

media literacy

a guide for parents and youth



Being media literate means understanding that this is not the whole story of the images and pictures we see

What is Media Literacy?

Have you ever looked in the mirror and not liked what you've seen? You are not alone. Maybe your body hasn't actually changed, but your perception of it has. We all have days when we feel awkward or uncomfortable in our bodies and feel the pressure to measure up to the way fashion supermodels look in the pages of magazines, or the way our favourite actors and actresses look in the movies, on television, or on the internet.

Artists in music videos also project certain images of beauty and the kind of lifestyle that many of us can only dream about. Some of us admire the way sports celebrities look and wish that our own bodies looked that way. Maybe it is because all these celebrities always seem so happy, popular and rich, but being media literate means understanding that this is not the whole story of the images and pictures we see.

Media images and advertising help to create and perpetuate social and cultural definitions of beauty and attractiveness which provide the context in which we learn to place value on appearance and the size and shape of our bodies. It is mostly due to the media that some people believe that those who are overweight are "sick" and out of control, while thin people are perceived to be "good," healthy, and in control

of themselves. Media messaging and advertising have strongly influenced how we define what is attractive and beautiful, and its powerful effect on self-esteem and body image is often acknowledged as a contributing factor to the development of disordered eating.

how do I know if advertising and the media influences how I see myself?

- You look at advertisements and feel dissatisfied or depressed about your body and weight.
- Your beauty role-models are the fashion models and celebrities that you see in magazines, movies and music videos.
- You often read magazine articles about dieting and "how to get a better body."

When constantly bombarded with Barbie doll-like images and pictures of thin models promoting a physical ideal that is nearly impossible to achieve and maintain, the cosmetic and diet supplement industries exploit the body image insecurities they create to make money and grow their companies. It is no accident that the definition of beauty that these companies promote centres on thin, half-dressed youthfulness. The message we get loud and clear is that that in order to be beautiful, you can never be too thin, and that wrinkles and aging are a fate to be avoided at all cost.

It's not just girls and women who are influenced by the images of this kind of physical "perfection." A lot of boys and men try to look like the images of well-built guys with impressive biceps and chiseled, washboard abs that they see in advertising and entertainment; dieting and compulsively exercising to build muscle mass. Media literacy means understanding that these images are unattainable - that they are false in the first place. They are airbrushed and the body proportions are often redrawn. The models who actually posed for the pictures don't actually look like the finished product.

As consumers, we can play an active role in the media images and messages that are sold to us. If we think critically and evaluate the advertising we see online, on television, and in magazines and newspapers and understand how the images and ideas they send us help to create body dissatisfaction and self-doubt. We can refuse to accept the sug-

gested sell in a way that will affect their profits while helping ourselves create new standards of beauty and identity that we can healthily live with.

What Can I Do?

1. Become a critical consumer of advertising and media messages. Pay attention to images, messages or attitudes that give you self-doubt, or make you feel bad about your body.
2. Voice your opinion and protest the negative images and messages you see by writing letters to advertisers, television stations and movie studios.
3. Encourage the media and advertisers to present more diverse and real images of people that promote positive messages of beauty, health and self-esteem.
4. Remember that the primary goal of the fashion, cosmetic, diet, fitness and plastic surgery industries is to make money, not to help you to reach your fullest potential and be the best person that you can possibly be.
5. Remind yourself that the print ads you see in magazines are all photographed with special lighting and then digitally retouched and enhanced in a way that supposedly makes the products being sold more appealing. When we spend money trying to make ourselves look like their images, they keep on making money.
6. Question the motives of these companies and their advertisers, and make sure the hard-earned money

you spend reflects the person you are, not the person that the media and advertisers want you to be.

7. Be a role-model to yourself and others. Develop your own style and celebrate who you are. Break free from the way our society and culture expects you to look.

Where do I go from here?

Jessie's Legacy, a program of Family Services of the North Shore provides web based eating disorders prevention resources to support BC youth, families, educators and professionals.

Visit www.familyservices.bc.ca.



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heretohelp

Mental health and substance use information you can trust

HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners For Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addiction Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy—a program of Family Services North Shore, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.