

A parent guide  
for confident  
conversations  
about weight

Having  
**Body-Positive  
Conversations**  
with Children





# About this guide

Conversations about health and well-being are an important part of your child's life and can include talking about your child's body. All children have unique features that can affect their health and growth, such as disability, mental health, genetics, and eating preferences. Conversations can often feel hard for parents, but it is important to feel comfortable when talking to your child about their weight, body image and health, and to think about their uniqueness when having these conversations.

It is also important to understand that body weight alone does not determine someone's [health](#) and that you cannot tell how healthy someone is just by looking at them. Despite this, society treats people with larger bodies poorly. Children hear and see things about weight and health and may want to talk to you about it. As a parent, having the correct information is important so that you and your child can have a positive conversation.

## A note from the team ....

In this guide, when we refer to 'child' we mean those who access the paediatric healthcare system. This includes children and adolescents. When we say 'parents' we refer to all caregivers.

## ➔ What is the right term to use?

Not everybody agrees on the best term to use when talking about weight. You may hear doctors and others use the word 'obesity' to describe people with larger bodies. Obesity Canada suggests using person-first language when talking about weight e.g. 'people with obesity'.

In this guide, we use 'people in larger bodies' or 'people with higher weight'. We also use a lot of other terms and define them along the way.

When talking about weight with your child, use the terms you and your child feel most comfortable with.



The messages in this guide may be useful to other adults in your child's life (e.g. grandparents, teachers, coaches). Please feel free to share this guide with them.



This guide has been created to support you in having body-positive conversations with your child, no matter their body weight, shape, size or ability. It provides practical information that you can use if your child brings up the topic or if you choose to raise it.

This guide provides information on:

- How and when to talk about weight and health with your child
- What words to use
- How to respond to weight-related teasing
- How to talk about body diversity

As you read this guide you will find:

- Definitions of some important words
- Words and sentences to help you get the conversation started
- Tips to help you feel more confident about having conversations
- Activities to help you think through how this advice might fit best for you and your child
- Links to different resources (e.g. videos) on this topic

→ **Body positivity** is appreciation of all body types.

→ **Body diversity** refers to different body shapes, sizes, weights, heights and abilities.



### How to use this guide

Download and save this interactive guide to open all links. Words that are underlined in blue mean that you can click on them to get more information. Move from page to page by clicking on the arrows at the bottom of each page. You can also move from section to section of the guide by clicking on the tool bar found on the right side of the page.





# From one parent to another

Body image. Such a tough and touchy subject. But does it have to be? What if we had the words and the delivery style to have conversations with our kids about their bodies that are positive, healthy and helpful – that won't add to the shame often faced by our kids as a result of societal pressures? Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital has worked with parents, youth, researchers, and clinicians to provide a real-life guide to support such conversations.

There are so many factors that contribute to kids' weights, including the onset of puberty. It is important that parents are prepared for these conversations with their children at any age – often it is the child or youth who will be the one to introduce the subject. Society continues to promote unrealistic expectations of body size and shape. We need to foster positive body image in our kids and promote mental health to help them to thrive.

In our house, we have four kids ranging from 13 to 23 with inherited metabolic conditions that affect their muscles. With wacky metabolisms, medications, and exercise intolerance, three of my four kids live in bigger bodies and find weight management challenging. My kids have faced negative comments and bullying around the size and shape of their bodies.

Even doctors and other clinicians may use insensitive language at times. I sometimes find myself changing the language they use to keep conversations from becoming negative and hurtful. This can be tough stuff!

It is important as parents that we give our kids space to talk about their feelings related to the size and shape of their bodies. We also need to be mindful of our words and reflect on our own habits and body image in order to set our kids up for success. We all want our kids to grow up with healthy, active habits that they can maintain throughout their lives.

I hope this guide gives you a good starting place for having body-positive conversations with your kids. Making these conversations positive and really listening to your child will go a long way toward promoting healthy lifestyles and creating a healthy body image.

– Christine Hill



Christine and her four children aged 13-23





# How and when to talk about weight and health with your child

Children often bring up the topic of weight with their parents and so it is important to be prepared. Thinking about their bodies can happen at an early age and so it is never too early to introduce positive conversations about weight and bodies to your child.

