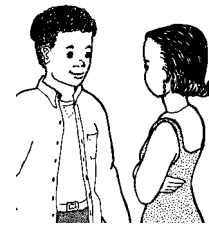


# Focus Issue: Youth Development

## Preventing Body Dissatisfaction and Eating Disorders in Teens



by Carrie Green-Zinn M.A., ADTR, Annie Johnston M.S., Elizabeth Scott LCSW, and Connie Sobczak — *The Body Positive*, Berkley, CA



### Key Words

body image, self-esteem, eating disorders (prevention), intuitive eating, health (promoting in teens), diversity (& body size), media (influence on body image)

### Objectives:

As a participant in this guided self-study, family educators will be able to:

- generate a safe and comfortable arena for teens to deal with issues regarding their body esteem.
- give teens an understanding of the importance of positive body image in the development of overall positive self-esteem.
- give teens an understanding of the importance of the potential in life once free from body hatred.
- promote health at any size.
- teach teens to respect diversity in size in our culture, as much as they respect diversity in race, sex, or religion.



*Editor's Note:* This article suggests a prevention-based model. It is not written to address the treatment needs of a teenager diagnosed with an eating disorder.

*The Body Positive* is a non-profit organization dedicated to the prevention of eating disorders and to the promotion of healthy body esteem. Their creative educational videos and workshops provide youth and adults with tools to work against body dissatisfaction.

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### Overview

Our mission at *The Body Positive* is “To empower people of all ages, especially our youth, to celebrate their natural size and shape instead of what society promotes as the ideal body.” We have created a series of dynamic and educational videos, workshops, and a comprehensive guide to help people implement prevention programs in their communities. We believe that children and teens will accomplish their goals more fully, if they can be free from body dissatisfaction. Eating disorders and disordered eating, however, are on the rise and have become a pervasive and serious problem in our society. These destructive behaviors can stem from body dissatisfaction and the illusion promoted in our culture, that if someone looks better on the outside, they feel better on the inside.

*The American Council on Size and Weight Discrimination* (2000) says four out of five girls in this country are more afraid of being fat than they are of nuclear war, cancer or losing their parents. This is not an affliction of just upper middle class white women. In 13 studies reviewed by Gard and Freeman (1996), only two studies were found to show a relationship between class and eating disorders, and these two found higher rates of bulimia in lower or lower-middle class groups.

A 1998 **New England Journal of Medicine** article stated that eating disorders have a mortality rate as high as twenty percent, and are

epidemic among middle school, high school, and college females. Simultaneously, obesity rates for children and adolescents are soaring. Traditional methods for treating obesity aren't working. Ninety-five percent of the people who go on diets gain the weight back within two years. (NIH, 1993). Research also shows that dieters are nine times more likely to develop an eating disorder than non-dieters.

More disturbing are studies done on adolescents in the past decade (Neumark-Sztainer D., et al, 1996 and NIMH, 1994) which correlate eating disorders and poor body image with other risk taking behaviors, including tobacco, drug and alcohol use, delinquency, unprotected sex and suicide attempts. *The Office of Women's Health BodyWise Handbook* (2000) says that eating disorders and dieting are also known to cause nutritional deficiencies, which affect a teenager's capacity to learn, mature, and grow.

If parents, educators, and health professionals can help one teenager move beyond obsession with their body and how it looks, they have made a huge impact. It has been our experience at *The Body Positive* that as teens become aware of the harmful effects

body dissatisfaction has on their lives, they learn to resist the beliefs and behaviors,

which lead to eating disorders. (Teens who suffer from a clinical eating disorder need additional counseling and evaluation for psychological and medical treatment). It is as if once a teen's eyes have been opened to the relief they experience when they are comfortable with themselves and their bodies, they rarely regress. Many of the teens in our ongoing peer lead support groups have become activists and promote body esteem in their communities by teaching other teens in formal and informal settings, and by educating the adults in their lives.

