DOS AND DON'TS
TO POSITIVELY INFLUENCE TEENS' BODY IMAGE

DO

Compliment the teen in your life on things other than their physical appearance to help them develop self-esteem that isn't dependent on their looks.

- Focus on their personality and strengths: *"Your energy is infectious. It's so much fun to be around you."*
- Praise their ideas and initiative: *"I like how you see things. You always have an original viewpoint that makes me think."*
- Show interest in their tastes and preferences, especially when they relate to their physical appearance: *"Your new haircut really suits your style!"*

DON'T

Make comments about your own body, someone else's body (such as a celebrity on TV), or a teen's body.

- *"I've gotta lose some weight, I'm getting flabby."*
- *" The host's dress looks awful on her!"*
- *"Wow, you're all muscle! You must work out a lot."*

Even if your comments aren't directly about your teen, they can still send the message that physical appearance is important to you. As a result, your teen may base a large part of their self-worth on their appearance.

DO

Be aware of your own relationship to your body and how much your own appearance defines your self-esteem.

Seeking professional help to unpack your own baggage may be a good idea. There's no reason to do it alone.

DON'T

Base your self-esteem solely or mainly on appearance.

You're unlikely to encourage a teen to accept themselves as they are if you yourself are fixated on changing your own body by slimming down or beefing up.

DO

Focus on appreciating what our bodies can do.

- For example, a P.E. teacher could recognize a student's physical effort without referring to their physical appearance.
- Think about what your body allows you to do as an adult in the different areas of your life—physical, cognitive, relational, professional, leisure, etc.

DON'T

See the body as an image that exists only to be evaluated, criticized and altered.

DO

Make decisions about your body that show you value comfort over appearance.

- Wear comfortable clothing that allows you to move easily and encourage this habit among young people: *"You look comfy in those pants."*

- Separate lifestyle habits from a desire to modify your body:
  - Eat a varied diet that you enjoy and that meets your body's needs.
  - Practise a sport that meets your body's needs in the present moment.

DON'T

Prioritize physical appearance and desirability over well-being.

- Not changing your wardrobe even if your clothes are too tight or leave marks on your body.

- Linking lifestyle habits to a desire to change your body:
  - Restricting your diet, going on a diet, or tolerating feelings of hunger or deprivation in order to lose weight.
  - Viewing physical activity as a way to control your body; e.g., by following a strict workout routine.

DO

Learn about the changes that happen in puberty and talk to young people about them so they're better prepared.

DON'T

Ignore the turmoil and sense of loss of control that comes with puberty.

DO

Start a discussion about the harmful effects that society's beauty standards have on body image and help teens develop their capacity to think critically.

- *"Do you ever feel pressure to try to look like the standard beauty image?"*
- *"Does the content on your social media make you feel good about your body?"*
- *"Do you think it's realistic for everyone to have the same body type?"*
- *"Do you think it's asking too much for everyone to look identical?"*

DON'T

Believe that everyone has the same advantages and resources to change their body.

Some people are genetically equipped to change their body more easily and have more resources to work out for long hours, for example. Take influencers: for some, working out is a full-time job, and they put all their time and effort into achieving a certain body ideal.

YOUTH IN MIND FOUNDATION

DO

Talk about a range of topics beside your teen's appearance.

Take an interest in their activities, emotions, opinion, interests, what they learned at school, their friends and so on.

DON'T

Place importance on physical appearance at home or during social interactions.

- Making comments about their weight (compliments, criticism or teasing).
- Talking about the best ways to lose weight or the latest diet fads.
- Comparing the physical appearances of family members.

DO

Listen to your teen's concerns about their body and normalize the days when they've had a negative body image experience.

- "I know it's tough when others tease you about your appearance. Of course it's hurtful.
- And it shouldn't happen."
- "Maybe you'll feel differently about your body tomorrow. Some days are just tougher."
- "How can you take care of yourself today? What would make you feel better?"

DON'T

Try to reassure your teen by minimizing their concerns.

- *"That's silly, you're beautiful. Don't say things like that."*
- *"Why don't you exercise more? It would help you lose some weight."*

Even if these words are meant to be caring, they send the message that the young person can control their weight and improve their self-esteem by changing their body.

DO

Have caring, inclusive talks about weight.

- Promote body diversity, for e.g., by watching movies or TV shows that feature characters of different shapes and sizes.
- Talk about biased situations that you've experienced or observed.
- Vary your algorithm on social media and encourage young people to do the same by sharing positive accounts. Here's a list of Instagram accounts to check out and follow.

DON'T

Perpetuate weight-related stereotypes and biases.

For example, thinking that overweight people should make more effort to lose weight or assuming that a person who's on the heavy side must have bad lifestyle habits, etc.

STAY ALERT **for signs of body dissatisfaction among young people:**
social anxiety, avoidance, comments about their weight.

Adolescence is a fertile time for body dissatisfaction. It's not an inevitable rite of passage, however; you can be a teen *and* feel good in your body!