

HOW SOCIOCULTURAL INFLUENCES IMPACT YOUNG WOMEN'S BODY IMAGE

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Young women are influenced by a variety of different messages as they are transitioning from being viewed as little girls to being viewed as young women. While women of all ages can experience dissatisfaction with their bodies and appearance, this is especially common during the time when girls are entering into adolescence, adjusting to their changing bodies, and trying to develop a sense of who they are as an individual. Our society today has placed a significant importance on thinness and young women are bombarded with messages presenting them with an unattainable level of thinness as society's ideal. This paper describes adolescent development, looks at the sociocultural influences (family, peers, and media) that impact young women's body image, presents prevention and intervention programs that have been used with young women, and provides recommendations for family life educators on how to educate parents on the messages their daughters are being sent and provides them with suggestions on how to talk with their daughters about these messages.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Today's my half birthday. It's the first day of summer, and I'm exactly eleven and a half. I usually make a wish on my half birthdays, so I was thinking that I'd wish to be the thinnest girl at school, or maybe even the thinnest eleven-year-old on the entire planet....I was just about to make the wish, but I sort of wondered what I'll have left to wish for on my real birthday, if I finally get that thin. I mean, what are girls supposed to wish for, other than being thin? (Gottlieb, 2000).*

This excerpt is taken from Lori Gottlieb's memoir *Stick Figure: A diary of my former self* (2000). In her memoir, Lori provides a wonderful glimpse into her life describing her experiences with her friends, her family, and her struggle with anorexia nervosa. In the beginning of the memoir, Lori is an 11-year-old girl who would be described as a tomboy; she is not concerned with what she wears, she is not into fashion or beauty, and she is not concerned with her figure or what she eats. Throughout the course of the memoir, Lori begins to become more and more concerned with her weight and eventually is hospitalized for anorexia.

Lori's struggle with anorexia did not happen overnight, instead it developed over several months and after receiving a number of different messages from friends, peers, and her mother. The messages Lori received stressed that being thin was important for young women; it was something they needed to strive for. Lori talks about her friends' mothers always being on diets; however, they never seemed to lose any weight. While eating dinner at one of her friend's homes, she was told by her friend's mother, "Now girls, remember to leave the table wanting a little something more" (Gottlieb, 2000, p. 35).

Not only was Lori receiving messages from her friends and their mothers telling her she needed to watch what she ate and that thinness was important, especially for women as they get

older, but she was also receiving these messages at home. Lori's mother constantly commented on what Lori wore, encouraged her to wear her hair down, and to wear makeup. She also began discouraging Lori from eating like she normally did. "I was in the kitchen baking Toll House cookies after school and when I reached for a second cookie, Mom told me to save the cookies for 'the guys'" (Gottlieb, 2000, p. 35). Lori was a very persistent young lady who wanted answers to her questions; when her mother continued telling her that desserts were for "the guys" Lori continued to push for an answer. Lori and her mother eventually had the following conversation;

'David's [Lori's brother] a growing boy and he needs his energy', she said. Then I asked Mom why I didn't need to eat the same food since I'm a growing girl. I mean, I'm not gonna be 4'8" for the rest of my life. And besides, Dad stopped growing a long time ago. 'It's just different', was all she said (Gottlieb, 2000, p. 36).

As Lori continued receiving messages regarding how she dressed, what she ate, and how she behaved she began to struggle more and more with her parents and the respect they had for her. Lori initially stopped eating to prove a point to her parents while on a vacation she did not want to be on, but as she continued not eating it became an obsession for her. She began counting calories, reading diet books, and exercising every chance she got. As Lori began losing weight her parents became concerned and after several doctor appointments and visits with a psychiatrist Lori was hospitalized for anorexia (Gottlieb, 2000).

Like Lori, many girls struggle with their appearance, weight, and how others view them. ABC News recently had a news report where they interviewed a six-year-old girl, named Taylor, who was concerned she was fat. Taylor came home from school and asked, "Mommy, why's my tummy so fat?" (ABC News, 2011). Her mother explained to the reporter that one of her peers

had asked her why she was fat. In another instance, Taylor was called “fat girl” by a boy at a birthday party. In spite of the fact that Taylor is a healthy, active six year old whose body mass index (BMI) is completely normal for her age, she still worries she is fat. Along with talking with Taylor and her mother, the reporter talked with a panel of five- to eight-year-old girls. These young girls were asked why it was important to eat healthy; the most common response was “so you don’t get fat” (ABC News, 2011). These young girls also talked about hearing their mothers and teachers talking about being on diets and needing to go to the gym in order to lose weight. Watching this interview, it was clear that these girls had internalized the message that being fat is a bad thing; however, it did not seem as though the young girls understood why being fat was a bad thing. For example, one girl did not want to get fat because if she did her dad would not be able to carry her. Another girl voiced her concern of her tummy popping if she got too fat (ABC News, 2011). The responses of these young girls and Taylor’s concern with her weight show the influence comments regarding weight, dieting, and exercise can have on young girls.

Along with peers and family another significant influence on young women’s body image comes from the media. Recently the American Medical Association (AMA) made a statement related to body image and advertising. The press release discussed how advertisers often alter photographs in order to enhance model’s bodies; however, these modifications can add to the unrealistic expectations of what is viewed as an appropriate or attainable body image. Such images can be especially influential to children and adolescents. The new policy adopted by the AMA encourages “advertising associations to work with public and private sector organizations concerned with child and adolescent health to develop guidelines for advertisements, especially those appearing in teen-oriented publications, that would discourage the altering of photographs

in a manner that could promote unrealistic expectations of appropriate body image” (AMA, 2011, p.1).

The experiences of Lori, Taylor, the young girls interviewed on ABC News, and the statement made by the AMA provide a number of reasons why it is important to look at the influence sociocultural influences (family, peers, and media) have on young women’s body image. Although sociocultural influences impact both male and female body image, due to the complexity of this topic, for the purpose of this paper I will be focusing on young women’s body image. Throughout this paper, the words body image, body satisfaction/dissatisfaction will be used interchangeably.



## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Body Image and Eating Disorders**

It is important to have a clear understanding of how body image is defined when looking at the influence sociocultural influences have on body image. The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA, 2005a) defined body image as consisting of how one sees him/herself, what one believes about his/her appearance, how one feels about his/her body as well as how one feels in his/her body. How one feels about one's body is influenced by how s/he sees him/herself when s/he looks in the mirror, or how one imagine him/herself looking. Beliefs about one's body and one's appearance are influenced by memories one has along with assumptions and generalizations made. How one feels about his/her body does not simply consist of his/her height, shape, and weight, it also includes how one feels in his/her body and how s/he senses and controls his/her body.

As individuals develop a sense of themselves, they can develop either a negative or positive body image (NEDA, 2005a). Individuals who have a negative body image often have a distorted sense of how their body looks, they often feel others are attractive but they cannot imagine themselves as being attractive, they are often self-conscious and ashamed of their appearance, and they feel uncomfortable and awkward in their bodies. Individuals who have a positive body image have a clear understanding of how their body truly looks, they are able to appreciate their body for what it is and recognize that their body does not define who they are as an individual. Individuals with positive body image accept their body and do not spend much time worrying about their weight or what they eat, and they are confident and comfortable with their bodies and who they are as individuals (NEDA, 2005a).

According to NEDA (2005a), individuals who have a negative body image are at an increased risk of developing an eating disorder and are likely to experience feelings of depression, low self-esteem, isolation, and have an obsession with weight loss. Eating disorders involve serious emotional and physical problems that can result in life-threatening consequences. NEDA discussed four different eating disorders: Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, Binge Eating Disorder, and Other Eating Disorders.

NEDA (2005b) explained that anorexia nervosa is characterized by actions that result in starving oneself and extreme weight loss. Symptoms of anorexia nervosa include refusing to maintain a healthy body weight for one's height, age, body type, and activity level, a fear of gaining weight, viewing oneself as being fat although there has been significant weight loss, no longer having menstrual periods, and an intense focus on one's body weight and shape.

