OUR BODIES, Our Daughters

The data is overwhelming to substantiate the fact that most American women do in fact believe in the myth of unrealistic thinness.

BY JILL S. ZIMMERMAN

I am the proud mother of two children, neither of whom are daughters. When I was pregnant with my first son, I had a dream that he was a she. If it weren't for my husband's sensibility, I would've decorated the nursery in pink wallpaper and white wicker, but he thought we should wait and see. When Daniel (not Danielle) was born, I was shocked but ecstatic at the same time. Three years later I was blessed with a second son, and my wish for a girl was relegated to a simple hope for daughters-in-law who would like me. Now my "daughters" are actually the young women I work with as a clinical social worker specializing in body image and eating disorders.

In this day and age, raising daughters is a big responsibility, and perhaps because I am the mother of sons as well as a psychotherapist for young women, I can both stay objective and feel the heat of this burning point. Burning, because despite the feminist gains of the 20th century, girls today are in danger of having their wings singed as they navigate their way to womanhood. Some of the flames are visible and condemned by society, such as physical and sexual abuse. But girls and women are also subject to a smoldering, culturally accepted abuse, spearheaded by Madison Avenue moguls who bombard us with advertising that demeans a woman's natural shape. Some of us lay on bandages of political correctness as we strive to protect our daughters' sense of self. (One of my friends who has a particularly beautiful daughter makes a point of telling little Maura that she is smart, too, when perfect strangers point out her resemblance to a well-known child actress.) But we can't control our daughters' inevitable collision with the popular media purveyors who promote the message that unrealistic thinness equals sexiness, which equals beauty, success, and the good things in life.

Could this message, along with its young model/messengers, be related to the fact that eating disorders affect more than 7 million girls and women?[1] Could it have anything to do with a California study of 500 10-year-old girls that determined that 81 percent were (or already had been) on a diet?[2] Could it account for the fact that, according to the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, "Sixty percent of girls between grades one and six [ages six to 12] develop distorted body images and overestimate their body weight"?[3] And how do we help our daughters save themselves from the statistics if we struggle with the message ourselves?

The data overwhelmingly substantiates the fact that most American women *do* believe in the myth of unrealistic thinness. In a 1993 interview in *People* magazine, Beverly Johnson, one of the most famous "supermodels" of the 1980s, admitted that she is afraid of fat and will "always have an eating disorder."[4] The editor of *Sassy* (a magazine for teenage girls) also recently reported to *People* that "we get letters from girls who are 5 feet, 3 inches and weigh 100 pounds who want help getting down to 95."[5] Every day I listen to beautiful, bright young women in my office who punish themselves because they feel they are not thin enough. They live on Diet Coke and lettuce because they are afraid of calories; they abuse their bodies with bulimia because they cannot tolerate the heavy burden of their appetites.

The media is a primary factor in the development and maintenance of women's body-image problems. It is not simply the "patriarchal establishment" that is manipulating

our self-images. To blame men is the easy way out; we give up our power when we shirk our own responsibility.

The fact is, we hurt ourselves. Hazel Bishop, Eileen Ford, and Diana Vreeland were some of the pioneers of the beauty, fashion, and advertising industries—coaches in the cultural game in which women compete with each other for the prize of beauty and thinness. And we're all to blame. We spend billions of dollars each year with hopes of achieving the myth of body perfection if we only buy the "right" products. Of course, perfection is never achieved, yet many of us continue to believe in the message. We blame ourselves for not trying hard enough.

A little history lends perspective: In the 1930s George Gallup found that women remember reading ads featuring sex, vanity, and quality—in that order.[6] Twenty years later, market research revealed that a woman will probably buy something "if it makes her look thin."[7] Charles Revson put it all together in the mid-1950s as he launched his first major Revlon advertising campaign. Ads for products called "Fire and Ice" and "Cherries in the Snow" featured ultrathin models, such as Suzy Parker, the first American "supermodel," drenched in luxury and exuding sex appeal; lipstick and nail polish sales soared, so, naturally, other companies copied Revson's formula.

Big-breasted, curvaceous women like Marilyn Monroe and Doris Day were certainly idolized in the Fifties as the epitomes of sexiness and cuteness, respectively. But the ideal mother and housewife was not expected to look like Marilyn; the fashionable, attractive woman was supposed to be more Audrey Hepburn-esque in physique. Even models who advertised vacuum cleaners for Sears Roebuck had to wear corsets under their shirtwaist dresses.[8] The decade also ushered in diet food such as Metrecal, RyKrisp and Diet-Rite Cola, to encourage women to control their natural appetites.

