



Body talk: the power of words for a positive body image

Talking about our bodies is like an unwritten rule in female friendship – many of us do it constantly and automatically: “I feel fat in these jeans,” “I’ve put on so much weight,” or “Gosh, my skin looks awful today.” Talking about your looks might seem like a way to bond with your child and friends, but it’s worth considering what effect it could have.

Use our action checklist to stop the ‘fat talk’ and start a new kind of conversation for a positive body image – yours, your friends’ and your child’s.

Teach your child to talk positively about their body

If you’re not guilty of these kinds of put-me-downs, then you’re in the minority. [A study of female college students](#), published by the Psychology of Women Quarterly, found that 93% engaged in this type of talk – dubbed ‘fat talk’ – and a third did so regularly. The study found those who complained about their weight more often were likely to have lower satisfaction with their bodies – irrespective of their actual size.

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Jess Weiner

When we talk in this way our children pick up on it. It may seem to them that physical appearance is how women judge and value themselves and each other. Is this how we want our children to evaluate themselves?

“Words can have a huge impact on our self-esteem, and constantly talking negatively about our bodies can reinforce the idea that there is only one type of body shape that is beautiful,” explains body confidence expert Jess Weiner. “It’s a pattern we have to break if we want our daughters to grow up to be confident about the bodies they’ve got.”



Aren't you bored of all the body talk?

Body talk doesn't just refer to body-bashing. Talking about your appearance, even in a positive way, can contribute to low self-esteem by placing undue attention on certain physical features. It's all about beauty psychology – by telling a friend they look great and following up with “Have you lost weight?”, you're reinforcing the stereotypical view that skinny equals beautiful.

By discussing your gruelling exercise or diet regime or fluctuating weight, you're implying that weight is the primary factor in what it means to be fit and healthy.

Less fat talk, more fun talk

Just three minutes of fat talk can lead to women feeling bad about their appearance and increase their body dissatisfaction, [according to a study](#) titled Adverse Effects of Social Pressure to be Thin on Young Women: An Experimental Investigation of the Effects of 'Fat Talk' in the International Journal of Eating Disorders. Making the effort to cut it out should make you feel better about yourself. In turn, your child will pick up on the more positive language and be less likely to put herself down.

The words we use when talking about our bodies can damage our self-esteem, but they can also improve it. By focusing less on weight and body shape in your conversations, you can break the habit of reinforcing beauty stereotypes.



Action checklist How to fight fat talk and increase self-esteem

Try out Jess Weiner's action checklist and see how much better you and your child feel about yourselves

Your words have power

Use your words to show your child there's more to life than appearances. By making the change yourself, you'll help them do the same and show them there's more than one way to be beautiful

Take the one-week challenge

Challenge yourself to a week of no fat talk. It might be hard at first, but if you tell friends and family about it, they can support you and even try it for themselves

Tell your friends you're bored of body talk

Next time you meet up with a friend, if they start any fat talk reassure them but also alert them to the negative impact of their words – for example: "I adore you and it hurts me to hear you talk about yourself that way

Focus on the fun talk

Avoid fat talk when discussing diet and exercise, focusing instead on the emotional and health benefits. So, if your friend has started a new fitness regime, perhaps ask them whether they're feeling stronger or sleeping better

Replace negative with positive

If you start to fall into the 'body talk trap', try turning a negative into a positive. Think of a positive replacement statement for everything negative you might say about your or others' appearance

Love your body

The first step to building self-esteem and positive body confidence is to love and appreciate your body. Use it to feel energised – go for a walk and enjoy the fresh air, do some gardening or take the kids for a bike ride

Tackle your harsh words about others

Stop making criticisms about other people's weight or looks. Not only will your child subconsciously pick up this negative behaviour, they'll also interpret it to mean that bigger can't be beautiful



Next Steps

- Use the action checklist as a starting point for changing the conversations you have with your child
- Share our self-esteem boosting activities with your child. They might help them if they're feeling negative about how they look
- Steer conversations away from 'fat talk' by changing the subject or turning negatives into positives. For instance, instead of "I'm fat," try "I'm curvy"
- Let your child know you're going to avoid body talk in future because there are so many more interesting things for you to chat about. Encourage them to do the same with her friends