Bulimia nervosa, according to NEDA (2005b), involves a secretive cycle of binge eating and then purging. During the binging phase, individuals eat large amounts of food in a very short amount of time and then rid their bodies of this excess food and calories through vomiting, using laxatives, or excessive exercise. Symptoms of bulimia nervosa include repeated cycles of binging and purging, having a sense of being out of control when binging and eating excessive amounts and then purging to rid themselves of the excess calories and weight. These individuals engage in frequent dieting, and have an intense concern with their weight and body shape.

NEDA (2005b) explained that binge eating disorder, or compulsive overeating, involves episodes of uncontrolled, impulsive, or continuous eating to where the individual is past the point of being comfortably full. Although individuals do not purge, they may engage in sporadic fasts or repetitive diets. Individuals also may feel shame and self-hatred after they have binged. Individuals may experience anxiety, depression, and loneliness, which can influence their

unhealthy binges. These individuals' body weight can vary from normal, to moderate or severe obesity.

NEDA (2005b) described other eating disorders as involving a combination of signs and symptoms of anorexia, bulimia, and/or binge eating disorder. Although these behaviors may not be viewed as a full syndrome eating disorder, they can be dangerous to the individual's health as well as emotionally draining.

Findings from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) show that 14.5% of females, in grades 9 to 12, went without eating for 24 hours or more in order to lose weight or to keep from gaining weight. Around 6% of females were found to use diet pills, liquids, or powders to lose weight or prevent themselves from gaining weight. About 5% of females vomited or took laxatives in order to lose weight or prevent themselves from gaining weight. Females engaged in these behaviors within the 30 days prior to their filling out the survey. The young women who filled out the YRBS were not advised by their doctors to engage in these disordered eating behaviors (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009).

Although eating disorders, specifically those focusing on thinness, can have a significant impact on adolescents it is also important to recognize that obesity has become a serious problem within our society. It is important to take this into consideration and recognize that, while it is not healthy for adolescents to strive for this ideal level of thinness, it is also not healthy for adolescents to follow the path our society is taking, a path towards obesity. Findings from the YRBS show that around 16% of adolescent females are overweight with around 8% being obese. Around 33% of girls, who filled out the survey, described themselves as being slightly or very overweight. In regards to physical activity, around 30% of girls reported they did not partake in at least 60 minutes of physical activity in any of the seven days prior to the survey (Center for

Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). These statistics help show that obesity is becoming a significant problem among adolescents. Although it is not within the scope of this paper to focus on the issue of obesity, it is important to make individuals aware that obesity is becoming a significant health risk within our society.

While this paper is not looking specifically at eating disorders, it is important to provide an explanation of eating disorders, because individuals who struggle with having a negative body image are at an increased risk of developing an eating disorder. While the research discussed in this report focuses on body image, a large number of studies touch on eating disorders showing that there is a relationship between body image and eating disorders.

### **Age Groups and Body Image**

Within the research on sociocultural influences and body image for young women, two age groups are represented: adolescence and emerging adulthood.

#### **Adolescence**

There seems to be a significant amount of ambiguity in defining adolescence. Often, definitions vary depending on the source. For this paper I will adapt the definition Steinberg (2008) used to define adolescence. Steinberg's definition of adolescence provides a broad age range for adolescence covering ages 10 to age 21. This age range is then divided into three stages, early adolescence, middle adolescence, and late adolescence. For this paper, I am going to focus on early adolescence, which ranges in age from 10 to 13, and middle adolescence, which ranges in age from 14 to 17. Because late adolescence also falls into the category of emerging adulthood, I am not going to include this within my discussion of adolescence.

#### **Emerging Adulthood**

For this paper, I use Steinberg's definition of emerging adulthood to define the age range as covering the ages of 18 to 25. He described this as being a time when individuals are

transitioning out of adolescence and into adulthood (Steinberg, 2008). As young women move from adolescence to adulthood, they are still discovering who they are as individuals while also realizing what it is like to no longer be under their parent's control. Young women may be adjusting to living on their own for the first time and may be experiencing new pressures, both socially and through the media, to attain the ideal level of thinness. A significant amount of research has been done looking at college age women's body satisfaction.

### **Adolescent Development**

One cannot focus in on one specific part of development to understand what girls are experiencing as they are becoming young women; instead one has to look at a number of different areas of development. As girls begin transitioning into adolescence they are developing physically, cognitively, socially and they are developing their identity. As girls mature, they have to adjust to their changing bodies, they are learning to think about and understand things differently than they have been able to prior to adolescence, and they are developing a sense of who they are as individuals. As girls are taking in all of these changes their family, peers, and the media are also influencing them socially. By looking at adolescent girls' physical, cognitive, identity, and social development, one can gain a clearer understanding of what girls experience and why sociocultural influences can have such a significant impact on these young women's lives.

### **Physical Development**

During adolescence, girls go through physical changes as they transition from girls' bodies to those of young women. The physiological changes girls experience during adolescence are referred to as puberty, which often occurs between the ages of 9 and 13, and is achieved by their ability to sexually reproduce. Girls' physical development and sexual maturation are based

on the physical changes that take place within the many systems of their body. The changes experienced during puberty are controlled by the pituitary hormones, which lead to dramatic changes in body size, shape, and composition.

The pituitary gland releases a growth hormone that leads to a growth spurt during adolescence. The growth spurt often lasts for two to three years and leads to an increase in height and weight. As girls experience this growth spurt, their lean body mass becomes less while they experience an increase in their body fat. During this time girls also experience the development of secondary sex characteristics, which includes the appearance of pubic hair and breast development, along with maturation of the genitalia and the beginning of ovulation. Although girls have developed secondary sex characteristics and had changes in their height and weight, they often do not experience menarche, the start of menstruation, until later in their pubertal development. As a result of this, girls may appear physically mature before they are actually able to reproduce. Girls can begin menstruation between the ages of 9 and 17 (Rew, 2005; Steinberg, 2008).

Although these changes occur within the body, they can be affected by both social and environmental influences. For example, the social setting and environment in which a young girl grows up influences the rate at which her body develops. Research has shown that nutrition and overall health play critical roles in the process of growth and development. Children who grow up in settings where they receive proper nutrition have been found to go through puberty earlier than children who do not receive adequate nutrition (Rew, 2005).

### **Pubertal timing and development.**

The changes that go along with puberty have been found to influence an adolescent's psychological adjustment. Both pubertal status, which refers to adolescents' level of maturation,

and pubertal timing, which refers to whether they are physically developing on time in relation to their peers, have been looked at in relation to psychological distress among adolescents (Rew, 2005). Due to the broad age range of the timing of pubertal development, girls differ in the effect pubertal development has on their body satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Early maturing girls have been found to have higher levels of body dissatisfaction when compared to on-time and late-maturing girls. Early maturing girls received more attention from boys, were more likely to engage in weight loss strategies, and were likely to become exercise dependent (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). Early maturing girls were also found to have a greater number of eating problems (Swarr & Richards, 1996). Timing of maturation was not found to protect girls from engaging in risky behaviors; it simply resulted in early maturing, late maturing, and on-time maturing girls engaging in different health-risk behaviors. For example, late maturing girls were more likely to use food supplements, while early maturing girls, who placed a significant focus on sports, were more likely to use steroids, and girls who matured on time who placed a significant level of importance on sports were likely to partake in strategies to increase muscle (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004).

