

Why is Your Daughter Fat?

By Sarah Levy, Ph.D.

Have you ever wondered why your daughter, who looks beautiful to you, complains of being “fat” or “ugly”? If so, you are not alone. “Body Dissatisfaction,” which is defined as feeling unhappy about a certain physical feature, has reached epidemic proportions among teenage girls. The National Institute on Media and the Family reports that at age 13, 53% of girls are unhappy with their bodies. This figure reaches 78% by age 17. While the forces contributing to this problem are pervasive, there are things that you and your daughter can do to promote a healthy body image.

As a psychologist working with children and adolescents, I recognized the need to address the problem of Body Dissatisfaction for both the physical and psychological well-being of our children. Towards that end, I have developed a workshop for middle school girls (grades 6-8) that has three goals: First, to demystify the problem by defining its nature and scope. Secondly, to explain the pernicious forces at work in our society that seek to exacerbate the problem, and lastly, to provide information and perspectives necessary to combat this problem. Given that this problem affects almost all our youth (although it impacts girls more than boys), the

school setting – day schools, yeshivas or Bais Yaakovs – is the ideal place to begin addressing this social ill. Given the critical role that parents have in shaping their children’s attitudes and habits, I have also developed a companion workshop for mothers. If mothers model a

impact on their daughter’s attitudes.

The workshop for students can be delivered during a 45-minute class period, and should be repeated each year to remain effective in counteracting our society’s obsession with being skinny and looking perfect. The main points of



healthy body image by making responsible food choices, avoiding fad diets, avoiding complaints about how they look, and focusing on their own and their daughter’s natural beauty without comparing themselves to the ideal beauty presented by the media, they can have a profound

the workshop are outlined below.

① DEFINITION OF PROBLEM

A. “Body Image” is defined as how one views his/her own body, and it is often at odds with one’s actual appearance. Research finds that people view their body parts about which they

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are dissatisfied as being as much as 50% larger than they actually are.

B. The workshop includes the video “Dove Real Beauty Sketches,” which reveals the extent to which women are dissatisfied with their looks and are more critical of their own physical flaws than are others. The video forcefully makes the point that we are more beautiful than we think.

C. Research has linked body dissatisfaction with many problems such as eating disorders (anorexia and bulimia), poor self-esteem, depression, anxiety, extreme exercising and cosmetic surgery. Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, with anorexia being the third most common chronic illness among adolescents.

D. Despite the fact that diets that restrict calories below one’s needs are dangerous, pre-teens and teens often experiment with diets because they want to look thinner. 40% of 9 and 10-year-old girls have tried to lose weight, according to a survey by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.

② CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM

A. Research has linked the rise of body dissatisfaction to the media’s use of unrealistic images for beauty. Whereas the average American woman is a size 12, the average model used in advertising is a size 0-2.

B. Studies have found that the amount of time adolescents watch television, movies and music videos is associated with their degree of body dissatisfaction and their desire to be thin.

C. In addition to using extensive beauty products, the media employ computerized touch-up techniques to present an image of beauty that greatly distorts the appearance of the people they are ostensibly portraying. This misrepresentation has the desired effect of causing consumers to address their perceived inadequacy by purchasing the product being marketed, e.g., silkier hair, brighter teeth, smoother skin, and thinner body.

D. The workshop includes the short but powerful video clip “Dove Evolution,” which shows how a model is totally transformed with make-up, and then radically digitally altered before we see her in an advertisement. This video enables students to recognize that the images they see on billboards and in magazines are not genuine.

③ ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

A. Since research indicates that people have a biological set point of weight that is determined predominantly by genetics and early nutrition, diets that restrict caloric intake below one’s needs do not work in the long run. Studies show that 95% of dieters regain the weight they lost within one year.

B. The key to maintaining a sustainable body weight is getting regular exercise and making healthy food choices. Doctors recommend that children have 60 minutes of physical activity daily. A helpful guideline for healthy food choices is to fill half of your plate with vegetables, one quarter with carbohydrates and one quarter with protein.

C. The actual foods a person eats are just as important as the number of calories in one’s diet. One should avoid ingredients that sound as if they were made in a laboratory, e.g., MSG, hydrogenated oils, high fructose corn syrup, and BHT. Just as Hashem created our bodies, He also created the natural foods we need to keep them healthy.

D. Hashem created each person with a neshama (soul) and a guf (body). While the body is important and must be carefully maintained, a person’s true beauty radiates from the neshama. This is the beauty that elevates those around us and can increase throughout our lives rather than diminish with the passing of the years. We must strive to identify with our neshamos.

The media, “beauty” products and diet industries are conspiring to wreak havoc on our self-concept. The best defense is to clearly understand this phenomenon and use the latest findings of the medical community and the timeless hashkafos (perspectives) of the Torah to combat its insidious effects. By educating our children and their parents, we can chart a course that promotes a healthy mind, body and soul. ■

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