Acceptance of Diverse Body Sizes--
Facilitating Programs for Youth

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Wellness IN the Rockies is a community-based health-improvement project in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. The project integrates research with education. The overall goals are two-fold: to enhance the well-being of individuals by improving their attitudes and behaviors related to food, physical activity, and body image; and to help build communities’ capacities to foster and sustain these changes. Ultimately, the project seeks to reverse the rising tide of obesity by focusing on prevention and positively on health rather than weight. The youth cohort consists of 5th/6th graders from communities in the three states.

The guiding principles of WIN the Rockies in the area of body image include the following:

**Body-Size Diversity**
- accept and value every body, whatever size or shape
- help people feel good about their bodies and about who they are
- recognize that people of all sizes and shapes can reduce their risk of poor health by adopting a healthy lifestyle
- challenge your own size-prejudice beliefs

**Positive Self-Acceptance**
- value yourself regardless of your size or shape
- identify your strengths and abilities and build on your assets
- be critical of messages that focus on unrealistic body images as symbols of success and happiness

For more information, visit our website at www.uwyo.edu/wintherockies.

**Why this age group?**
Can you recall the first time you felt concerned about your weight or what you were eating?
How old were you?
Have you heard kids talk about dieting?
Do you see children teased about their appearance?
At what age do kids start worrying about these topics?

Experts believe body image education can be very effective between fourth and sixth grade when developmental changes are becoming obvious and before pressures related to body image intensify. At this age, youth are beginning to formulate their own attitudes and beliefs about themselves and the world they live in, yet they are receptive to input from adults in their lives.

**How can you be effective?**

1. **You are a role model!** Embracing the Wellness IN the Rockies principles is an important step towards improving health in ourselves, our families and our communities. Model acceptance for a diversity of body shapes and sizes. Demonstrate acceptance of your own body type. Ask yourself the following questions:
How do I feel about fat people?
How do I feel about thin people?
Am I swayed by the diet industry’s myths and false claims about weight loss?
Do I criticize my own body in front of others?

“Fostering self-esteem, and in particular, body esteem among health educators, nutritionists, and school teachers may prove to be one the most potent ways of improving body image among the young people in their care.”
Jennifer O’Dea

Here is a checklist of things to think about when you interact with others.

**DO:**

- ✓ Be critical of messages that focus on unrealistic body images as symbols of success and happiness.
- ✓ Value yourself, regardless of your size or shape. Make peace with your body.
- ✓ Challenge your own size prejudice beliefs and behaviors
- ✓ Identify your strengths and abilities and build on your assets. Encourage others to do the same.
- ✓ Enjoy physical activity every day.
- ✓ Make physical activity fun.
- ✓ Emphasize the joy of movement.
- ✓ Recognize that people of all shapes and sizes can reduce their risk of poor health by adopting a healthier lifestyle.
- ✓ Base compliments to others on feelings rather than body size or shape.
- ✓ Select posters and pictures for your work area or home which include people of varying sizes and shapes.
- ✓ Take pleasure in eating, savoring and relishing each bite.
- ✓ Prepare and enjoy meals at home as a family whenever possible.
- ✓ Honor the gift of food.
- ✓ Follow USDA’s Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- ✓ Take control of your relationship with food by eating when you are hungry and stopping when you are satisfied.
- ✓ Accept and value every body, whatever size or shape.
- ✓ Help others feel good about their bodies and who they are on the inside.

**DON’T:**

- ✓ Compare yourself to others in terms of appearance.
- ✓ Praise another’s appearance base on body size or attractiveness.
- ✓ Compliment someone when they lose weight or diet.
- ✓ Encourage someone to lose weight.
- ✓ Talk negatively about your own body.
- ✓ Criticize or comment on the weight or body size or shape of yourself or others.
- ✓ Label foods as good or bad.
- ✓ Make fun of another person’s eating habits or food choices.
- Criticize your own eating.
- Allow distractions while eating (watching television, answering telephone, driving or riding in a car).
- Skip meals.
- Weigh yourself frequently.
- Complain about boring exercise.
- Use food as a reward or punishment.
- Put a child on a diet.
- Consider a person’s weight important.
- Say someone is healthy, successful or happy based on their body shape or size.
- Expect perfection from yourself or others.
- Allow media to establish unrealistic body images as ideal.

2. **Understand the power of accepting our own bodies** whether thin, fat, short, tall or in-between. Be aware of and teach students about the harmful stereotypes and fears our culture directs at people who do not fit an arbitrary appearance “ideal.” Remember, adults can transfer negative beliefs and attitudes to students including poor body image, prejudices about body weight, and bias towards students.

3. **Celebrate individual differences** in body sizes and shapes. We are unique and our body size and shape reflects our genetic heritage.

4. **Encourage compliments** based on what someone does, not on how they look. Do not tolerate any teasing or stereotyping about body size or shape. There is no such thing as a “joke” about someone’s body.

5. **Promote healthy choices**, not weight gain or loss. Well-intentioned educational strategies can be potentially harmful by creating an awareness about dieting and disordered eating thus introducing a problem that did not exist.

6. **Be cautious if you are a survivor of an eating disorder** and wish to share your story. Describe how you felt and the health and social consequences of your behaviors. Avoid describing your weight changes, how you looked or what you did to lose weight.

7. **Avoid labeling food or eating habits** as good or bad as this can contribute to a fear of food. Avoid: “I was good today, I ate the fresh fruit.” Instead: “I really enjoyed the fresh strawberries I had at lunch, they were delicious!”

8. **Follow good food practices** when sharing food in the classroom. Here are a few tips from veteran teachers:

   ✓ Allow time for students to wash their hands before handling food. You may have to teach them by making sure they use soap and warm water and count off the 20 seconds recommended for a good handwashing.

   ✓ Whenever possible, allow students to help scrub fresh produce so they know the importance of washing. You may have to demonstrate how to use a good brush and wash them under clean, running water.
When using prewashed foods from the cafeteria, be sure to mention to students that they have already been scrubbed.

Students can also help scrub work and eating surfaces before food activities begin.

Allow students to pick and choose what they taste in the classroom. Remember,
- some students have food allergies and intolerances
- some students have religious beliefs or cultural foodways that limit food choices

**Additional Suggested tools**

**Body Talk 2** (grades 4-6)
*The Body Positive* (510) 528-0101 or www.thebodypositive.org
Educational video (20 minutes) and facilitator’s guide. Documentary with youth of diverse backgrounds and sizes talking about body image, trying to fit in and finding support. The guide includes goals and discussion/activity ideas for each of five segments: confusing messages, I don’t fit in, finding support, staying strong, and I like me.

**Healthy Body Image: Teaching Kids to Eat and Love Their Bodies Too!**
*Kathy J. Kater, National Eating Disorders Association* (212) 575-6200 or www.nationaleatingdisorders.org
Prevention curriculum for 4th - 6th grade. Each of 11 lessons is a building block towards a healthy body image and emphasizes inner strengths. Includes developmental changes, genetics, unrealistic body images, influence of media, dangers of dieting, and benefits of physical activity and healthful eating.

**Full Of Ourselves: A Wellness Program to Advance Girl Power, Health and Leadership**
*Lisa Sjostrom and Catherine Steiner-Adair*
Educational program to decrease girls’ vulnerability to the development of body preoccupation and eating disorders. Emphasizes personal potential and overall mental and physical well-being. Phase 1 includes an eight 50-minute sessions for girls 11 to 14 years old taught by two women leaders. In phase 2, the girls from phase 1 mentor 8 to 11 year-olds. Has been tested with over 1000 girls in 5 states.

References used in preparation of this publication: