

Body Image in Boys

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Body image is how a person sees their own body. Negative body image has long been a problem for adolescent girls, due to the societal pressure to be thin. Parents, especially mothers, often recognize their daughters' preoccupation with weight and appearance and watch for signs of a developing eating disorder. But what about sons? More and more, body image is also becoming an extreme focus for adolescent boys. As such, eating disorders in boys are now on the rise.

A negative body image in a boy can be caused by a variety of factors. Perhaps one of the greatest issues is when he is overweight and is teased for being so. This can be so devastating and emotionally damaging to a boy that even if he acquires a normal weight as he matures, he may still feel shame and anguish about his body.

Another contributor to the prevalence of body image issues in boys is the media. The male images depicted in commercials and print advertisements are those of incredibly fit and muscular individuals. Just as with females, young males look at the glossy photos, then consider their reflection in the bathroom mirror. Comparisons are made and feelings of inadequacy inevitably set in.

Because young girls tend to be highly verbal, the signs and symptoms of body-dissatisfaction are more noticeable in them. This is often quite different with males. Not only are they inherently less verbal, they are less likely to discuss their concerns or difficulties because it seems like such a "girl" thing to do. Often, boys are ashamed and embarrassed of their feelings, and so remain secretive about their concerns and behaviors.

The pressures on boys to look a certain way have become huge and insidious. Consider current vernacular ... when did "shredded" cease to be something that was done to paper; or "cut" take on a completely different meaning than what a diner did to a steak? To say nothing of ripped, buff, six-pack, and abs. For the most part, these terms apply to the male gender. Today, the stress on young men to obtain some idealized version of a great body is enormous. Many boys therefore go to great lengths to achieve that desirable physique, including taking dangerous steroids or supplements, working out far beyond what is reasonable, and embarking on bizarre diets.

These issues have become so prevalent among young males in today's society that the term, Adonis Complex, was created to describe the obsession. How would a parent know that a son was moving in this unhealthy direction? Consider the following questions:

1. Does your son work out excessively, perhaps more than two hours a day? Does this time seem out of proportion to what he needs for athletic activities?
2. Do work outs take precedence over every other activity such as studies, hobbies, or spending time with friends?
3. Does your son seem overly preoccupied with looking like body builders in magazines?
4. Does your son use large numbers of dietary supplements, like creatinine or protein powder, in an effort to become more muscular?
5. Does your son use drugs found in health or nutrition stores, such as ephedrine or DHEA?

6. Do you have any reason to suspect that your son is using steroids? Has he grown more muscular than seems natural?

7. Does your son's weight fluctuate drastically, showing sudden gains and losses?

8. Does your son use dangerous techniques to lose weight, such as fasting or extreme dieting? Does he refuse to eat with the family because he is on a special diet?

9. Does your son use laxatives or diuretics?

10. Does your son spend a lot of time examining himself in the mirror, or look at himself in reflective surfaces like store or car windows?

A child who does any of the above probably has at least some symptoms of the Adonis Complex and may even have a full-fledged eating disorder.