Adolescence is a time when girls are experiencing significant changes with their bodies, and although these changes may be hard for girls as they adjust to being viewed as young women, it does not mean that all girls will become dissatisfied with their bodies and engage in dangerous behaviors in an attempt to fit an ideal. However, some girls do become dissatisfied with their bodies and the timing of their pubertal development does not seem to prevent them from engaging in behaviors that can result in them becoming exercise dependent and developing disordered eating. These findings show the extent to which girls desire to achieve society's ideal of thinness for females (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). While the timing of maturation may

initially alter girls' approaches to achieving society's ideal, it is evident that girls are ultimately seeking to achieve the thin figure they feel they are expected to exhibit once they enter into adolescence and begin developing into young women. It is evident that young women are influenced by perceived pressure to be thin and this pressure can result in a greater level of body dissatisfaction than their actual Body Mass Index (BMI) would indicate. BMI serves as a screening tool to identify potential weight problems in children and adolescents. BMI is calculated from a person's weight and height while also factoring in their age and sex. To calculate BMI, using pounds and inches, the following formula is used:  $\text{weight} / (\text{height})^2 \times 703$ . Once an adolescent's BMI has been calculated, their BMI is plotted on the Center for Disease Control's (CDC's) BMI-for-age growth chart; a separate chart is used for boys and girls. Through plotting an adolescent's BMI, one can obtain their percentile ranking. These rankings are used to assess the adolescent's size and growth patterns in relation to adolescents who are of the same age and sex. For children and adolescents, there are four categories for percentile rankings. Children or adolescents are considered underweight if they fall within less than the 5<sup>th</sup> percentile. They are considered to be a healthy weight if they are between the 5<sup>th</sup> percentile and under the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile. If their BMI falls between the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile and under the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile they are considered overweight. Children and adolescents whose BMI falls equal to or above the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile are considered obese. BMI is calculated differently in children and teens than it is in adults, because their level of body fat is continuously changing with age and the level of body fat for girls and boys differs (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

### **Cognitive Development**

As individuals grow and develop, they acquire cognitions based on their experiences and interactions with the environment around them. One explanation of the relationship between



cognitive development, the child, and her environment is that “cognitive development occurs as the child acts on the environment and as the environment acts on the child” (Rew, 2005, p. 59).

Piaget explained cognitive structure as the mental and physical actions that provide a strong base for intelligence. The cognitive structure is exhibited in skills or schemas that relate to anticipated stages of development. The main concept of Piaget’s theory of cognitive development is that development takes place over four stages (Rew, 2005). These stages include the sensorimotor stage (birth to age two), the preoperational stage (age two to seven), the concrete operational stage (age seven or eight to puberty), and the formal operations stage (age 11 or 12 and up) (Muuss, 1988).

**Sensorimotor Stage (birth to age 2):** During this stage children’s movements are shifting from being mostly inborn reflexes to more voluntary movements. Children are also beginning to look to objects and events outside of themselves and are starting to engage in intentional behaviors. They are beginning to understand object permanence and thoughts are beginning to be incorporated into their actions, which had previously been solely dependent on sensorimotor approaches (Muuss, 1988).

**Preoperational Stage (age two to seven):** Children in this stage are beginning to learn concepts through their own experiences. Their reality is based on what they see, for these children no other alternatives are possible. During this stage, a rapid increase in language development occurs. Children in this stage are still reliant on sensory experiences, they are not able to think of multiple dimensions at once, and they are unable to reorganize information in their minds (Muuss, 1988).

**Concrete Operational Stage:** During the concrete operational stage children are able to understand basic logic related to concrete information, they are able to deal with more than just

tangible objects; however, problems still need to be connected to reality. Piaget presented two elements of concrete logical operations. (1) The logic of classes involves children's understanding of whether or not an object belongs in a given class. As children develop this understanding, they develop an interest in the relationship between the parts and the whole. Developing this understanding and categorizing parts that go together can help children develop a clearer understanding of the whole. As children's minds are able to hold multiple pieces of information and they are able to reverse their thinking it allows them to recognize the ordering of social classes (Muuss, 1988).

(2) The logic of relations allows children to order and organize multiple things in relation to one another according to specific standards, for example shape. This logic of relations becomes expounded upon when children are asked to set two sequences of objects into accordance with one another. Children in the concrete operational stage are now able to understand the principle of conservation, recognizing that changing a Play-Doh ball into a sausage or flattening it into a pancake does not change its mass, weight, or volume. Conservation of mass is established first, while conservation of weight and volume may not be understood until the formal operations stage. Once children have developed an understanding of conservation they are able to develop an awareness of thought process reversibility. Reversibility is "the permanent possibility of returning to the starting point of the operation in question" (Muuss, 1988, p. 183). The capability to go back to the starting point of an operation, which is implied within the notion of reversibility, establishes a significant milestone in a child's intellectual development. Along with the emergence of concrete operations, children's language is still growing in this stage. Up to the age of seven children's language is mainly egocentric; however, after age seven there language becomes mostly sociocentric. Sociocentric language

provides children with the ability to try to understand others and verbalize their thoughts objectively. The shift from egocentric to sociocentric thought is not only reflected in children's language, it also penetrates their thought processes allowing them to place themselves in another's situation and take on that person's perspective (Muuss, 1988).

**Formal Operations Stage:** Piaget divides the formal operations stage into two substages. (1) III-A (age 11-12 to 14-15) where early adolescents are almost to full formal functioning. During this stage, adolescents are able to handle some formal operations; however, the process is difficult and they cannot give organized and hard evidence for their claims. (2) III-B (age 14-15 and up) adolescents have achieved full formal function. When adolescents reach this stage of formal operations they are able to develop more sophisticated generalizations and can naturally provide organized evidence for statements they make. While children in the concrete operational stage reason based on objects, adolescents are able to reason based on verbal statements. In the formal operational stage adolescents have the ability "to reason in terms of verbally stated hypotheses and no longer in terms of concrete objects and their manipulation" (Muss, 1988, p, 187). Adolescents are able to think beyond what is currently going on and develop theories, especially related to fantasy. At this stage, adolescents often have social and political theories, with some even having religious, philosophical, and scientific theories. Through formal operations, adolescents are able to understand and form theories and participate in society and the beliefs and ideas of adults. Many adolescents in this stage may have the desire to change society and they may develop an idea in their minds of how they would improve society (Muuss, 1988). For example, the preoccupation adolescents have with theory can even be applied to girls' desires related to the body ideal they hold for themselves in the future. Upon reaching this stage, adolescents are able to think of all rational possibilities and consider them in an organized way;

for adolescents reality becomes secondary to possibility (Muuss, 1988). As a result of this, adolescents may look at the culture and society around them and feel as though they can prevent themselves from being influenced by the ideals society presents them with.

### **Identity Development**

A significant part of adolescence includes an individual's discovery regarding who s/he is as a person and the development of a sense of identity. Although identity is developed throughout the course of one's life, a significant amount of one's identity is developed in adolescence. Erikson described human development as including a series of crises (Rew, 2005). Erikson described eight crises or stages individuals experience over the course of their lives. Each of the stages consists of a conflict; if the individual resolves the conflict in a constructive, acceptable manner the positive quality will become part of his/her ego and the process of healthy development will continue. If the individual is not able to resolve the conflict the negative quality will become part of his/her ego and hamper future development. Although the identity crisis is most prominent during adolescence, a change in one's ego-identity can occur anytime a life-changing event occurs (Muuss, 1988). The eight stages of Erikson's theory of Identity Development include: Trust vs. Mistrust (infancy), Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt (18 months to 36 months), Initiative versus Guilt (three and a half to six years), Industry versus Inferiority (six to 12 years), Identity versus Identity Diffusion (12 to 18 years), Intimacy versus Isolation (19 to 40 years), Generativity vs. Self-Absorption (40 to 65 years), and Ego identity versus Despair (65 years to death) (Muuss, 1988; Rew, 2005).

**Trust versus Mistrust (Infancy):** During this conflict, individuals' experiences with their parents and the environment they grow up in have a significant influence on their becoming a trusting individual. Not only does this involve trusting others, it also involves trusting oneself.

