfaction with their bodies leads them to diet so severely that they harm their health and even stunt their growth. Adolescence is a time when a healthy diet is especially important because of rapid bone growth.

Unfortunately, for a few teen-agers, a preoccupation with weight and dieting can contribute to the development of a serious eating disorder such as *anorexia nervosa* (dieting to the point of near starvation) or *bulimia* (eating very large amounts of foods and then getting rid of it by vomiting or taking a lot of laxatives). Both of these eating disorders are dangerous, are almost exclusively experienced by females, and require specialized medical treatment.