

Coping with the Ugliers **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Pre-teens are like puppies in many ways—with some body parts just waiting to be grown into, and others that they wish would just stop growing at all! It's a developmental stage that resides in the middle ground, with childhood being left behind and adolescence looming in the not-too-distant future. And, to make matters worse, many kids this age believe that they have a case of “the uglies.” What's that? Well, it's very subjective, but tends to range from feeling that one's face, body, weight, or hair style is unattractive—causing lots of self-absorption, introspection, anxiety and perhaps even depression.

So, what's normal?

A focus on appearance during the early adolescent years is a common and expected aspect of development—for boys as well as for girls. But, what becomes a problem is when kids begin to worry about their appearance to the exclusion of many other activities. Growth spurts (or lack thereof), acne, braces (or crooked teeth) can affect the youngsters emerging self-esteem. Add to that your child's increasing understanding of what society *thinks* is beautiful—cool clothes, flawless complexion, a six-pack abdomen for guys or an hour-glass figure for girls, and the problems begin.

Warning signs:

Be on the look out for your child's frequent references to feeling ugly, the consistent need to be told that she looks fine, excessive exercise or calorie counting, and guilt or distress about overeating. These are warning signs that the kid is overly focused on bodily appearance, and in a negative way.

What to do about it:

- *Encourage physical activity.* Athletics encourages the child to focus upon her body more for performance than for attractiveness. Whether its team sports, lifting weights or jogging down the block with the dog in tow, encourage activity. This helps kids to reduce anxiety and feelings of self-consciousness and depression, and it can jump-start the process of building muscles and trimming down.
- *Offer solutions when possible.* Some of the “uglies” cannot be changed immediately—that gawky body just needs to catch up with itself, and the face will eventually grow into the nose by age fifteen! However, you can advise specific ways to help your child to look their best—by checking in with the dermatologist or orthodontist to help out with that embarrassing acne or crooked teeth.

- *Confront your child's standards.* A review of studies shows that forty to sixty percent of adolescents say that they are unhappy with how they look. Kids come in all shapes and sizes—tall, short, muscular, flabby, curly-headed or boasting stick-straight tresses. I've found that a redefinition of what makes someone really attractive is necessary—which includes their compassion and personality as well as their physical attributes.
- *Talk about body changes.* Bookstores and libraries offer several selections for the pre-teen and teen about “what’s happening to my body.” Also, books are often more accurate than is your memory in terms of what to expect in terms of body changes during puberty and when they will occur. If you are the single parent of an opposite sex child you can still do a good job of educating the kid about puberty and what’s up with the underarm hair—just be sure to do a little research yourself so that you don’t scare the wits out of him!
- *Mention the gimmicks:* Media idols really aren’t so perfect in person. Explain to your child that camera angles, lighting and make-up help the stars to look as they do.
- *Be careful with flattery.* Praise positive effort such as perseverance at school or persistence on the practice field. Watch out for “person praise” such as looks, intelligence or ability. Your praise helps your child to develop her sense of identity, and if it can extend beyond the physical to character, commitment and conscience she’ll feel better about herself no matter how bad a hair day she’s having!
- *Be flexible with the dress code.* Realize that the clothing that your child wears makes him or her feel more accepted within the peer group. It’s your child’s self-expression, and unless it is totally inappropriate try to let the kid make his own selections.
- *Avoid teasing.* Even cheerful comments can harm a child’s self-confidence, “What a cutie you are—so petite, and look at that red hair—how unusual!” may not be taken well by pre-teens and teens.
- *Consider a little “pick-me-up”.* A new outfit, contact lenses, a makeover or new haircut can be just the thing to give your child the right ego boost to get her through this tough time. But, back up the focus on appearance with interest, encouragement and support for other activities such as chorus, softball, chess club or band.
- *Listen to peer pressure comments.* Pre-adolescents often live in a culture of cruelty where teasing is *in* and difficult to avoid. Often, your child will feel better just telling you about the criticisms or comments, and may even listen to your advice and suggestions. That’s okay—as long as they are talking about the situation it won’t get out of hand.
- *Check out your own conduct.* Evaluate your own weight and body concerns and how you talk to your child about them. Instead, talk about health, exercise and nutrition when it comes to your own body—not about weight, calories or dress size.

If it gets out of hand.

If “the uglies” are getting the better of you and your child, and you’ve tried most of these suggestions and he’s still upset, consider a visit or two with a child/adolescent specialist. Sometimes Mom or Dad just “won’t do”, and the child needs the guidance of a trained professional. Remember, this is a tough stage of development for just about any child. Support and encourage your kid to realize that a *healthy* body is a beautiful body, one that remains attractive longer and leads to a better lifestyle than an over focus upon weight, dress size or hairstyle.