The conviction that children develop during this conflict is “I am what I am given” (Muuss, 1988, p. 56). If infants positively move through this conflict, they will be able to trust themselves and others. Mutual recognition and trustworthiness are the first and most similar experiences of what later forms an individual’s sense of identity. If infants do not successfully move through this conflict they will develop a sense of mistrust of both themselves and others, which may result in identity confusion during adolescence (Muuss, 1988).

**Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt (18 to 36 months):** In this conflict, children are faced with either becoming autonomous, creative individuals or dependent, shameful persons filled with self-doubt. During this stage children experience an understanding of autonomy and free choice; they are able to recognize they are their own person although they still depend on others. The conviction for this conflict is “I am what I will be” (Muuss, 1988, p. 57). If children positively move through this conflict they will gain qualities such as, pride, control, self-assurance, autonomy, self-certainty, and the will to be oneself. Developing autonomy during this stage contributes to the development of an adolescent identity that leads to the conviction “I am an independent person who can choose freely and who can guide my own development and my own future” (Muuss, 1988, p. 57). If children do not successfully move through this conflict they will experience shame, self-doubt, dependency, self-consciousness, and timid compliance due to too many constraints, unjust punishments, and their parents not being able to handle their developing sense of autonomy. With autonomy being one of the main ingredients for identity development, the struggle for autonomy is a significant issue as adolescents fight for independence from their family and in efforts at developing self-determination (Muuss, 1988).

**Initiative versus Guilt (3 to 6 years):** As children get older and become more adventuresome they are faced with the conflict between their forceful intrusion into the world

through play, exploration, and interest or being unable to enter the world due to being restrained by fear and guilt. Along with play and development, language is increasing rapidly. The conviction for this conflict is “I am what I can imagine I will be” (Muuss, 1988, p. 58). If children work through this conflict positively, a sense of initiative develops that in adolescence can form the basis for curiosity, determination, and trying on different roles. Being proactive adds to adolescents’ identity development, this leads to anticipation of what they may become and the roles they will have later in life, which allows them to take on adult roles. If children’s parents restrict and punish their developing initiative too strongly, it can result in them not coming out of this conflict successfully, which may lead to identity diffusion during adolescence (Muuss, 1988).

**Industry versus Inferiority (6 to 12):** This conflict, also known as “the apprenticeship of life” (Muuss, 1988, p. 59), is a time of learning and understanding the basic skills one needs to navigate society. During this time, children are learning to attain approval, recognition, and a feeling of achievement by making things and accomplishing tasks well. Children are learning to follow and respect rules along with being committed to working fairly in teams. The conviction of this conflict is “I am what I will learn” (Muuss, 1988, p. 60). If children are able to successfully establish a sense of industry they will feel a need and desire to accomplish tasks and to attain recognition for the work they have done. Children who do not make it through this conflict successfully will experience feelings of incompetence, inadequacy, and inferiority and may feel they will never amount to anything (Muuss, 1988).

**Identity versus Identity Confusion (12 to 18):** This conflict holds great significance for individuals as they develop through adolescence. During this conflict, adolescents must develop a sense of personal identity and avoid the possibility of falling into role diffusion and identity

confusion. As adolescents work towards achieving their identity, they must evaluate their strengths and weaknesses as well as reflect on where they came from, who they are, and the goals they have for the future. Erikson highlighted that identity is not given to an individual by society, nor is it a part of maturing that is out of one's control; instead, it must be attained through continuous effort by the individual. In searching for an identity, adolescents must establish a meaningful self-concept that incorporates their past, present, and future to form an integrated whole (Muuss, 1988).

Adolescents turn to their peers to assist them in answering the question of "Who am I?" (Muuss, 1988, p. 61). They receive answers to this question through others' feedback on their perceptions and assessments of them. Therefore, adolescents are often preoccupied with how others view them compared to how they view themselves and how to connect the roles and skills they developed in previous conflicts with the ideal precedent of today. Through conforming to their peers' expectations, adolescents are able to see how different roles fit them. Peer groups, cliques, gangs, and crushes/infatuations all help adolescents find their personal identity since they provide both a role model and social feedback. As adolescents mature and their bodies are changing rapidly they rely on their peers for comfort, friendship, and as someone to bounce ideas off of. In order to attain a mature identity, adolescents have to free themselves from the dependence they have developed with their peers (Muuss, 1988).

A significant concern for adolescents is what their vocational role will be. During this stage in their development, adolescents may have idealized, glamorized, and unrealistic ideas of vocational roles; for example, being a model, actress, famous musician, or star athlete. Adolescents may over-identify with and adore their models to the point where they begin to forgo their own identity to emulate these models. When this occurs, adolescents are unlikely to

relate to their parents and instead may resist their parent's authority, values, and intrusions into their personal lives. During this rebellion against their parents, adolescents are seeking their own personal ideology or life philosophy that will aid them in evaluating different events. As our society develops more and more ideologies, developing one's own ideology that has conviction and reliability becomes increasingly challenging. While adolescents may find it easier to adopt an existing belief system, these belief systems are often less flexible and effective than a personal belief system and often do not become truly incorporated into the individual's personality. As a result of not having one's own belief system adolescents may experience foreclosure in their identity development (Muuss, 1988).

Success in working through this conflict depends on adolescents' willingness to accept their past and learn from prior experiences. They also must commit to a system of values (religious beliefs, goals for their vocation, a life philosophy) and accept their sexuality. Adolescents who do not successfully work through this conflict experience self-doubt, role diffusion and confusion, and may engage in self-destructive behaviors. These adolescents are often preoccupied with how others view them or they no longer care about others' opinions and withdraw completely (Muuss, 1988).

In thinking about adolescent identity development it is easy to see how it can be so easily influenced by peers and the media. During this time in their lives, adolescents are strongly dependent on their peers to help them adjust to their changing bodies as well as in searching for who they are as an individual and who they are to become. As adolescents worry about what their peers think of them and how they view them, comments made regarding how they look, their size, or how they dress could significantly influence how the adolescent will view him/herself. Along with being influenced by peers, adolescents are living in a society where it is



difficult to escape the media's influence. As adolescents are searching for their identity and trying to develop their own belief system they are receiving constant messages from the media and society telling them how they should dress, what beauty products they should use in order to achieve the ideal look, and different ways in which they can attempt to achieve the unattainable level of thinness that is expected of women. During a time when adolescents need support, encouragement, and positive role models to help them develop a positive identity they are often bombarded with messages telling them they are not beautiful, they do not measure up, and if they want to be accepted they need to look like the models they see in magazines, in advertisements, and on television shows.

**Intimacy versus Isolation (19 to 40):** Upon achieving a personal identity, young adults enter into the next conflict with the need for personal intimacy. At this stage of development, conforming to a peer group is much less important; however, the peer group may be used to assist in finding one's identity and meeting individuals of the opposite sex. It is important that ego-identity is established before a young adult enters into marriage. Until an individual can answer the question "Who am I?" (Muuss, 1988, p. 64) it is difficult to find a partner to fit with the "I". If individuals enter into marriage before establishing an identity it is unlikely the marriage will be successful. The conviction for this conflict is "We are what we love" (Muuss, 1988, p. 64). Young adults who transition through this conflict successfully experience intimacy, which include sexual intimacy, true friendship, unwavering love, and a marriage that will last. Young adults who do not transition through this conflict successfully will avoid interpersonal relationships or may become promiscuous. They will likely become disconnected and distance themselves in interpersonal relationships (Muuss, 1988).

**Generativity versus Self-Absorption (40 to 65):** This conflict comprises the years of the human life cycle where individuals are productive and creative in regards to their vocational and professional contributions to society. The conviction of this conflict is “I am what I create” (Muuss, 1988, p. 65). Individuals who successfully transition through this conflict are mature individuals who desire to be useful and productive; they want to be needed. Individuals who do not successfully transition through this conflict will not progress further in their development. They will experience stagnation, go through the same routine daily, and become self-centered and self-indulgent (Muuss, 1988).

