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My body, my buddy

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Six preschoolers settle down in a circle on the polished wood floor, sticking close to their mothers and eyeing one another.

It's a room filled with strange new faces, but their moms have brought them this Saturday morning to learn about themselves.

Teacher Eliza Parker, trim and bouncy in exercise pants and a T-shirt, addresses the circle. "We're going to learn all about our bones today," she says.

The kids turn to her, even the shy, raven-haired 4-year-old who won't leave her mother's lap.

"The whole thing, all of our bones together, is called a skeleton. What do you think when you hear 'skeleton?'" Parker calls.

"Halloween!" answers a tittering chorus of little girls.

Enter Huey. The miniature human skeleton gets even the raven-haired girl moving. Soon Huey is covered by little hands feeling his plastic bones and tapping his teeth.

The kids begin linking the wonder of Huey's body parts with their own. And the lesson is under way.

At Arts Together, a nonprofit, multiart organization for all ages in Raleigh, these kids are getting a chance to develop a healthy relationship with their own bodies. It's a bond that will serve them well, especially in an age when body image issues and obesity are epidemic, and children are bombarded with negative messages.

Classes, like today's Me & My Body for preschoolers, can help get things off on the right foot by fostering appreciation.

It's not difficult to get preschoolers interested in learning about their bodies. This morning's session is a sneak peek at a four-week course Parker will start in February.

"Young children are fascinated with their bones and heartbeats and muscles," says Parker, who designed the course.

Huey the skeleton is proof.

"It's like a puzzle," one girl says moving Huey's joints.

"It is. They all fit together," Parker says.

Cue the music, and the kids are dancing freestyle around the room, mothers joining in, as Parker exhorts them to "Make your bones move!"

Trouble can start early

Parker has taught Me & My Body in Durham, but this is the first time in Raleigh. She uses creative activities, such as drawing and working with Play-Doh, along with movement and music to help children experience their bodies.

"I wanted to find a way to teach anatomy to children," she says before class starts. "They hear their parents and the media talk about diets and image. The word 'body' is associated with things like: I'm too fat, I'm too tall, I'm too short."

Early on, a schism can develop between a child and his or her physical body, with the body increasingly seen as a source of trouble and disappointment. Left unchecked, such perceptions can snowball into self-esteem and body-image problems, fueling eating disorders, among other emotional problems.

"It can start very young," says Chris Woolston, co-author of the new book "Generation Extra Large: Rescuing Our Children from the Epidemic of Obesity."

Woolston cites a recent American Heart Association study showing that more than 10 percent of preschoolers today are overweight. Children nationwide are worried about weight, according to a new survey of 9- to 13-year-olds conducted by Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Results show 59 percent of the more than 1,100 kids surveyed have already tried to lose weight and 54 percent worry about their weight.

But weight isn't the only body image issue that can affect a child's development. After the infant to preschool years, ages 10 to 14 see the most rapid body changes, says Renee Prillaman, adjunct professor of child development at Duke University and head middle school teacher at Carolina Friends School.

"Body image is the quintessential middle-school issue," says Prillaman. And for middle-schoolers, it includes feelings about height, skin, voices and hair -- all of which are mysteriously changing.

Children must learn to forge new relationships with their bodies and peers. Identity issues are inevitable.

"They're working so hard to figure out who they are and how they fit with everyone else," Prillaman says.

What parents can do

Parents can help by promoting role models of all sizes and shapes who are praised for accomplishments, not appearances. Prillaman, for example, takes her daughter to women's sporting events to appreciate the athletic ability of the players.

Parents should monitor their own behavior, too. "Are you constantly complaining about feeling too fat or wishing your hair was this or that?" Prillaman says.

Your kid could pick up the habit. Instead promote definitions of beauty that focus on qualities other than the physical.

Be open to concerns children have about their bodies, says Lisa Berlin, a research scientist at Duke University's Center for Child and Family Policy.

"Whether it's about how they look or how they feel ... it's important for parents to help their kids give their feelings a name and support," Berlin says.

Psychologist Cynthia Bulick, director of the UNC Eating Disorders Program, encourages parents to help children separate self-esteem and body esteem.

"You are not what your body is," she says.

This lesson can be started even with very young children. Relatives and others don't have to greet them with "You're so pretty" or "Aren't you a big boy?"

Instead Bulick suggests emphasizing non-appearance qualities. How about: "I hear you're smart" or "You're a fast runner."

Young children will generally follow a parent's lead.

"They're really very curious about their bodies anyway," says Uli Gratzl of Raleigh, who took her 5-year-old daughter and a 4-year-old friend to Me & My Body.

Fellow parent Larisa Lotz hoped the class would introduce respect for the body.

"But at this age, as a 3-year-old, they're just curious and it's fun," Lotz says. "It's the building blocks. It's the bottom."

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Details

The four-week Me & My Body course for 3- to 5-year-olds will be held Feb. 5, 12, 19 and 26 at Arts Together, 114 St. Mary's St., Raleigh. Cost is \$45. To sign up, call 828-1713 or visit the www.artstogether.org Web site.

Caption:

Eliza Parker, center, uses a model skeleton to show 3-year-old Sierra Clark, left center, and her mother, Courtney Clark, right, how bones move during a Me & My Body class at Arts Together in Raleigh. Parker says preschoolers are eager to learn about bones and skin and such.

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