

Physicality – Why is it worth discussing this topic?

Health, as defined by the World Health Organisation, is not just the complete absence of disease or disability, but above all, full physical, mental and social well-being.

In this context, adolescence is a major challenge in both physical and mental terms. Am I still a child or a teenager? – children wonder, looking in the mirror. The growth spurt heralds sexual maturity. This is a time when the body goes through physiological changes which have their consequences in the area of emotions and self-perception. Physical changes, although they may be fascinating and exciting, also bring problems causing shame to the child who would rather not experience them, such as: increased sweating, deterioration of skin conditions, oily hair, an increase in body fat.

You can prepare for a pole vault by training, gradually raising the bar. It's harder, though, to prepare oneself for a growth spurt. This is because it occurs rapidly in children. Especially boys between the ages of 12 and 15 gain about 20 kilograms and grow about 20 centimetres. In girls it starts two years earlier, and the weight gain and growth is less intensive and shorter. Puberty not only consists in changes that can be measured and weighed. Hormones play an important role, the brain changes, the body looks different. Intensive transformation can be observed through a significant change in the shape of the body, the voice or the way in which one moves.

There are some differences in how boys and girls look at their bodies. Some boys are proud of their muscles and physical abilities and because of the psychological changes they undergo, they get into fights – they become brutal and aggressive. They are not aware of their strength and may inadvertently be dangerous to their environment, so it is worth redirecting that strength and using it in a positive way, e.g. in sports activities.

Girls are more likely to be anxious and lost when their bodies start to get out of control; the changes in their bodies often become a source of fear and anxiety. They look at their bodies critically, looking for external examples to follow. The media promoting very slender models and their unrealistically slim figures has become the canon of beauty, and what's worse, of self-evaluation. Studies of blind teenagers have demonstrated that those who were blind from birth accept their body to a much greater degree than those who lost their sight at a later stage. They managed to see the models of femininity which they later want to follow. Results of similar studies have shown that in South America, on an island cut off from civilisation, women valued their bodies until television broadcasting American films became available in their area. Within a few years, a previously non-existent problem of eating disorders appeared, when women tried to look similar to the American actresses.

In the 1950s, Erik H. Erikson coined the term "the sense of physical identity" to describe "feeling at home in one's own body". Helping children in accepting their own carnality is, therefore, a huge task for educators and parents. This is particularly important because the 'home' also refers to the bodies of sick and disabled children for whom self-acceptance is a challenge consisting in overcoming real physical problems.

Appearance can affect our sense of freedom. We will feel free if we accept the body as our own home, which we want to take care of, look after and appreciate. This requires help so that children can find sources of self-esteem not only in their physical appearance and strength, but also in their potential and abilities, in what is inside them. At the same time, it is necessary to promote health among children consisting not in counting calories, but in conscious, healthy eating, doing sports, having an active lifestyle, sleeping properly and having regular medical check-ups. Children are often unaware of the threats. It is important that adults are vigilant, that they talk to children about how they feel and react in time.

It is important that children see dependencies – the more they take care of themselves, the greater their chances of a healthy, fulfilling life are; the more sick people, the greater the risk of contracting a disease; the worse our nourishment is, the more susceptible we are to diseases, and thus the more difficult it is for us to focus and learn, which in the long run makes it difficult to pursue our plans for life. The same applies to taking care of one's mental health, self-acceptance, naming emotions, the ability to function and communicate with others. Taking care of oneself is a fundamental step towards freedom, towards the children learning to take responsibility for themselves and towards becoming aware of one's needs, feelings and life goals.



| DEAR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS!

In today's class, we talked about the subject: *Physical traits and individual freedom*

Proposals for activities:

- Pay close attention to the health of your child. They won't always show that they are not feeling well, and sometimes may not even realise that something wrong is happening to them. When something worries you, when you see that your child is not in a good physical and mental shape, react – talk to the child, and if necessary, seek the assistance of a specialist.
- Think about what your child might say if you asked them how their parents treat their bodies and how they take care of their health.
- Plan an activity that you could perform together for the benefit of your health.
- Think about your attitude towards the body. You are your child's role model. They look up to you and follow your example. If you are critical about your body and make your self-esteem and well-being dependent on appearance, then your child can also build their self-esteem on that, focus on striving towards unrealistic perfection, get frustrated or feel inadequate.
- Find a quiet moment to talk to your child about puberty. Prepare in advance and read about what you would like to say. If you feel it's too difficult for your child, suggest that you can always talk to them about it when they feel like it.
- Suggest your child specific books about adolescence so that they can read them in their own time when they need it. These could be, for example:

The Period Book. A Girl's Guide to Growing Up
by Karen Gravelle, Jennifer Gravelle,
published by Bloomsbury USA Childrens

Guy Stuff: The Body Book for Boys
by Cara Natterson,
published by Amer Girl Pub