**Ego Integrity versus Despair (65 to death):** The final conflict is where individuals either appreciate the experiences they have had over the course of their life or they become bitter and negative about the experiences they have had. The conviction for this conflict is “I am what survives me” (Muuss, 1988, p. 65). Individuals who work through this conflict positively accept themselves and the life they have had without being bitter or remorseful and they are able to come to terms with the fact that they are nearing the end of their life. Individuals who do not positively work through this conflict feel as though their life was not worth anything and they are afraid of dying and often revert back to the dependency they had in childhood (Muuss, 1988).

### **Social Development**

Elkind’s theory of adolescent egocentrism follows Piaget’s concept of “egocentrism”. Egocentrism involves a lack of distinction between one’s own point of view and the point of view of others (Muuss, 1988). Elkind asserted that, while cognitive development progresses through Piaget’s stages of cognitive development, the nature, quality and characteristics of egocentrism change congruently and each stage of development consists of a unique characteristic. A decline in egocentrism occurs when decentering takes place. Decentering allows

for a shift in focus of awareness from a single aspect to numerous features and eventually to a complete assortment of different dimensions. For children, this decentering occurs when they realize they are not the center of the world and recognize that other people and objects have their own existence. Eventually individuals are able to resolve the conflict between their point of view and another's point of view and are able to take on multiple dimensions of a problem along with taking on others' points of view. The four stages of egocentrism include: Sensorimotor Egocentrism (birth to age two), Preoperational Egocentrism (age two to six), Concrete Operational Egocentrism (age seven to 11), and Adolescent Egocentrism (age 11 to adulthood).

**Sensorimotor Egocentrism (birth to age 2):** Infants in this stage are unable to distinguish between actual objects and the sensory impressions produced by the object. They hold the belief that their sensory impressions are vital to the object's existence. Egocentrism lessens as infants begin to understand the concept of object permanence (Muuss, 1988).

**Preoperational Egocentrism (ages 2 to 6):** Children in this stage are unable to understand the link between the signifier and what is being signified. They hold a certain understanding of the world and they believe everyone else shares their view (Muuss, 1988).

**Concrete Operational Egocentrism (ages 7 to 11):** During this stage, a child is "able to structure relationships between classes, relations, and numbers objectively....He acquires skills in interindividual relations in a cooperative framework" (Muuss, 1988, p. 267). Children are now able to develop concrete hypotheses about reality; however, they do not recognize that their hypotheses are their own ideas and have to be tested against reality to verify the hypothesis. Children struggle to distinguish between what they think and what they perceive. This inability to distinguish between hypothesis and fact can result in children viewing hypotheses as facts and facts as hypotheses (Muuss, 1988).

**Adolescent Egocentrism (ages 11 to adulthood):** In formal operations, adolescents are trying to adapt their ego to the environment while also trying to adapt the environment to their ego. Attempting to do this results in adolescents not being able to distinguish between their point of view and the point of view of a group. Adolescents are beginning to conceptualize in their minds others' thought processes and they are able to distinguish between their thoughts and those of others; however, they are unable to distinguish between the objects others' thoughts are directed towards and the object that they are personally concerned with. Adolescents assume they are the object of others' thoughts and concerns. In this stage adolescents are concerned with their behavior, changing bodies, and their physical appearance. While adolescents are able to take on another's point of view, it can result in them becoming so concerned with how others view them that they lose sight of their own point of view. An example of adolescents' egocentric thinking can be seen in an adolescent girl going to school wearing a new outfit, her hair styled differently, and she is wearing makeup for the first time. As she was getting ready she was sure all of her peers would notice her; however, she is shocked when no one notices the changes she has made (Muuss, 1988).

Elkind explained that a significant concern of adolescents is the idea of an imaginary audience. Adolescents imagine they are the main focus of this audience of peers; an audience they created in their minds. Since adolescents construct this audience in their minds, they know exactly what the audience thinks of them and what they are looking for in regards to how they dress, do their hair, how physically developed they are, if they are attractive, and if they are too fat or too thin. The adolescent takes her own dissatisfactions with her body and her appearance and assumes that her audience is just as dissatisfied with how she looks as she is. Adolescents feel they are constantly on stage and being evaluated by their peers; as a result of this they may

need more privacy and be hesitant to self-disclose as a result of feeling as though they are constantly being evaluated, looked at, and compared by their audience of peers. What adolescents do not realize is that their peers are going through the same experience, so while they believe their peers are continuously evaluating them, in reality their peers are focused on themselves and how they feel they measure up to the expectations of their own audience (Muuss, 1988).

Another concept used to describe adolescent's egocentrism is "the personal fable" which is used to describe each individual's uniqueness. Adolescents often are under the assumption that their beliefs, feelings, and ideals are unique to them and others cannot even begin to understand what they are feeling and experiencing. During this time adolescents rebuke their parents and believe that their parents could not possibly understand what they are going through. Another part of the belief of the personal fable is that the adolescent is indestructible. They hold onto the belief that nothing bad will ever happen to them (Muuss, 1988).

As adolescents are developing their sense of who they are, they are struggling with all of these thoughts and ideas they have regarding what others think of them. Adolescents look to their peers for approval and acceptance. Any dissatisfaction adolescents have with their appearance is compounded by their belief that their peers hold the same views of them. As a result of this it is easy to see how adolescents can struggle with trying to fit in socially and to gain acceptance from their peers. They may change the way they dress in order to gain their peers' approval and they may work to improve areas of their body they are dissatisfied with in order to gain acceptance from their peers.

### **Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development.**

Bronfenbrenner's Human Ecological Approach to Human Development can be helpful in gaining a clearer picture of how adolescent development is influenced by those around them. Bronfenbrenner made the argument that in order to understand human development we must move beyond the direct observable behaviors between one or two individuals in a lab setting and expand our view to "the examinations of multiperson systems of interaction," taking "into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing the subject" (Muuss, 1988, p. 301). The ecological model adds to the understanding of the sociocultural environment by recognizing four key structural systems and describing the interactions between those systems. The four structural systems include the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem.

**Microsystem:** The microsystem is defined as "the complex of relations between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting containing that person (e.g. home, school, workplace, etc.)" (Muuss, 1988, p. 302). An adolescent's microsystem is made up of a social network of interpersonal relationships. The adolescent both influences and is influenced by individuals within their social network with whom they have a lasting relationship. The family is the main microsystem for adolescents followed by friends and school. Microsystems are not static; they undergo changes due to changes in time and experiences. As adolescents enter into high school their peer microsystem becomes more differentiated and has a stronger impact on adolescents. Healthy microsystems are based on mutual exchanges in which parents respect reasonable requests from the adolescent and adolescents respect reasonable requests from their parents. Microsystems that provide a significant amount of information, provide answers to questions, encourage exploration and experimentation, and provide guidance enhance

adolescents' learning and development and leads to their being successful later in life (Muuss, 1988).

The microsystem can have a significant impact on adolescent female's body satisfaction and her interaction with the media. Individuals are impacted by the family microsystem from a very young age. For example, if young girls hear their mothers talking about wishing they were thinner or constantly weighing themselves. This can send girls the message that being thin is important and thinness is something they will have to work to achieve as they get older. Comments made while watching television as a family can also influence young girl's body satisfaction. If parents are making comments regarding an actress's body or how attractive she is this can send their daughter the message that size and beauty are important. Another microsystem that can influence young girls is their peer microsystem. Adolescents girls are surrounded by peers who are focused on their body size, the latest fashions, and use teen magazines as a source of information for dieting and weight loss as well as what beauty products they should buy.