## Getting the conversation started

There are a variety of tips you can use to help guide the conversation with your child. The tips below are useful even if the child doesn't bring up the topic themselves. Here are some things you can try:

**Try this!**

- Think about who your child may want to talk about this with – you, another parent or with other family members.
- Be open to talking about your child's body and weight.
- Let your child know that you are willing to listen to their concerns and questions and that you are there to help.
- Give your child space to talk about how they feel.
- Help your child feel comfortable – create a safe space for sharing feelings (e.g. all feelings are ok).
- Thank your child for sharing their feelings with you.
- Focus on qualities other than your child's appearance (e.g. kind, caring).

**The "don'ts" of a conversation**

When getting the conversation started, try to avoid the following:

- Making it a 'big' conversation
- Ignoring, criticising or minimising your child's comments about their weight
- Teasing your child about their weight
- Singling out your child in front of other family members, such as siblings

## Activity

Were you able to try some of the options listed above? Think about what tips worked well and list them below. Are there other approaches you and your child could try? List those too!

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## Remember, when having the conversation with your child it is important for you to:



### Be positive

Nobody knows your child better than you.

- Focus on what is most important to your child.
- Emphasise your child’s unique qualities and traits (e.g. kindness, creativity, humour, effort, helpfulness).
- Tell your child when they do something well! Be specific with your praise. It will help reinforce that they are worth more than just their physical appearance.

### Let them know this is a common topic for kids

It is completely normal for your child to be curious about their body, especially when experiencing puberty. It is important to explain that fluctuations in weight during puberty is a normal part of their growth and development.

If your child makes a comment about another person’s body or the way they look:

- Remind your child that people come in different sizes and shapes and how we look does not define who we are.
- Be supportive so that your child feels comfortable asking questions about their own bodies.
- Let them know that it is ok to ask you questions as long as they are respectful.



### Seek advice

If you are concerned about your child’s weight, or if your child feels anxious or stressed about how they look or feel, seek advice from healthcare professionals such as a family doctors, paediatricians, psychologists and dietitians.

Reach out to a healthcare professional if your child shows the following:

- Struggling to eat enough to have energy.
- Preoccupation with their body weight or shape.
- Behaviours related to weight control (e.g. avoiding certain foods, calorie-counting, too much focus on food and/or weight, making themselves vomit, exercising too much).
- Regularly eating a large amount of food in a short period of time, feeling out of control, hoarding or hiding food.



### Resources

#### Further information can be found here:

- [Eating Disorders Program, Hospital for Sick Children](#)
- [National Eating Disorder Information Centre](#)





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# What do I say? What words should I use?

When talking about weight and body image with your child, it is important to think about what you want to say and the words you use. **Your words matter.** **What you say can have an impact on how your child feels about their body.** Below are some suggestions for you and your family to try. Keep discussions positive!

➔ **Body image** is how a person thinks about their physical body. This may be positive, negative or both.

## What to say...to your child

Instead of saying ...	✓ Try	Say
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I think you need to lose some weight.</li> <li>I've noticed you're getting fat.</li> <li>You should go on a diet.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Focusing on health, not appearance or weight</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We are going to try something new because we want the whole family to feel good.</li> <li>You can't tell how healthy someone is just by looking at them.</li> <li>Eating meals with different foods and being active in different ways will help your body grow and develop into the shape and size it is meant to be.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You're fine.</li> <li>You have nothing to worry about.</li> <li>Just don't think about it.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Hearing their concerns</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tell me what's bothering you.</li> <li>Did something happen to make you think this?</li> <li>You can tell me anything you're worried about.</li> <li>It sounds like you're having a tough time. The most important thing is to listen to your body.</li> <li>What would you say to your friend if they felt this way about their body?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>That food will make you slimmer.</li> <li>That food has too many calories.</li> <li>This food is fattening and unhealthy.</li> <li>You better not have dessert tonight if you want to lose weight.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Recognizing and praising healthy behaviours</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drinking water is a great choice when you are thirsty!</li> <li>Let's try a new fruit or vegetable this week.</li> <li>There are some foods that your body needs everyday to help you to grow strong and healthy.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You need to be more active.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Making it a family effort</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Let's plan a family activity that gets us moving.</li> <li>Thank you for inviting me to go to the park. What a great idea.</li> <li>Why don't we put our favourite music on and move our bodies!</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I'm concerned you're overweight.</li> <li>That person is fat.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Taking a positive tone</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fat is not a word we use to hurt people.</li> <li>Fat helps us! It is an organ that helps our body work.</li> <li>All bodies are good bodies.</li> <li>Just as some people have blond hair and others have brown hair, some people are smaller, and some people are bigger!</li> <li>Fat is not a personal trait.</li> </ul>



## Activity

Use the blank speech bubbles below to write phrases you think your child would respond to. These can be phrases from page 7 or new phrases you have created.