The baby boomers born between 1948 and 1959 inherited a legacy of several generations of poor body image. Their grandmothers were young women in the 1920s, when the tubular "flapper" body was the feminine ideal. My mother, now 67, remembers "some contraption in the bathroom with a motor and strap that was supposed to vibrate the fat away ... she [her mother] was always on a diet."

In addition, the baby boomers' mothers grew up during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and had to "do without" during the war years in the 1940s. Consequently, they were hungry for the luxuries that the prosperous 1950s heaped on them as suburban housewives, and they were image-conscious. Advertising executives exploited this phenomenon. (For example, a 1957 *Vogue* ad for Rite Form Girdles promised "the exciting, new hol-

How Girls Negotiate School

The time between age 10 and 15 is the greatest period of change we undergo as human beings, including that which occurs from age one to five. And, unlike those younger children, the early adolescent is acutely aware of the changes.

It is during these years that the self-image is formed. Growth is not constant. The rates of development of boys and girls are at their greatest difference. Boys are increasing in size; girls are developing.

While boys are more at risk in childhood, girls are more at risk in adolescence. Some girls respond to the adolescent developmental crisis by devaluing themselves; others become rebellious toward authorities that devalue them.

The successful strategies that early adolescent girls use in school are:

Speaking Out: Girls with a strong sense of themselves who speak out are either leaders or troublemakers, depending on their relationships with key adults at the school and how well their home cultures match the dominant school culture.

Doing School: Good girls who do what is expected of them and speak in turn. This strategy is comfortable and can cover dimensions of who they are.

Crossing Borders: Girls who cross borders between different cultures or sets of expectations may achieve both school and home success, becoming proficient in two or more codes of speech and behavior. These girls are recognized by peers and adults as those who know everybody.

Appreciating these strategies can increase acceptance of a broad repertoire of possible strengths and achievements—a range of ways in which girls can be successful.

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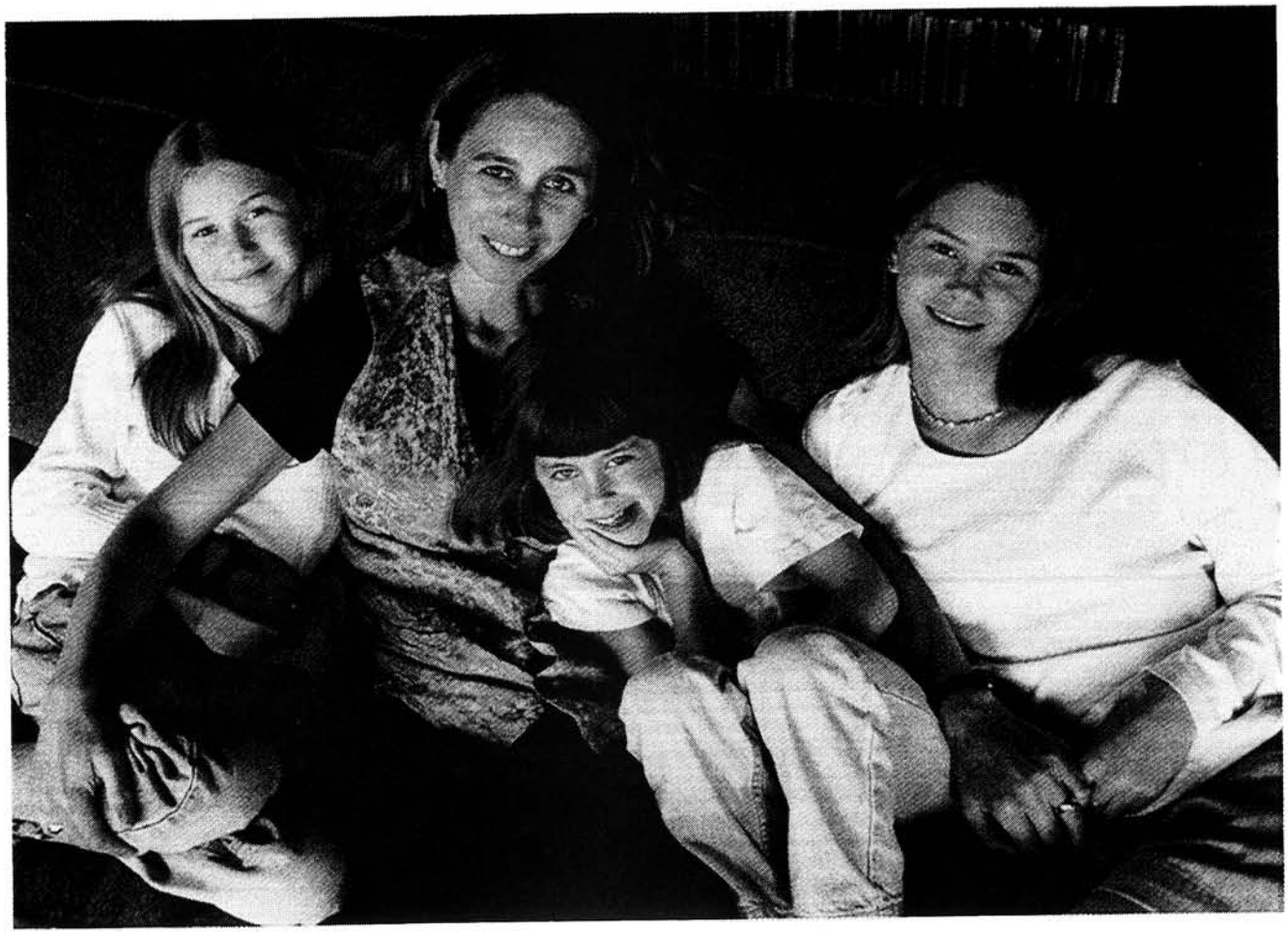