Low body esteem is not something teens will generally try to fix on their own. They can talk forever about self-loathing, body hatred, how to change their bodies, their looks or whose bodies are great and whose aren't. They will not however, talk about the roots of these issues and



why they don't like themselves. This is why they need a comfortable place to address and explore these concerns. For a teenager to be willing to change his/her pattern and to see its destructive tendencies, a very safe environment is needed to uncover their fears and insecurities. Teens can trust each other and will take care of each other if the culture of the setting is nurturing. This is why we use adult supervised, but peer facilitated groups to encourage teens to talk. One of *The Body Positive's* advisory board members, Eric Stice, Ph.D., a researcher from the University of Texas, has found that providing leadership in eating disorders prevention is the single most effective intervention available to reduce eating disorder symptoms and promote resiliency in girls and women. We have built our model around this premise: that as teens work to educate their peers about how to love their bodies, they are equally affected by the message they teach.

The following is a brief introduction to the work of developing body esteem and helping teens change their focus from *how they look* to the more valuable pursuit of *how they feel, what they can accomplish, and how they can take care of themselves.*

## Content/Discussion

### ***Body Image and Adolescent Development***

Adolescence, as we all know, is a time of great upheaval and change psychologically, emotionally, and physically. It is during this time that we develop many views of our world, which we carry with us into adulthood. Although myriads of developmental milestones occur during this time, one aspect, which has lasting impact, is the intense awareness of how we look. Erik H. Erikson, the renowned author in the field of psychoanalysis, wrote in 1950 in ***Childhood and Society***:

*"...in puberty and adolescence all sameness and continuities relied on earlier are more or less questioned again, because of a rapidity of body growth which equals that of early childhood and because of the new addition of genital maturity. The growing and developing youths faced with this physiological revolution within them, and with tangible adult tasks ahead of them are now primarily concerned with what they appear to be*

*in the eyes of others, compared with how they feel they are, and with the question of how to connect the roles and skills cultivated earlier with the occupational prototypes of the day. In their search for a new sense of continuity and sameness, adolescents have to refight many of the battles of earlier years, even though to do so they must artificially appoint perfectly well-meaning people to play the role of adversaries; and they are ever ready to install lasting idols and ideals as guardians of a final identity.”*

In short, teenagers become obsessed with their bodies, their sexuality, what others think about them, and with idolizing supermodels and rock stars instead of parents or teachers. The intensity of the adolescent years is shaped by our drastically changing bodies, hormones, and the desperate need to be the same as everyone else, while simultaneously trying to assert independence! Defining identity doesn't just mean rejecting adults, it means aligning with peers. *“I am one of them, not one of you.”* If one doesn't look just right, than one might not fit in. This can be a brutal reality for someone without the so-called “perfect” body.



Our initial framework for the development of our body image is when we are growing babies. The way we are cared for, held, loved, fed, nurtured etc. affects our growing bodies. As we mature from crawling to walking, we continue to become aware of our body and its functions as, hopefully, a positive and useful tool. At times this experience may be frustrating and challenging, but if we receive encouraging messages, we may feel successful in the face of these difficulties. If we are repeatedly given the message that we are strong, beautiful, and smart, that will add to our feeling free, happy, and comfortable in our growing body. Of equal impact are the messages we receive which may feel insulting, shameful, or hurtful. These messages come from adults close to us, peers, strangers, and of course, the media and culture around us.

## ***Encouraging Teens to Change Their Focus***

By the time we reach puberty and adolescence, many of these negative self-images are already ingrained into our body concept, apparent by how we feel about ourselves, by our posture, our movement behavior, and our interactions with others. The task at hand is to offer young people, while they appropriately struggle through adolescence, an alternative to the “I hate my body” mantra.

