

The Key Influencer's Role

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What is the role of the key influencer in promoting positive body image and preventing disordered eating?

Positive body image can be achieved through the three A's:

Attention – listening for and responding to internal cues (like hunger, fullness, fatigue, sadness)

Appreciation – appreciating the pleasures our bodies can provide

Acceptance – accepting our bodies as they are, instead of longing for what they are not

The sport environment can make a difference in how athletes see and value themselves. As a key influencer, you play a role in ensuring that your own attitudes and beliefs about food, weight and body image are positive, and that the messages athletes are getting are positive and empowering. You can ensure that when athletes are in your care, they are being treated with respect and celebrated for differences and uniqueness so that athletes can build a sense of who they are from the inside out.

Here are some things that you can keep in mind in the sport environment to ensure that you are promoting positive body image:

Be affirming rather than teasing.

The sport environment can be an invaluable source of support for an athlete. Teasing takes away from this support and can be very harmful to an athlete's self-esteem.

Model balanced nutrition and stress the importance of fueling the athletic body.

Efforts to change a natural body weight and shape (through dieting or bulking up) can be harmful and may lead to disordered eating issues.

Teach athletes about natural and healthy body changes during puberty.

An athlete will experience many changes during puberty. For instance, it is natural to gain weight due to an increase in fat tissue, bone and muscle. Help each athlete understand what types of body changes they might expect during these times.

Support athletes in making independent decisions.

Encourage athletes who are dealing with difficult issues to make their own informed decisions. Support them as much as you can during this process, even if you don't agree with their decisions.

Celebrate uniqueness, difference and diversity.

Acknowledge that each individual is different and being unique is wonderful, special and normal! There is no one perfect body weight, or shape.

Help athletes understand what is in and out of their control.

There are factors that affect athletes and their performances that are not in their control. Help athletes understand what can and cannot be controlled about sport and life experiences.

Accept and celebrate every athlete regardless of gender, race, age, ethnicity, body size, ability or sexual orientation.

Don't discriminate based on gender.

Men DO have eating and body image disorders. Become aware of the warning signs specific to males. Also encourage males to seek help.

Take care with language and comments.

Remember that comments and remarks (even positive ones) made about an athlete's body can have a huge impact on an athlete who is striving to please others and perform well.

Know the facts about body image and disordered eating.**Learn about issues of self-esteem, body image, identity and disordered eating in athletes.**

Search the Internet, your local library or bookstore for related reading. Browse the BodySense web site for resources.

Make an effort to understand the pressures faced by athletes in sport.

- **Body type.** Many athletes feel pressure from coaches, teachers, the media, parents, and teammates to have the "ideal body size" for a given sport.
- **Extreme behaviours** like excessive training, restrictive dieting, and sacrifice of social life are often acceptable for athletes, but would not be acceptable in the general population.

Build self-esteem and assertiveness.

Encourage athletes to discover who they are – inside and outside of sport. Allow athletes to express needs and creative interests. Guide athletes in learning that self-worth is based upon each individual rather than looks, grades or performance in sport.

Be aware of your own limitations.

If an athlete in your care is suffering from disordered eating issues, support him or her in finding professional help. If the athlete is not interested, call on a professional that can support you in finding help.

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