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lowed-tummy look.") In other words, the women who were young mothers in the Fifties were acutely weight-, image-, and body-conscious. Naturally, they handed down their perceptions to their own daughters. This, along with the slew of aggressive diet advertisements and skeletal fashion models that cropped up in the 1960s, inadvertently helped to produce a generation of women self-conscious about body image.

I've always found it fascinating that some of the loudest voices touting the "superthin equals sexy" message come from magazines written for prepubescent girls and teenagers. I extensively researched this subject, reading not only current issues of magazines such as *Seventeen*, *Teen*, *YM*, *Sassy*—to name a few—but also decades worth of *Glamour*, *Seventeen* and *Mademoiselle*. What strikes me is how similar the issues look; skinny sexiness is like a shiny ribbon running through each issue, regardless of the year. The Nineties have magnified, not created, the message. When the first model-as-a-pinup-girl appeared in an ad for Springmaid fabrics in a 1967 *Seventeen*, the comely, slender teenager (identified only by her first name) was pictured perched on a barstool with practically nothing on but a lacy, see-through blouse. (The copy reads: "MISS DECEMBER: Springmaid of the Month.") Calvin Klein's recent controversial underwear ads are only an intensification of this sales pitch.

We can't change society overnight, but a good place to start is in our own homes. According to a 1994 *Glamour* survey of 4,000 young women, only 19 percent had mothers who liked their bodies.[9] This survey points out, as have others, that daughters of dieters are apt to dislike their own bodies. My clinical experience bears out that when a young woman hates her body, she's vulnerable to emulating media stereotypes and prone to compulsive dieting, which may lead to serious eating disorders. Do we complain about the 10 pounds (or 20 or 30) we've gained since our last child was born? Do we cook separate meals for ourselves? Do we (as one of my well-meaning friends has done) rid our cupboards and refrigerators of anything that isn't "fat-free?" Do we reward ourselves with sweets, only to later chastise ourselves for indulging? Do we project our insecurities onto our daughters, giving them a critical eye when we notice they've gained weight? These are behaviors that our children pick up on (and that many of us gleaned on from our own mothers), affecting the internalizations of their newly forming, fragile body images.

Perhaps the best way to help our daughters dodge media exploitation is to learn to appreciate our own bodies. If we felt comfortable with our own bodies, it would give our daughters more of a chance to as well. True, it's only natural for girls to rebel against motherly wisdom, but if we could embody a solid acceptance of our physical appearance, that role model in itself would go a long way. I'm talking about feeling whole inside: showing our daughters, by our examples, that healthy eating, moderate regular exer-

What Creates Body Image?

Melpomene, a journal of women's health research, recently studied data drawn from an eight-page questionnaire completed by 152 girls aged 11–17 who were part of a YWCA summer program.

Low body image was associated with:

- weight for height
- perceived weight
- worry about weight
- talking about weight
- attempting to lose weight
- comparison of appearance to others'
- teasing
- wanting to be attractive to boys
- negative comments
- lower level of participation in sports

High body image was associated with

- less preoccupation with weight
- less worry about weight
- less likely to compare appearance to others'
- less likely to report wanting to be attractive to boys
- less likely to talk about feeling fat with friends

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Racial differences were associated with body image in several areas. African-American girls were more likely to report high body image than either Anglo or American Indian girls. African-American girls were more likely than Anglo girls to consider themselves attractive or very attractive, to always like the way they looked, and to report feeling competent and capable about their bodies and the things they could do. African-American girls reported comparing their appearance to others less often than Anglo or American Indian girls.