Our goal is not to take away their preoccupation with their looks and body and sexuality, because they need to do some of that as part of becoming an adult. What we want is that they make a mental shift and choose to be preoccupied in a healthy and productive way. If they can change their focus from *“I want to be thin and pretty,”* to *“I want to be smart, healthy, and feel both my outer and inner beauty”* then they may use their time more wisely and feel better about themselves. We accomplish this goal through a comprehensive multimedia program that emphasizes youth leadership and wisdom. We use videos of young people speaking out against body hatred and dieting and promoting self-expression and health. They then develop leadership and activism projects in smaller focus groups in the community. Our programs help young people identify and change the conditions in their lives that foster body dissatisfaction, so they can move on to focus on relationship and self-expression.

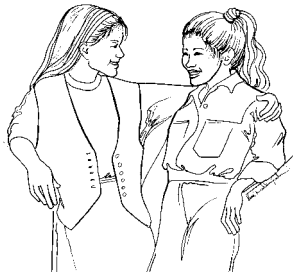
## ***Change Your Focus***

We recommend that when beginning to work with teens on these issues, you model self-acceptance of your own body shape and size. We encourage you to examine your own concerns about your body. Ask yourself to what degree have you internalized harmful stereotypes about fat, muscle, shape and size and have allowed yourself to be swayed by the diet industry's myths and false claims. Since the weight loss industry makes forty billion dollars a year, we have all been affected. They work very hard at convincing us that we are all “over-weight.” However, we know, the best way to affect young people is through role modeling. We don't believe one needs to be completely cured of any critical body thoughts or feelings to do this work. We do think you need to be willing to commit to a path

of living fully in your body, becoming aware of the critical messages you have internalized, appreciating your body for its unique qualities, and sharing this process with those you teach.

## Activities

The components of this program can be multifaceted. We hope that you will choose to find a way to work on these issues on an ongoing basis and will continue to enjoy the riches that can come from working with youth on such an important topic. The following are some components and activities to introduce to the youth in your program.



Firstly, it is important to create ground rules for the setting in which this topic will be discussed. Let the youth participants contribute to establishing the parameters. Explain to them that the subjects of body image and self-esteem can be very provocative for people of all ages, especially adolescents, and especially when both sexes are sharing the same discussion. When we invite people into their bodies by asking them to pay attention to how it feels, many feelings may arise. These feelings can range from anxiety, embarrassment, or excitement, to fear, sadness and anger. It is crucial in this process that the kids agree to express these feelings honestly without any teasing, criticizing, or making fun of anyone in any way, such as laughing when a peer is sharing. This rule of *respect* must be a priority. Encourage the group to create a few additional rules, such as *confidentiality*, (nothing said in the session is discussed outside of the room), and a commitment to *honesty*.

Secondly, generate an interest in the topic, not by asking personal questions about body image, but a more general discussion (or by showing a video, such as *Body Talk 1* or *2*). Present the issues with inquiries such as:

- “How many people do you know who really like their bodies?”
- “How many people do you know who worry about food because of how they feel about their looks?”

- “What does our society tell us about how we should look?”

Based on the response, the participants may be ready for a more in-depth discussion. In one group, or separating into smaller groups, ask more specific questions such as:

- “How do I feel about my body?”
- “How would I like to feel about my body?”
- “How do these feelings impact or hinder me from doing the things I would like to do?”
- “How have you used food or eating to cope with bad feelings?”
- “What are the messages in my environment which contribute to my body dissatisfaction?”

As the answers begin to flow, some of the concepts, which are important to introduce, are (see *Factors Influencing Our Body Size and Image, FI-YD p. 24*):

**Genetics** — Not everyone is meant to be thin. Our genetic makeup plays an important role in our shape and size. What do our parents or grandparents look like? At *The Body Positive* we believe that everyone has a natural size and with healthy eating and an active lifestyle, we can maintain that natural size.

**Healthy at Any Size** — Experts in the field of nutrition promote a new paradigm, which basically states that people of all sizes can be healthy given proper nutrition and moderate exercise. Not all fat people are unhealthy or prone to illness, neither are all skinny people. Promote health, not weight loss.