### Remember...

Every body is different. Liking the body we have been given is important for self-esteem, self-worth and for our mental health. When thinking about what to say to your child, consider that for some children:

- physical activity may be difficult or impossible.
- nutrition is not always delivered through the mouth (e.g. tube fed).
- making healthier choices requires a lot of guidance and support.
- access to healthy food may be limited.
- taking medication may increase their weight.

### Resources

Looking for more information to help guide conversations with your child about weight?

Watch this video created by the Hospital for Sick Children: [Communicating about weight with parents and families](#)





# What to say... when talking about yourself

It starts with you as the parent! Think about the words and actions you use to talk about your own body. It is sometimes hard, but children learn a lot by watching and listening.

## Instead of ...

- Complaining about your weight, shape or size.
- Commenting on other peoples' bodies.
- Talking about calories.
- Treating exercise as a punishment or consequence of unhealthy food choices.



## Try to ...

- + Talk about your body in a positive way.
- + Show respect for yourself and others.
- + Model a healthy lifestyle by being active, eating well, and feeling good about yourself.
- + Talk about how activity can make you stronger, have more energy, and feel happier.



## Activity

Write down three positive things about yourself (they don't have to be body related) that you can share with your child:

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
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 \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
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# Weight-related teasing

Children often experience teasing about their body at school and at home, especially if they live in a larger body. **Teasing can affect the way a person sees themselves and their body for many years.** Your child may feel uncomfortable telling you they are being teased about their weight. Start a conversation with them by asking questions like:



If your child is upset because their peers or siblings have been saying negative things about the way they or others look, try saying:



- ➔ Teasing a child about their weight may lead to:
- restricting or hiding food
  - binge eating
  - poor body image
  - low self-esteem

## Resources

If your child is being bullied because of their weight, here is a resource that may help: [RUDD Center for Food Policy & Obesity](#)





# How to talk about body diversity with your child

Our genes largely determine our body shape, size, weight and height. This is called **body diversity**. Other things that make our bodies different from one another are our abilities. We can all do different things!

Differences in size, shape, and abilities are normal. Some children wear glasses, have freckles, or a different hair colour. Other children may use a wheelchair, a hearing aid, or a prosthetic. These are differences we can see. Sometimes, people have differences we cannot see. For example, some children may have different ways of thinking and communicating (e.g. someone with a learning disability or who has trouble forming words).

These differences are what make us who we are. Appreciating all body types is important. This is called **body positivity**. Talking about body positivity and diversity at a young age can help kids have a healthy relationship with their bodies, which they can carry with them into adulthood.

I am comfortable with my body

My self-worth is much more than how I look

All bodies are good bodies

I appreciate my body's shape and size



You can approach conversations about body diversity by encouraging your child to:

→ It sounds like your body has helped you do amazing things today.

→ I believe all bodies are wonderful. What do you think?

# 1 Think about how they feel and treat others

We all look different on the outside, but experience many of the same feelings and emotions on the inside. Help your child understand that what matters is not what people look like, but how they act and treat others.

## Activity

Brainstorm ways you could respond to their questions in a positive way.

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# 2 Embrace their background and life experiences

All bodies are good bodies! People come in different shapes and sizes, and some of us live in larger bodies compared to others. We all have different abilities, backgrounds, and life experiences too. All of these differences are what make us unique. Help your child embrace who they are.

## → Everybody deserves to be seen

Children with disabilities may feel left out of discussions about body image and diversity since their body type is often underrepresented in the media.

## ✓ Try it!

- Introduce your child to people with different backgrounds and experiences.
- Show your child examples of people who make a positive impact on society and their community.
- Discuss how people's body shape or size doesn't affect their ability to do good things.
- Find images that show lots of different kinds of bodies in movies, toys, and books.
- Talk to them about who they follow on social media.
- Explain that pictures on social media are often changed to make people look a certain way that is not realistic.

