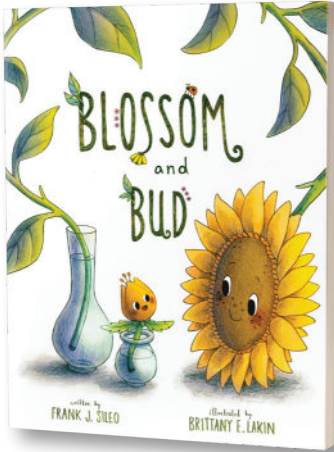




Fostering a Positive Body Image



We are all different shapes, sizes, and colors, each of us special in our own way. *Blossom and Bud* by Frank J. Sileo, PhD was written to help children respect, accept and appreciate how their own and others' bodies are beautiful and different in their own ways. It was also written to foster discussion in a safe and comfortable environment with the caregivers in their lives.

Understanding individual differences and body diversity may help children build self-esteem, feel kindness toward themselves and others, practice healthy eating, have more realistic expectations of their appearance, and possess a healthy body image.

In his Note to Adult Gardeners in *Blossom and Bud*, Dr. Sileo provides information and suggestions about nurturing a positive body image in children. Here's an excerpt with tips for fostering a healthy body image.

Fostering a Healthy Body Image

Examine your own attitudes — Consider your own beliefs, attitudes, statements, and behaviors around weight, physical characteristics, food, exercise, and health. If we make statements like, "I hate my thighs," "I need to lose weight before my birthday," or "I hate my nose," we convey that we are critical of our appearance, that a healthy body must be perfect, and certain sizes and shapes are unacceptable. Words are important, but back them up with positive behavior. Constant dieting, excessive workouts, or adjusting pictures for social media posts send negative messages about body image to your children.

Focus on your child's inner qualities — Focus less on appearance and more on your child's abilities, gifts, and skills. Have discussions about what it means to be a good person without focusing on appearance. Praise your child for inner qualities that make them special.

Exercise for enjoyment — Engage in physical activities without focusing on losing weight. Place your emphasis on what a body can do instead of what a body looks like or cannot do.

Talk about healthy food choices — Take your child shopping and talk about healthy food choices. Model making healthy food choices. Teach your child that having an occasional treat is fine. These foods can be enjoyed in small amounts and in moderation.

Educate children about the media — Watch television and movies with your child, and look for advertisements together. Discuss how the media sells products and sometimes portray certain bodies as “ideal.” Explain how the media sometimes will touch up photos or use other tech to change people’s appearance.

Be mindful of bullying — Children may get teased or bullied about their body or their appearance, but may not say anything about it. If you discover your child is being bullied, talk with them about it. Listen to what they have to say and watch for changes in their behavior, like refusing to participate in activities. Bullying rarely goes away on its own. It may require you to reach out to other adults to make a plan of action.

Teach how bodies grow — Communicate that everyone grows and changes at different times. Encourage your child not to compare themselves to others. Educate your child and help them build empathy for “early” or “late bloomers.” Help your child develop empathy.

Be sensitive to height — When it comes to children of different heights, being short or tall can be difficult. There is societal bias against boys who are short and girls who are tall. Both tall boys and girls are also subject to stereotypes, like “you must be a basketball player.” Respect your child’s age, regardless of height. If your child is tall, there may be an expectation that they behave more maturely or take on more responsibility than they are capable of. When a child is shorter, don’t say they are younger to get cheaper movie tickets, etc. Not treating your child their age can affect their self-esteem.

Celebrate diversity — Children may be self conscious about other aspects of their appearance including hair color or type, skin color, or other physical characteristics. Notice and make mention of how wonderful it is that we all come in various shapes, sizes, and colors. Teach your child about appreciating diversity and respecting individual differences.

This Article’s Author

Frank J. Sileo, PhD, is a New Jersey licensed psychologist and the founder and executive director of the Center for Psychological Enhancement in Ridgewood, New Jersey. He received his doctorate from Fordham University in New York City.

In his practice, Dr. Sileo works with children, adolescents, adults, and families. Since 2010, he has been consistently recognized as one of New Jersey’s top kids’ doctors.

He has authored several children’s books including: *A World of Pausabilities: An Exercise in Mindfulness*, *Did You Hear?: A Story About Gossip*, *Bug Bites and Campfires: A Story for Kids About Homesickness*, and *Sally Sore Loser: A Story About Winning and Losing*, which is the Gold Medal recipient of the prestigious Mom’s Choice Award.