**Media Literacy** — The fashion industry, the diet industry, the film industry, even the health care industry all make money by telling the public that thin is better. Challenging this concept, exploring when and why fat became the enemy, and combating the barrage of illusion and imagery we see in the media is a healthy direction to channel adolescent angst and energy.

**Intuitive Eating** — As children we probably listened to our hunger and thirst needs more naturally. As we grow older, for many reasons, we sometimes deny these most basic needs and feelings. Relearning to eat when you are hungry and stop when you are full can create

a trusting and healthy relationship to food. Adolescents tend to need more sleep and more food to manage their changing bodies. To ignore these needs can be detrimental to a normal developmental pattern. We do not encourage a limit of caloric intake unless a physician requests this for a medical problem. If eating or not eating seems to be filling an emotional need, then be open to exploring what that is about.

The key to creating change in this arena is to listen to the young people's concerns, listen to their ideas, and listen to their needs. Let them give appropriate feedback to each other, because they will probably listen to their peers more intently than they will listen to the adults in the room. Encourage them to meet with an appropriate adult, (you, a parent, or a counselor) if they don't feel safe talking in a large group. Most importantly, continue to examine your own beliefs and attitudes and behaviors about your own body. It is through this role modeling that the young people in your program will see that changing their focus to a positive body image can and does work.

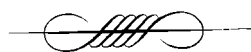
The following activities are useful tools in generating further work in this area.

*What is Body Image? (FI-YD p. 25)*

*Family Heritage (FI-YD p. 26)*

*Media Literacy (FI-YD p. 27)*

*Personal Exploration (FI-YD p. 28)*



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## Video Resources

*BodyTalk 1: Teens Talk About Their Bodies, Eating Disorders and Activism*. Video length 28 minutes, *The Body Positive*, (1999) [www.thebodypositive.org](http://www.thebodypositive.org).

*BodyTalk 2: It's A New Language*. Video length 20 minutes, *The Body Positive*, (2001) [www.thebodypositive.org](http://www.thebodypositive.org).

*GirlTalk: For Families, Health Care Providers and Educators*. Video length 15 minutes, *The Body Positive*, (1999) [www.thebodypositive.org](http://www.thebodypositive.org).

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## Factors Influencing Our Body Size and Image

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## What is Body Image?

*Body image is the mental, emotional, and physical experience you have of your body. Body image is made up of many events in your life. Write down some thoughts in a private journal on each of these aspects to help you understand your own body image. Choose one aspect to speak about with someone you trust.*

- How your body feels.
- How your body changes as you grow.
- Being a girl or a boy.
- Your ethnicity and/or community.
- How your family members react to your body.



- Messages from the media, such as television, magazines, and movies.
- Accidents or illnesses you have had.
- Sports or movement activities in which you participate.
- Any experience of physical or sexual abuse you may have had.



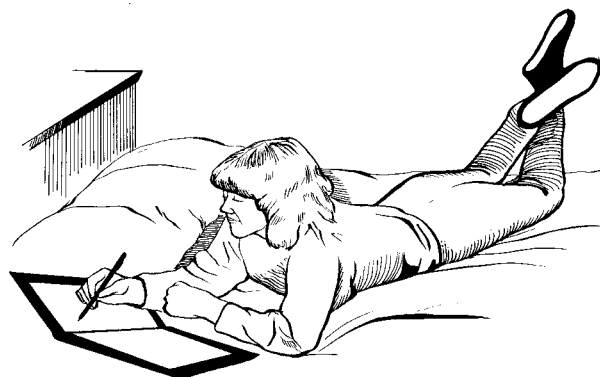
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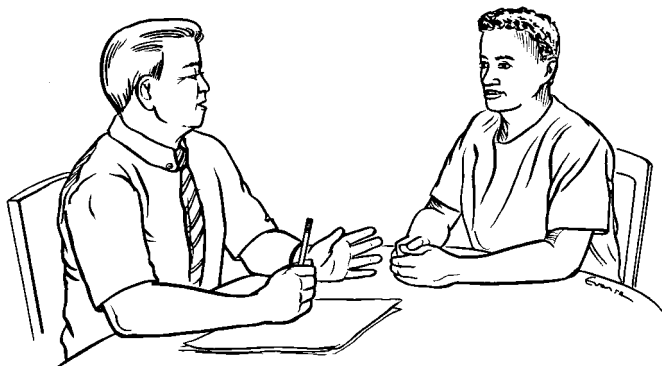
## Family Heritage

Genetics plays a huge role in why we look the way we look. Patterns in our family's eating style, cooking style, and ethnic preferences play a huge role in how and what we eat.