# 3 Appreciate their body

Our bodies can do amazing things! Recognise that this might look different for each child because all bodies have their own needs and abilities. For example:

- Arms might let us hug our loved ones
- Lungs can help us get air into our body
- The heart pumps blood into our bodies
- Senses like smell, taste or touch help us understand the world around us

## Activity

Write down some of your child's favourite activities or hobbies. Brainstorm ways that their body helps them accomplish this. Share these examples with your child and explain how their body allows them to do amazing things.

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# Conclusion

This guide has provided parents with strategies and tools to use when having conversations about weight, body image and health with their children. It has given tips for parents to use for all children with all body types and abilities. This is especially important when children have complex needs, for example children with disabilities. No one approach will be right for every child and family. We hope that this guide has provided practical support that parents can apply to everyday life.



# Resources

## Websites

[A Guy's Guide to Body Image](#)

[Body Diversity Newfoundland and Labrador](#)

[Body Image Health](#)

[Health at Every Size](#)

[MORE-LOVE.ORG](#)

[Obesity Canada](#)

[Parents: Talking to your kids about weight](#)

[The Full Bloom Project](#)

[The Student Body: Promoting Health at Any Size](#)

[WHAT to SAY](#)

## Books

Love your body: Your body can do amazing things ... By: Jessica Sanders and Carol Rosetti (Frances Lincoln Children's Books, Illustrated edition 2020).

Your body is awesome: Body respect for children. By: Sigrun Danielsdottir (Singing Dragon, Illustrated edition Oct. 6 2014).

Shapesville. By: Andy Mills and Beck Osborn (Gurze Books, Illustrated edition Oct. 1 2003).

Full mouse empty mouse: A tale of food and feelings. By: Dina Zeckhausen (Magination Press, 1st edition Aug. 28 2007).

I like me! By: Nancy Carlson (Puffin Books, Illustrated edition May 15 1990).

I'm, like, SO fat! Helping your teen make healthy choices about eating and exercise in a weight-obsessed world. By: Dianne Neumark-Sztainer (The Guilford Press, 1st edition Jun. 7 2005).

Real kids come in all sizes – 10 essential lessons to build your child's body esteem. By: Kathy Kater (Harmony, 1st edition Jul. 27 2004).

The body image workbook for teens: Activities to help girls develop a healthy body image in an image-obsessed world. By: Julia Taylor (Instant Help, Illustrated edition Dec. 1 2014).



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## Selected research articles

The information in this guide was drawn, in part, from the following research articles:

Berge, J.M., MacLehose, R., Loth, K.A., Eisenberg, M., Bucchianeri, M.M., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2013). [Parent conversations about healthful eating and weight: Associations with adolescent disordered eating behaviors](#). *JAMA Pediatrics*, 167(8): 746-753.

Bauer, K.W., Bucchianeri, M.M., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2013). [Mother-reported parental weight talk and adolescent girls' emotional health, weight control attempts, and disordered eating behaviors](#). *Journal of Eating Disorders*, 1(45): 1-8.

Gillison, F.B., Lorenc, A.B., Sleddens, E.F., Williams, S.L., & Atkinson, L. (2016). [Can it be harmful for parents to talk to their child about their weight? A meta-analysis](#). *Preventive Medicine*, 93: 135-146.

Golden, N.H., Schneider, M., & Wood, C. (2016). [Preventing obesity and eating disorders in adolescents](#). *Pediatrics*, 138(3): e20161649

Lessard, L.M., Puhl, R.M., Larson, N., Simone, M., Eisenberg, M.E., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2020). [Parental contributors to the prevalence and long-term health risks of family weight teasing in adolescence](#). *Journal of Adolescent Health* (early online 9 November).

Lydecker, J.A., Riley, K.E., & Grilo, C.M. (2018). [Associations of parents' self, child, and other "fat talk" with child eating behaviors and weight](#). *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 51(6): 527-534.

McPherson, A.C., Hamilton, J., Kingsnorth, S., Knibbe, T.J., Peters, M., Swift, J.A., ... & Ball, G.D.C. (2017). [Communicating with children and families about obesity and weight-related topics: A scoping review of best practices](#). *Obesity Reviews*, 18(2): 164-182.

McPherson, A.C., Knibbe, T.J., Peters, M., Swift, J.A., Browne, N., Ball, G.D.C., & Hamilton, J. (2018). ["Fat is really a four-letter word": Exploring weight-related communication best practices in children with and without disabilities and their caregivers](#). *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 44(4): 636-643.

