

Your Little Girl's Eating Disorder See the Signs You're Missing



by Dr. Jenn Berman

In the past five years, I have noticed an alarming trend in my private practice. Eating disordered thoughts and behaviors are striking girls at increasingly younger ages. It is not uncommon for me to hear an eight-year-old girl tell me that she thinks her thighs are "too fat" or that "carbs are bad." This disordered thinking is striking young girls more than ever because of a lethal combination of media images, problematic parenting, and their peers.

The Origins of the Problem

Children are bombarded by images of unnaturally thin women on television and in magazines. These images influence what they think is attractive and create an unattainable standard of beauty which most women can never meet. As a matter of fact, studies show a direct correlation between the amount of media exposure a woman is subjected to and the frequency of eating disordered symptoms she experiences. One study in which women viewed slides of thin, average, and heavy models found that the exposure to thin models resulted in lower self-esteem and decreased weight satisfaction. Another study found that after 38 months of exposure to American television, Fijian teens (previously unexposed to Western culture) experienced significant changes in their attitudes and behaviors. The teen risk

for eating disorders doubled to 29%, vomiting for weight control in high school girls increased five fold to 15%, 62% of girls were on diets and 74% Fiji teens reported they felt "too big or fat" at least some of the time.

American culture stresses dieting and encourages young girls to restrict their eating which, in turn, increases the likelihood of developing an eating disorder. The diet industry is a \$50 billion a year business that benefits from more participants. The companies selling diet products, books and tapes don't care that the risk of developing an eating disorder is eight times higher in dieting than non-dieting 15-year-old girls. This is especially frightening when studies show that 50% of eight-year-old girls are on diets and 80% of 10-year-old girls report that they have already been on diets. Most of them are headed for trouble.

Parents contribute to the problem too. Many put undue pressure on their children to be thin. Children are eager to please their parents and don't realize that they are putting themselves in jeopardy by restricting their own eating. When parents criticize their own bodies they set a terrible example. This behavior teaches young girls to hate their own bodies, leading to disordered behavior. In addition, parents who discuss their own dieting behaviors in front of their children

Parenting Do's

- Set a healthy example around food and body image.
- Teach your children to identify and express feelings so they don't resort to emotional eating
- Be a healthy role model. Learn to listen and obey your body's cues and teach your children to do the same.
- Limit your child's media exposure.
- Be aware of the messages your child is getting from influential people, like peers.
- Talk to your child and try and create a relationship that allows for open communication.

Parenting Don'ts

- Don't criticize your own body in front of your children.
- Don't criticize your daughter's body, even if she has gained weight.
- Don't refer to foods as "good" or "bad."
- Don't allow dieting or scales in your house.
- Don't eat with distractions like the television on.

normalize the behavior and encourage young girls to restrict their own eating. Statistically, parents who have not worked through their own eating and body image issues are very likely to pass them on to their daughters.

Eating disorders tend to be contagious in nature. It often starts with dieting behavior followed by girls teaching each other dieting "tricks", and before you know it, those tips turn into eating disorder instructions. As many schools and summer camps can attest, once one member develops an eating disorder others tend to follow.

The Trauma of Changing Bodies

While it is normal for girls to have anxiety around their changing bodies, many girls take their anxieties to eating disordered extremes. Girls are going through puberty at younger and younger ages and are often not emotionally ready for the physical changes they experience. In a normal adolescent growth spurt, a girl's body fat increases by 125% while her lean body mass increases by only 42%. This is a very dramatic change for most girls, not to mention their mothers. Most girls need help coping with these changes and accepting their bodies but are often met with anxious mothers who fear that their daughters are getting "chubby" or fat, which only make matters worse, despite their own desires to help.

It's Never Too Soon

It is never too early for parents to think about how they can raise healthy children who are free of eating disorders. It is important that parents are on the lookout for signs of eating disorders, poor body image or bad self-esteem and take immediate action to help children who are struggling in these areas.

Dr. Jenn Berman is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in private practice in Los Angeles. For more information on her upcoming Prime Time TV appearances and her Monday night radio show (10 to midnight) on Star 98.7 (FM), check out Dr. Jenn's website