Find pictures of your parents, grandparents, and relatives. Is there a connection to the way your body is shaped? How does that feel to you? Make a collage with these pictures; include ones of yourself and your siblings. Try to find a sense of pride in the way you look as it relates to your heritage. Research even further back to the origins of your ancestry and find connections that way.



Discover with an adult relative the beginnings of family recipes, family mealtime traditions, and ways in which food is presented in your home. Make a recipe book of family favorites. Remember that all kinds of foods can be a part of healthy eating. There are not “good” or “bad” foods. What “different” kinds of foods are part of your family's traditions? Can you try to experiment with foods that you might not usually eat?



Explore your interests in sports, dance, arts, music and other activities, which keep you active and stimulated. Do you have traditions in these areas as well in your family?

Is there an activity that you would enjoy doing with other family members?

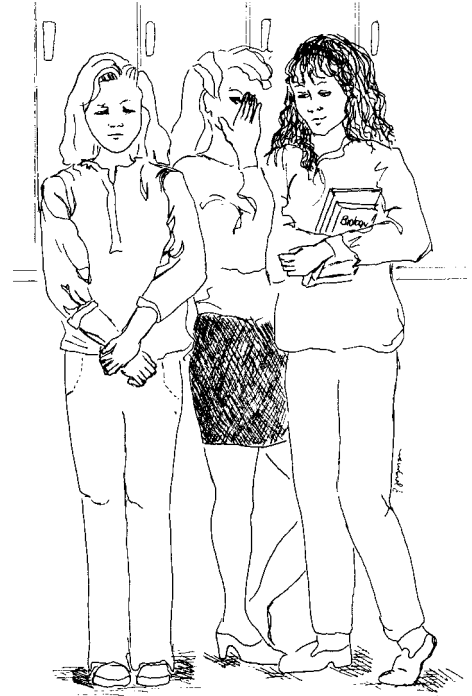


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# Media Literacy

- Critical thinking about body shaming messages from family, friends, and the media can lead to an increased awareness in yourself and those around you. Begin to tell people it hurt your feelings when they made a hurtful comment to you about your body.
- Notice how often you hear people around you complain that they are overweight and need to diet. Try to begin asking them to stop speaking this way in front of you, or to tell them you would rather talk about how they feel instead of how they look. Tell them they are great the way they are and that eating a variety of foods and exercise is better than going on a diet.
- Write an essay about the messages you receive from the media about your body and the food you eat. How do those messages affect you?
- With the group write down all the harmful stereotypes you can think of about fat people and thin people; i.e.: fat people are lazy, thin people are successful. Then watch thirty minutes of television with a critical eye. How are fat people portrayed? Thin people? What stereotypes are promoted?
- Calculate how much money you or your entire group has spent in the past week on fashion magazines, beauty products, and weight loss or gain products. How much would that amount to in one year? What charity or worthwhile cause could you spend that money on instead?
- Develop an activism project to cope with the negative messages you receive. Such as:
  - *Do not read fashion magazines for one month.*
  - *Defend someone who gets teased or ridiculed for his/her size.*
  - *A letter writing campaign to an advertising agency, which portrays harmful stereotypes.*
  - *Create a slogan that promotes body acceptance. Make it visible in your community.*



