

# Girls, Body Image, and Well-Being

Phyllis Egerly Ring

Scripture tells us that each of us is created in God's image. Yet our culture seems to contradict this at every turn.

The average women's magazine cover promises a diet plan that can't fail—and then pictures a dessert that will never be part of it. Or it portrays a model whose body type is possessed by 5 percent of the population—or by no one at all. Experts say this is a perfect setup for eating disorders.

Few are more vulnerable than those who have the least life experience. If someone is young and female, chances are good that society is already sending her some other mixed messages too.

Catherine Steiner-Adair, CEd.D., director of education, prevention, and outreach at the Harvard Eating Disorders Center, researches the cultural trends that discourage girls from expressing themselves freely or behaving assertively. She describes a connection between these messages and the efforts of girls to control eating and body size.

Girls do a good job of expressing themselves until they reach preadolescence and encounter what she calls the "tyranny of kind and nice." According to Steiner-Adair, "Society sends them a clear message that in order to be lis-

tened to, they have to posture themselves correctly. They begin to mimic older women by suppressing anger, hiding their feelings, and feigning happiness."

Steiner-Adair adds, "A nine-year-old will tell you 'I think...,' but by the age of eleven or twelve a girl is more likely to begin her sentence with 'I don't know...'"

As her voice begins to disappear, a girl may try to "shrink" in other ways. When they don't feel acceptance for expressing themselves, girls often seek shelter in some form of control. Body image and eating become their most common focus. "Add to this a constant media barrage of an unattainable ideal of female beauty and you have the makings of a very destructive situation," Steiner-Adair says.

Media analyst Jean Kilbourne's documentary film *Slim Hopes: Advertising and the Obsession With Thinness* alerted Americans to the body image that keeps women frustrated, helps the dieting industry flourish, and puts young girls at risk. "The body type most commonly pictured—tall, slender, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped—is one that belongs genetically to a very small percentage of the total population," Kilbourne says. "But it's the only one we ever see. Or worse, with computer-engineered images, we see models composed from up to seven different images, bodies that aren't physically possible without plastic surgery."

In the pursuit of such impossible stan-

ards, increasing numbers of girls view dieting as a necessity, and they experience eating disorders that destroy the health of their still-developing body. A Harvard Eating Disorders Center study found that 31 percent of ten-year-old girls fear being fat, and 52 percent of fourteen-year-old girls feel better about themselves when they're dieting.

With attention focused primarily on material things, our body becomes "larger than life." This unbalanced focus, experts say, has an ironic consequence, for we then fail to be aware of and to appreciate the remarkable ways our body protects and assists us. We draw away from the conscious living in our body that God intends.

Our body itself can serve as an invitation to contemplate the wonder of the spiritual realities reflected in God's creation. The very unity of its parts and functions demonstrates that creation in God's image implies wholeness and interrelationship both in ourselves and in the world around us.

Debora Burgard, Ph.D., creator of [www.BodyPositive.com](http://www.BodyPositive.com) and a therapist who specializes in body-image issues, recommends replacing confusing or destructive messages about body image with a focus on gratitude for how we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps 139:14). It is easier to behold our body as the wondrous gift it is when we can identify something it has done unasked on our behalf, for example, fighting an infection, taking us to the top of a mountain, staying awake so we could drive home safely, learning a new skill, watching the colors of a sunset, producing another human being, or functioning despite being in pain.

Clearly, God loves diversity of form. This is evident not only among plants and animals but also among human beings, in whom science has identified distinct body types determined by genetic codes. Nothing in science or Scripture suggests that God prefers one body type over another any more than God prefers one skin color or ethnic background over another. It follows, therefore, that to worship God and honor God's creation, we should appreciate all of the variety God has created.

A God's-eye view suggests that a healthy self-image is rooted in God's view of us as dearly loved children. (See Eph 5:1.) Such acceptance is physical as well as spiritual, so it benefits us to try to change the way we see ourselves and the world rather than the way we look.

In addition to an inherent body type, every person has a natural weight range set by genetics. Being the weight we were born to be poses no health risk. There is always a risk, however, in manipulating the body's natural balance. For preadolescents and teens, dieting may eventually and permanently alter the setpoint of their body weight at a level higher than it would naturally be. Thus, learning to appreciate, accept, and care for the body God gave us is both worship and wise practice.

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It is important to introduce such perspective early in life, as some experts now believe that a person's basic body image is determined by age six. Obviously, the popular media significantly influences how this is formed, but the single most influential factor is parental attitude. Research shows that parents who are unhappy with their body or who actively seek to alter it are more likely to have children with body-image distortion; eating disorders are now appearing in second and third consecutive family generations.

**A** strategy of informed intervention and conscious role-modeling can help girls bypass potential eating disorders and adopt the balanced approach to living that God desires for us. Parents and all who work with girls can use the following suggestions to encourage a healthy attitude, both within the girls they encounter and within themselves:

- *Acquaint girls with facts that offset advertising hype.* Use teachable moments to point out how harmful media messages and false images target them specifically.

- *Capitalize on the importance of the mother-daughter relationship.* Girls learn most of their life skills from their mother. What many learn is to eat compulsively, to shop, and to ob-

sess about weight. What girls could be learning from their mother is that the greatest source of joy and nourishment comes from a life grounded in faith.

- *Create opportunities for girls to express themselves authentically and feel accepted for doing so.* One mother began by sharing with her preteen a workplace problem about which she was praying for guidance. The daughter's ideas led to a unique solution and ongoing communication that benefits them both.

- *Foster self-confidence.* Effective self-expression is a learned activity. Offer girls support and guidance about how to handle difficult situations. Coach them on how to speak up when it is difficult to share something or how to express concern about an issue or problem without jeopardizing a friendship.

- *Monitor what you do and say.* In a survey in which women were asked what they most wished for, 80 percent responded "to be thin" or "to lose weight." Girls are not the only ones affected by unrealistic cultural norms. Do we constantly talk about body size and dieting? Do we perpetuate the idea that diet products can somehow save us? Or do we model the options of self-acceptance, balanced eating, and moderate exercise?

The younger a child, the more literally she interprets what she hears. Adults are the closest thing children have to a perfect standard. When an

eight-year-old hears her mother describe herself as fat because she weighs ten pounds more than she wishes, what does this tell the youngster about her own developmental pudginess? Do our words and actions reflect the belief that each of us is created in the image of a loving God?

- *Encourage pursuits that provide diverse experiences and fortify the emotional strengths of girls.* Psychologist Mary Pipher, Ph.D., author of *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, recommends involving them in activities that develop their talents and interests, especially physical ones such as sports, which reinforce both inner and outer strengths. To further expand and bolster self-concept, Pipher suggests that parents provide opportunities for girls to interact with age groups other than their own—from elders to toddlers—through friendships and volunteer work.

- *Adopt a mentor role whether you're a parent or not.* Adolescents, especially, often listen to a teacher or other adult more receptively than they do to their parents. Becoming mindful about what we say and do for the sake of young people is one of the greatest ways to overcome our own self-defeating attitudes and habits. ■

*Phyllis Ederly Ring, mother of two young adults, writes on issues of family and spirituality from her home in Exeter, New Hampshire.*

To obtain a copy of *Slim Hopes: Advertising and the Obsession with Thinness*, contact the Media Education Foundation at 800-897-0089.

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