Puhl, R.M., Wall, M.M., Chen, C., Bryn Austin, S., Eisenberg, M.E., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2017). [Experiences of weight teasing in adolescence and weight-related outcomes in adulthood: A 15-year longitudinal study](#). *Preventive Medicine*, 100: 173-179.

Puhl, R.M. & Luedicke, J. (2012). [Weight-based victimization among adolescents in the school setting: Emotional reactions and coping behaviors](#). *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 41(1): 27-40.



## Other sources

Gold, S.S. [How to Talk to Kids About Body Image](#). Parents. 2019. [accessed 2020 Sep 22].

Health Service Executive. [A guide for parents: Communicating with your child about a healthy weight](#). Safe food. [accessed 2020 Sep 22].

National Eating Disorders Association. [Size diversity & health at every size](#). [accessed 2020 Dec 7].

National Eating Disorders Collaboration. [Body Image](#). [accessed 2020 Sep 22].

STOP Obesity Alliance. Alliance for a Healthier Generation. [Weigh in: Talking to your children about weight and health](#). [accessed 2020 Sep 22].



## Development team

**Amy C. McPherson**, PhD, CPsychol (UK), RP (Qualifying), Senior Scientist, Bloorview Research Institute, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital and Associate Professor, University of Toronto.

**Christine Provvienza**, MSc, R.Kin, Knowledge Translation Lead, Evidence to Care, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital.

**Revi Bonder**, MSc, Research Coordinator, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital.

**Julia Kyat**, Family Leader, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital.

**Marie Hooper**, Family Leader, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital.

**Christine Hill**, Parent, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital.

## Contributors

**Alyssa Neville**, BSc, Research Assistant, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital.

**Windermere Jarvis**, MPH, Knowledge Broker, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital.

## Expert reviewers

**Angela Alberga**, Assistant Professor, Concordia University, QC.

**Geoff Ball**, Professor of Pediatrics, University of Alberta, AB.

**Jennifer (Jay) Baum**, Registered Dietitian, Pometta Nutrition, ON.

**Annick Buchholz**, Clinical Psychologist, Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, ON.

**Erin Gardiner**, Parent, Toronto, ON.

**Fiona Gillison** Associate Professor, University of Bath, UK.

**Elisabeth Grey**, Research Associate, University of Bath, UK.

**Jill Hamilton**, Professor of Paediatrics, University of Toronto and The Hospital for Sick Children, ON.

**Aislin Mushquash**, Assistant Professor, Lakehead University, ON.

**Maxine Myre**, Postdoctoral Scholar, University of Calgary, AB.

**Rebecca Puhl**, Professor, University of Connecticut, USA.

**Ximena Ramos**, Director of Research & Policy, Obesity Canada, AB.

**Shelly Russell-Mayhew**, Professor and Registered Psychologist, University of Calgary, AB.

**Josée Sovinsky**, Registered Dietitian, Registered Psychotherapist (Qualifying), Blossom Counselling Centre, ON.

**Alene Toulany**, Staff Physician, The Hospital for Sick Children, ON.

**Brandie Weikle**, Parenting writer and journalist, Toronto, ON.

**Oliver Wilson**, Postdoctoral Scholar, University of Calgary, AB.

**Ian Zenlea**, Paediatric Endocrinologist and Assistant Professor, Trillium Health Partners and University of Toronto, ON.







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## How we made this guide

This parent guide was created using research evidence and curating existing resources on this topic. The content in the guide was co-created with parents and caregivers who have knowledge and experience on this topic. Additional feedback was sought from experts in this field including healthcare professionals and researchers. We took this approach to ensure that various viewpoints were included in the guide.

## How to cite the guide

Providenza, C., Bonder, R., Hill, C., Hooper, M., Kyat, J., & McPherson, A.C. (2021). Having body-positive conversations with children: A parent guide for confident conversations about weight. Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital. Toronto, ON.

## Holland Bloorview

Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital is Canada's largest children's rehabilitation hospital dedicated to improving the lives of children with disabilities. As a fully affiliated hospital with the University of Toronto, we are home to the Bloorview Research Institute and the Teaching and Learning Institute, allowing us to conduct transformational research and train the next generation of experts in childhood disability. For more information please visit [www.hollandbloorview.ca](http://www.hollandbloorview.ca)