("Adolescent Girls: Factors Influencing Low and High Body Image," by Lynn Jaffee and Judy Mahle Lutter; *Melpomene*, Volume 14, no. 2, Summer 1995.

cise, a passion for living, and skills for finding peace within ourselves are the permanent keys to feeling beautiful.

Babies aren't born hating their bodies, but rather delight in the discovery of them. They are their own best judges of their appetites, crying when they're hungry and pushing away the breast or bottle when they feel full. Though appreciation of our own bodies, and our children's bodies, we encourage them to grow in synch with these natural rhythms.

NOTES

1. Vivian Meehan, MD, President, Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, conversation, May 1996.
2. Judith Rodin, *Body Traps* (New York: Quill William Morrow Press, 1992): 34.
3. Sanchiko St. Jeor, "The Role of Weight Management in the Health of Women," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* (September 1993).
4. Elizabeth Sporkin, "The Body Game," *People* (11 January 1993).
5. Lois Armstrong, Louise Lague, Allison Lynn, Laura Sanderson Healy, Gabrielle Saveri, Vicki Sheff-Cahan, "How Thin is Too Thin?" *People*(20 September 1993).
6. Stephen Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and Its Creators* (New York: Morrow, 1984).
7. Fairfax Cone, *Blue Streak* (Chicago: Crain Communications, 1973).
8. Conversation with Anne Fishbein, former model, August 1994.
9. Anne Taylor Fleming, "Daughters of Dieters," *Glamour* (November 1994).

For More Information

BOOKS

Banner, Lois. *American Beauty*. New York: Knopf, 1983.

Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa*. New York: Penguin, 1988.

Estes, Clarissa Pinkola. *Women Who Run With The Wolves*. New York: Ballantine, 1992.

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Fallon, Patricia, Melanie Katzman and Susan Wooley. *Feminist Perspectives on Eating Disorders*. New York: Guilford Press, 1994.

Hirschman, Jane and Carol H. Munter. *When Women Stop Hating Their Bodies*. New Youk: Fawcett Columbine Books, 1995.

PUBLICATIONS

Girls in the Middle: Working to Succeed in School
American Association of University Women Education Foundation
1111 Sixteenth Street NW
Washington, DC 20036-4873
202-785-7700
A report on the different strategies that middle-school girls use to negotiate through adolescence.

Equilibrium
1836 Ashley River Road
Charleston, SC 29407
A detailed catalog of books, products, and resources "to educate, celebrate and inspire women and girls."

Just Girls
PO Box 3487
Bethesda, MD 20827
301-320-7713 or 301-320-7916
Fax: 301-320-7883
Just Girls offers a series of minicatalogs of books that celebrate girls. Just Girls books focus on the strengths of girls of all ages, from all over the world—girls making history, girls as heroines, girls in legends and tall tales, girls as active participants in everyday life. Books are grouped by themes that

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include Girls in the American Revolution; Girls as Detectives; Women in Sports; Girls Making a Difference.

Let's Hear It for the Girls
Erica Bauermeister and Holly Smith
Penguin Books
$10.95
Publication date: March 1997

A guide to 375 books for readers 2–14 that provide children with strong female role models, both ordinary and extraordinary. This guide is organized by reading level and includes fiction, nonfiction, biography, poetry, picture books, and chapter books by both women and men. Cross-referenced by author, title, date, country, genre, and subject.

Melpomene
1010 University Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55104
612-642-1951
A journal of women's health research, *Melpomene* helps girls and women of all ages link physical activity and health through research, publication, and education.

New Moon
PO Box 3587
Duluth, MN 55803
218-728-5507
Bimonthly international magazine edited by, for and about girls ages eight to 14. Subtitled "The magazine for girls and their dreams," *New Moon* is available for $25 per year. *New Moon Network*, a companion volume for parents, teachers, youth workers, and counselors, is available for $25 per year, or both for $45 per year.

For more information on raising healthy children, see the following article in issue no. 52 of *Mothering*: "Raising Children Free of Food and Weight Problems."

JILL S. ZIMMERMAN, *MSW, is a psychotherapist, writer, and teacher specializing in women's issues. She has taught at the University of Chicago and has given public lectures throughout the Midwestabout body image and eating disorders. Zimmerman is currently working on a book about mothers, daughters, and body image. She lives with her husband and two sons (9 and 12) in Evanston, Illinois, where she maintains a private practice. She is also a mountain biker and a committed yoga student.*