**Mesosystem:** The mesosystem is made up of a network of associations between the many microsystems in individual's life. An analysis of the mesosystem looks at the quality, frequency, and influence of interactions as family experiences are linked to school adjustment, characteristics of the family and conforming to peer pressure, or the link between attending church and becoming intimate with the opposite sex at a young age. Mesosystems may become impoverished if there are very few or no significant links between the microsystems. This can occur if parents do not know their children's friends, or if parents do not have any form of communication with their children's school. A challenge can occur if microsystems within a mesosystem endorse different values. Adolescents who are involved in microsystems that hold

different values can experience tension within the mesosystem and they may feel they have to choose between the values, that they are being pulled in different directions, or they may feel they have to act as though they agree with both sets of values. Ecological transitions occur as microsystems within a mesosystem change, for example if an adolescent decides to go to a different church or begins spending time with a different group of friends. While adolescents will experience changes in microsystems throughout their lives it is important to have a strong family microsystem to help ease the ecological transition (Muuss, 1988).

As young girls transition into adolescence their friends and peers become more influential. During adolescence, girls are searching for their identity and they want to be accepted. They may turn to their peers to help them navigate changes they are experiencing and begin to turn less to their parents. The mesosystem is made up of different microsystems. During adolescence, girls are still influenced by their family microsystem but they are becoming more and more influenced by their peer microsystem. If these two microsystems hold different values, it can put adolescents in a position where they have to make a choice as to what they believe and what is important to them. If parents have not taken an active role in their daughter's life and have not taken the time to instill their values in her it may cause her to turn to her peers and take on the beliefs they hold.

**Exosystem:** The exosystem is the larger community within which the adolescent lives; however, they do not directly participate in the decision making of the exosystem. Examples of exosystems are parents' employers, school boards, the media, and the local government. Parents' employers determine the hours they have to work, how much the parent is paid, and if they will have to travel or relocate; while adolescents do not directly participate in their parents' work they are impacted by the decisions made by their parents' employer. The school board can also have a



significant impact on adolescents and the quality of education they will receive from their school based on decisions made regarding curricula and budget cuts. The question is raised to researchers regarding how exosystem decisions that impact the lives of adolescents actually affect adolescents' development (Muuss, 1988).

While the exosystem does not directly influence adolescent females, it can have a significant impact on them indirectly. For example, if the school board decides to cut school budgets and the school is forced to drop certain programs the programs cut would likely be those deemed as not crucial to education. If a budget cut were to occur a program dropped may be a media literacy program. Schools may not be aware of the significant influence the messages sent by the media have on adolescents and may feel cutting this program would not result in negative consequences for students. Young women who are struggling with body dissatisfaction are indirectly influenced by this budget cut since it resulted in the removal of a program that could have aided them in learning about media literacy and helping them learn to critically evaluate what they are viewing.

**Macrosystem:** The macrosystem does not directly impact adolescents' lives; however, it provides them with a blueprint of the steps they will need to take throughout the course of human development. Included in the macrosystem is "a core of general cultural, societal, legal, political, religious, economic, and educational values" (Muuss, 1988, p. 307). It is in the macrosystem that the standards for physical attractiveness are determined. "It can contribute to adolescent eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia by equating thinness with beauty and sexual attractiveness" (Muuss, 1988, p. 308).

While young women are not directly influenced by the macrosystem it is easy to see how they can be influenced by the values and standards that are set within the macrosystem. Our

societal and cultural standards regarding beauty and the expectations of thinness for females come from the macrosystem. If unattainable standards are set as the ideal, young girls are left to strive to achieve these standards which can lead to risky behaviors such as disordered eating, excessive exercise, and different dieting tricks they may read about in magazines or hear about on television.

All four structural systems can influence young women's body satisfaction. Young women are constantly being influenced by outside forces and depending on the level of support and the values they experience in the microsystem and mesosystem can greatly influence how they respond to these outside forces. While there are a number of sociocultural influences that can influence young women's body image and body satisfaction; this report will emphasize the influences of family, peers, and the media.

### **Sociocultural Influences**

There are a number of sociocultural influences that can factor into the decisions one makes; however, in looking at body image, there were three sociocultural influences that stood out within the research. The influences of family, peers, and the media were all found to have a significant impact on young women's body image.

#### **Families**

Families play a significant role in young girls' lives as they develop and transition into adolescence and later into early adulthood. Comments made by siblings and parents can impact how girls view themselves and actions they may take to achieve the look they feel their family wants them to have. Researchers have looked at the influence families have on females' body satisfaction, their eating behaviors, and the influence parental mediation can have on body satisfaction.

As young women transition from adolescence to young adulthood it is important to recognize the influence their families can have on them. Social support from girls' immediate family can protect them from becoming dissatisfied with their bodies (Barker & Galambos, 2003; Stice & Whitenton, 2002; Swarr & Richards, 1996). Girls who feel accepted by their mothers and fathers report feeling less dissatisfied with their bodies (Barker & Galambos, 2003). Receiving social support from parents has also been found to act as a protective factor for girls becoming dissatisfied with their bodies (Bearman, Presnell, Martinez, & Stice, 2006). There also is a link between parents being aware of their adolescents' daily experiences and adolescents having decreased concerns with their weight (May, Kim, McHale, & Crouter, 2006). These studies show the importance of parents taking an interest in their daughter's life and how simply by talking with her and showing a genuine interest in her life can protect her from becoming dissatisfied with her body and getting pulled into the expectations society places on young women's appearance.

While parents can help protect young women from becoming dissatisfied with their bodies, they also can greatly impact the way young women feel about themselves in a negative way. Comments made by parents, no matter how subtle, and messages sent regarding how daughters should look can impact actions young women take in an attempt to please their parents while at the same time trying to fit society's ideal of thinness. For example, a lack of social support from parents and peers can cause girls to be vulnerable to becoming dissatisfied with their bodies as a result of trying to fit the thin body ideal (Bearman et al., 2006). Girls have been found to view thinness as being a desirable quality for their families and the media; however, body dissatisfaction was found to stem from pressure from their family and peers (Blowers, Loxton, Grady-Flessner, Occhipinti, & Dawe, 2003). Also, adolescents who have high BMIs feel

their mothers encourage them to lose weight and increase their muscle. This was found to be especially true for females who felt their mothers were sending them messages that they needed to work to get their bodies to resemble society's thin ideal. Young women did not report feeling that their fathers were sending them messages regarding their bodies; however, females who had higher BMIs did feel their fathers encouraged them to lose weight and increase muscle (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001). Adolescent females who received pressure from their mothers to be attractive and fit the thin ideal, with less pressure coming from peers, were found to have higher body dissatisfaction compared to adolescent males; however, they were not found to engage in bulimic behaviors. Pressure from mothers to be thin and attractive was found to have a strong influence on an adolescent's physical appearance. Girls who were pressured by their mothers to achieve the thin ideal were more likely to experience body dissatisfaction as opposed to having a drive for thinness or partaking in behaviors that would alter their weight and shape (Peterson, Paulson, & Williams, 2007).

For young women, it is important for them to feel their parents are interested in what they are doing and are aware of the daily activities and challenges they face. When parents are not involved or aware of their daughters' daily activities, it can have a negative influence on their body image and weight concerns. May, Kim, McHale, and Crouter (2006) found daughters developed weight concerns if they did not experience intimacy with their mothers, did not feel their mothers was aware of their daily activities and experiences, and had conflicts with their mothers. This was found to be true throughout adolescence. Adolescent females also may be at increased risk for developing weight concerns as a result of spending an increased amount of time with their mothers, who may have their own weight and dieting concerns that they may discuss with their daughters.

Along with a lack of social support, messages from family members regarding the need to lose weight can also have a significant impact on young women's body satisfaction. Pressure from family members to lose weight has been found to be the most significant predictor of negative body image and eating attitudes and behaviors (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007). Research has also shown that parental influence can act as a predictor of individuals becoming concerned with their weight and constant dieting. Girls were found to view their father's perception of the importance of being thin as more important than the level of importance their mother placed on being thin. Parents' own weight issues also are transmitted to their children (Field, Camargo, Taylor, Berkley, Roberts, & Colditz, 2001). A mother who has struggled with an eating disorder can put preadolescent and adolescent females at risk for beginning to engage in purging. Authors of the study are unsure as to whether the relationship between having a mother who has an eating disorder is a result of genetics or due to living in the same environment (Field, Javaras, Aneja, Kitos, Camargo, Taylor, and Laird, 2008).