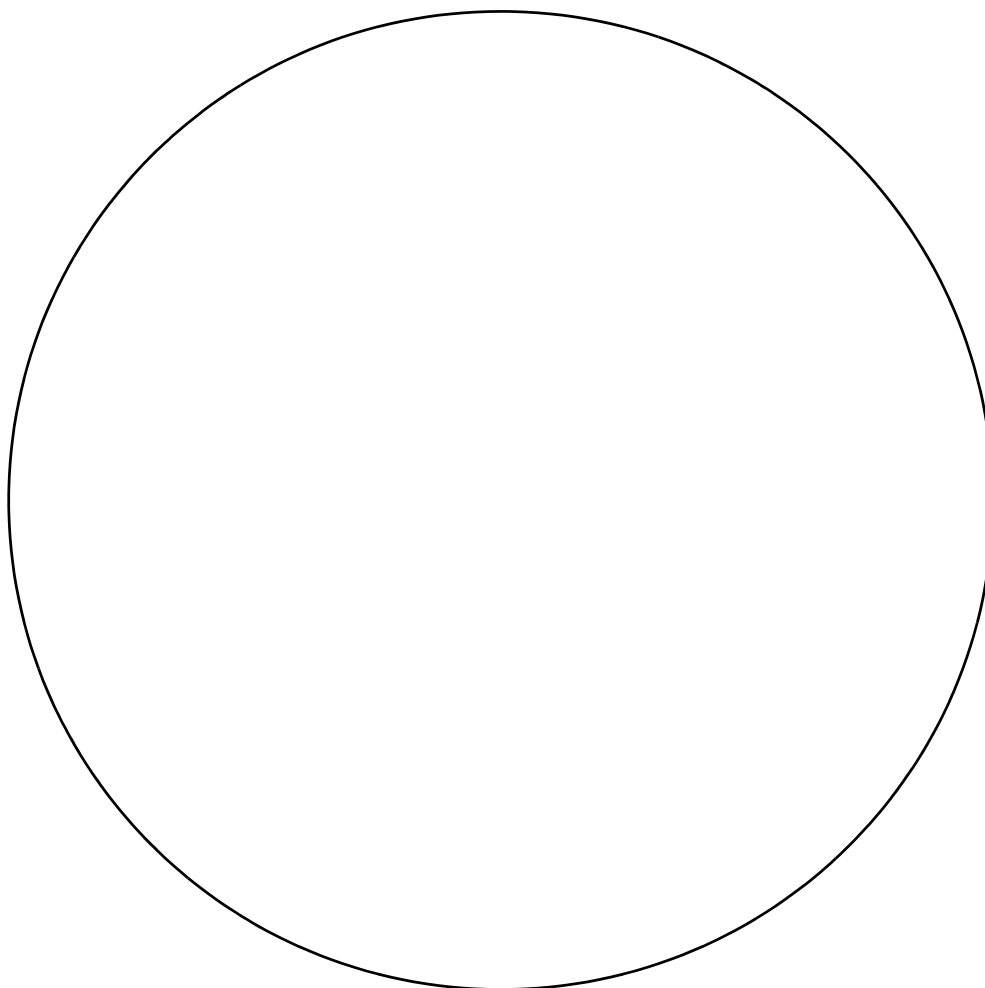
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# Personal Exploration

Feeling unhappy with the way you look can be a way of covering up other conflictual feelings. Try to begin to understand what “*I feel fat,*” really means. Are you sad, anxious, or angry? Why? Begin to listen to clues to the real causes of problems with food or your body. What helps when you have those feelings? Writing them down? Talking to a friend? Talking to an adult?

Think carefully about your morning; write down how often you made disparaging remarks to yourself about your body? When you first awoke? When you got dressed? When you ate breakfast? How did you internalize those remarks and how did they affect your day. Try tomorrow to replace all of those negative remarks with positive ones. How did this affect your day?

In a large circle, divide it into pie wedges. Write down, in the wedges, as many aspects about yourself that you can, such as caring, smart, confident, funny, etc. Notice how looks and image are only a small part of the pie. Your size and appearance are only a piece of the total you.



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