For young women, transitioning from preadolescence to adolescence and adolescence to young adulthood, being teased by family members can have serious effects on them. Parents' and siblings' comments and teasing can greatly influence how adolescents view themselves. Research has found that around one fourth of middle school girls are teased by one of their parents with around one third being teased by at least one of their siblings regarding their appearance (Keery et al., 2005). Siblings appeared to tease girls the most, followed by fathers, with mothers teasing the least amount. Adolescents who were teased by several of their family members were found to have greater negative outcomes than girls who were not teased. Girls who were teased by their parents, especially their fathers, and siblings were found to have higher levels of body dissatisfaction, engage in social comparison, internalize the thin ideal, engage in

restrictive and bulimic eating behaviors, suffered from depression, and had lower self-esteem than girls who did not experience teasing (Keery et al., 2005).

Older brothers have been found to tease adolescent females the most with the teasing leading to the greatest number of negative outcomes. As girls transition from childhood to adolescence, they experience changes with their bodies while also experiencing changes in their relationships with friends and family members. A girl's father and older brother serve as models for her of what heterosocial interactions should look like. As a result of this, negative feedback from fathers and older brothers can be harmful to girls as they transition through this difficult time (Keery et al., 2005). Swarr and Richards (1996) explained that, "During adolescence, a time when girls' bodies are changing and they are developing interests in the opposite sex, it may be important to spend time with the most important man who is accepting and supportive of these pubertal changes" – their fathers (p. 644).

Teasing from parents has both direct and indirect effects on adolescent females. This is because siblings are found to partake in higher levels of teasing when the behavior has been modeled by a parent, particularly by fathers. As a result of this, even if parents are not directly teasing their daughter about her weight or appearance, they have modeled the behavior in front of their other children who may in turn begin teasing their sister about her weight and shape (Keery et al., 2005). This finding is significant because it shows the extent to which parents influence their children. If young girls are teased by their parents it can influence their weight concerns and dietary restraints. Even if parents stop teasing because they come to the conclusion their behavior is not appropriate and is having a negative influence on their daughter, the teasing may continue if siblings continue to model the behavior their parents exhibited. It is important for parents to recognize when this is happening and educate younger and older siblings on why it

is not appropriate for them to tease others and how it was not appropriate for them, as the parent, to exhibit such behavior to begin with.

Parents also have a significant influence on what their daughter watches on television, views on the Internet, and the magazines she reads. Not only is it important for parents to monitor what their adolescent is watching, it is also important for them to talk with her about what she is watching or reading and the messages that may be behind television shows, magazine articles, or advertisements. For example, one study found that adolescents are likely to develop a strong drive for thinness or symptoms of anorexia if they are allowed to critically study characters bodies and compare themselves to the images they are seeing on television (Nathanson & Botta, 2003). If parents do not focus on characters' bodies, adolescents have been found to be less likely to focus on the images and are less susceptible to body image dissatisfaction. The authors of the study stress the importance of parents being aware of the comments they make regarding images they see on television. Even if parents are not discussing their own body dissatisfaction directly, making comments about images they see on television may lead adolescents to make judgments about their own bodies (Nathanson & Botta, 2003). Adolescents who watched and discussed television with their parents were likely to have higher self-esteem, greater body satisfaction, and less sexual experience. Parents taking the time to watch and talk about television helps adolescents feel cared for, which can increase their self-esteem, increase their body satisfaction, and their self-worth (Schooler, Kim, & Sorsoli, 2006).

As research shows, families can influence young women's body image, both positively and negatively in a variety of different ways. Young women are protected from body dissatisfaction if they have a family that supports them, takes an interest in their daily lives, and takes time to talk with them about what they are viewing on television or seeing in magazines.

On the other hand, young women whose families are not there to support them, who tease them about their weight and appearance, who may struggle with their own weight and body concerns, and who do not take the time to talk with them about what is going on in their lives along with what they are viewing in the media have been found to have increased body dissatisfaction. As discussed, parents and siblings can significantly impact young women's body image. It is important that siblings and parents are aware of the influences they can have on young women and how comments, they may feel are harmless, can have a serious effect on the young woman's body image.

### **Peers**

Adolescence is a time when individuals are developing their identity and who they are as individuals. It is also a time in which the influence of peers can have a significant impact on how adolescents view themselves. Peers can influence body image in a variety of different ways. For example, girls who were found to be satisfied with their current appearance developed their own level of body dissatisfaction and dieting awareness when they became aware of one of their peer's dissatisfaction with her body (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006). Having frequent conversations with peers regarding appearance has also been found connected to adolescents being more likely to endorse idealization of the thin ideal; this in turn has been linked to increased feelings of body dissatisfaction (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004). Body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls has also been found to stem from girls having higher BMIs than their peers (Dunkley, Wertheim, & Paxton, 2001). These findings show the influence peers have on an adolescent's body image. Girls can go from being content with their current body size to being dissatisfied simply by hearing a peer voice her dissatisfaction with her body or talking with peers about their appearance.



Peers can also lead one another to feel as though they need to diet, lose weight, and increase their muscle in order to fit in and become satisfied with their bodies. Young women may hear their peers voicing dissatisfaction with their weight and/or bodies; hearing this may lead them to evaluate and question their own bodies. Young women may feel if they restrict what they eat or increase their muscle they will look more like their peers and in turn become more satisfied with their appearance. Peers, in comparison to parents and the media, were found to place the greatest amount of pressure on girls to be thin (Dunkley et al., 2001). Feedback regarding the need to lose weight and increase muscle tone has been found to come from both male and female peers with female peers encouraging young women to lose weight regardless of their BMI (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001). Adolescent females who have had their appearance criticized by their peers have also been found to internalize the thin ideal and become dissatisfied with their body (Jones et al., 2004).

While peers can negatively impact young women's body satisfaction, this is not always the case. Receiving social support from peers can serve as a protective factor for girls becoming dissatisfied with their bodies (Bearman, Presnell, Martinez, & Stice, 2006). Although there is a variety of research indicating the negative influence peers can have on adolescent's body image, peers are also able to encourage one another and help protect one another from becoming dissatisfied with their bodies.

As young women go through adolescence they are figuring out who they are, they are navigating new relationships, and they want to fit in with their peers. It is important that parents and educators are aware of the influences peers can have on one another. Internalization of the thin ideal, becoming dissatisfied with one's body, dietary restraint, weight loss, and increasing muscle tone have all been found to stem from pressure or conversations with peers regarding

appearance (Dunkley et al., 2001; Jones et al., 2004). Making adolescents aware of these negative influences and how they can influence others as well as be influenced by others is important in being able to help adolescents learn to accept on another for who they are instead of feeling as though they have to look a certain way or wear a certain outfit in order to be accepted by their peers.

## **Media**

Young women today are constantly in contact with the media. Even if they do not directly seek out the media, in today's society, it is often hard to avoid the media. There are a variety of different forms of media an adolescent may come in contact with, either intentionally or unintentionally, throughout the day. Some examples include music, movies, magazines, television, billboards, advertisements, and the Internet. With the media being so prominent, it is helpful to not only look at the influence the media can have on young women but also look at the process young women go through as they interact with the media.

### **Media practice model.**

In order to better understand adolescents' use of the media and the impact it has on them, it is helpful to look at the Adolescents' Media Practice Model. Steele and Brown (1995) described the model as taking a practice perspective that centers on the daily activities and routines of media consumption. Adolescents today are potentially influenced by the media from the time they wake up to the time they go to bed. For example, consider the following typical scenario: Julie wakes up and listens to her favorite artist on her iPod as she gets ready for school. Before class begins she watches the latest YouTube video on her iPad, she has Facebook and Twitter updates sent directly to her phone throughout the day, she is connected to the Internet for school assignments while at school as well as when she gets home, and to relax before going to

bed she watches the latest episode of *Glee* while flipping through the latest issue of *Teen Vogue*. Through this description, it is easy to see how the media is constantly influencing adolescents.

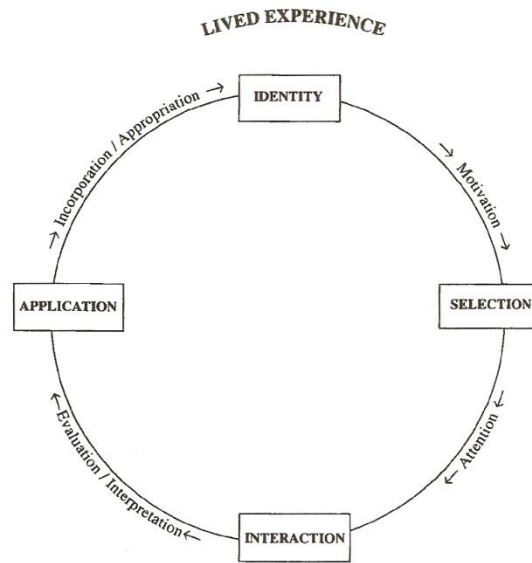


Fig. 1

Figure 1: Note: From “Adolescent room culture: Studying media in the context of everyday life,” by J. R. Steele and J. D. Brown, 1995, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 24, p. 556.

The Media Practice Model (Figure 1) is made up of four main components. These components include 1) identity formation, 2) selection, 3) interaction, and 4) application. Surrounding these components is the adolescent’s “lived experience. “Lived experience” is defined as, “a complex sociogenetic construct that sees the process of development as a constant bridging—accomplished through activity and communication—between the known and the new in specific contexts” (Steele & Brown, 1995, p. 557). Identity formation, the main task of adolescent development, includes the adolescent’s sense of who s/he is, which influences how s/he interacts and experience the media, which in turn influences how s/he sees him/herself. The model is designed in a circular formation to represent the interconnectedness of adolescents’ identities, both who they are currently and who they are becoming, and the three main parts of

adolescent audience activity. These parts include selection, interaction, and application (Steele & Brown, 1995).

**Selection** involves choosing a specific form of media. Adolescents' selection of a specific form of media is often motivated by what they hope to gain or take away from their media selection (Steele & Brown, 1995). For example, a teen may select a specific magazine because s/he enjoys reading the articles within the magazine and reads the magazine solely for entertainment. Another possibility is that a teen may select a specific magazine because s/he knows it contains articles on weight loss and different techniques s/he can use to attain society's ideal level of thinness.

**Interaction** involves the cognitive, affective, and behavioral interactions with the media that create cultural exchanges. The cognitive interaction consists of the processing and psychological involvement of the individual with the media (Steele & Brown, 1995). This cognitive interaction involves how the adolescent takes in what s/he is viewing, listening to, or reading about. The affective interaction involves the stimulation or "shutting off the self" (Steele & Brown, p. 558, 1995). This interaction involves the adolescent letting his/her guard down and letting the media influence him/her and at least temporarily, taking over how s/he thinks about and views things. The behavioral interaction involves looking through a magazine, listening to different radio stations or CDs, or flipping through television channels to get an idea of what is on (Steele & Brown, 1995). This interaction involves the adolescent physically seeking out a variety of different forms of media and using them to achieve his/her goals in selecting and interacting with that specific form of media.

**Application** involves the tangible ways in which adolescents use the media in their everyday lives. Steele and Brown (1995) discussed two forms of application: appropriation and

incorporation. Appropriation is an active use of media that is often visible either through decorations, activities involving media, or adolescents' explanations of why specific forms of media are significant to them. For example, adolescents who are dissatisfied with their bodies and desire to be thinner may seek out pictures of thin models to use as motivation and inspiration to achieve their desired level of thinness. Teens may select television or movies because they desire to look like the actresses they see on television. They may also flip through specific magazines in order to find weight loss tips or tips on how to dress. Incorporation is an associative use of the media where the adolescents' use builds on already established attitudes, feelings and previous learning (Steele & Brown, 1995). For example, adolescents with already established views and feelings on the ideal size for women will take what they see in magazines, advertisements, and on television shows and incorporate this into the feelings they have established. As adolescents are influenced more and more by the media they may turn to the media for information on different things without even realizing they are doing so.

Arrows are included in the diagram of the model to represent the flow of activities and practices to show that the components of the model are all connected as opposed to the relationships between the different components being causal. Although within the diagram the categories of motivation and attention, interpretation and evaluation, and appropriation and incorporation are listed, the authors explain that these subcategories between the main components of the model are not all-inclusive (Steele & Brown, 1995).

This model helps to show the process adolescents experience as they interact with and are influenced by the media. The media does not automatically hook adolescents; instead they go through a variety of processes to achieve the desired media influence they are looking for. Adolescents are likely not even aware of the many different components and factors that go into

selecting media, they simply know what they are interested in or what they are hoping to attain from the media they select. The model helps to show how adolescents select, use, and apply the media to their daily lives. Through studying this model it becomes evident that adolescents are not simply grabbing a magazine off the shelf or watching whatever channel the television is on when they sit down, instead they go through a process where they select the media based on what they are hoping to achieve and overtime the media becomes incorporated into their daily lives.

Elkind's theory of adolescent egocentrism can also be applied to adolescent's use of the media. Adolescents are at a time where they are concerned with their appearance and how others view them, especially their peers. During this time, adolescents are aware of areas they are dissatisfied with or would like to change on their bodies (Muuss, 1988). Adolescents may turn to the media, and seek out specific forms of media, in order to gain ideas on ways they can alter their appearance to satisfy themselves, but more importantly, in an attempt to satisfy their peers and gain their acceptance.

#### ***How the media impacts body image.***

Research has been done to examine not only how young women are influenced by the media but also at the process that occurs as young women are impacted by the media over time. The question has been raised by researchers concerning the long-term effects of exposure to thin ideal media on young women's body image. It is evident that brief exposure to thin ideal media can negatively influence young women's body image, increase their body dissatisfaction, cause them to have negative mood, and engage in unhealthy weight loss behaviors. If this brief exposure can have such a significant impact, it is important to ask what kind of influence repeated exposure to such media can have on young women. Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2003) raised this very question. They discussed how individuals may question the impact a brief media

exposure can have on mood and body image long term. Findings from their study suggest the impact of several small changes can add up and increase body image disturbances.

For young women, the media provides them with a source for social comparison and a goal they can work toward by achieving the thin ideal. Botta (1999) found the media impacts body image disturbance in two ways; directly through body image processing and indirectly through encouraging adolescents to accept the thin ideal and to accept what they see as realistic. Adolescents view images they see on television as being an attainable goal; when they do not achieve this goal, they feel as though they have failed in achieving their desired comparison. It seems as though it is not necessarily how much adolescents view images that lead them to endorse the thin ideal but instead how they process the thin images they are viewing. It seems the strongest impact television has on body image is that it provides adolescents with images to assess themselves. These comparisons can lead adolescents to feel dissatisfied with their bodies, increase their drive for thinness, and lead them to engage in disordered eating.

The media seems to affect preadolescent females differently than it does adolescent and college age females. For preadolescent females, they are aware of the expectations for the ideal female body; however, they have two body ideals when they are younger, their current body ideal and their future body ideal. Harrison and Hefner (2006) found that media exposure may not have an impact on the type of body a prepubescent girl desires for herself while she still has a child's body; however, she may hold the desire to have a slimmer body when she is grown. While research suggests that girls desire to have a thinner body prior to puberty, there is a lack of evidence suggesting the media plays a role in this preference for a thinner, preadolescent body. Because preadolescent girls have two body ideals in mind, there is a need for an additional

measure of body ideal in order to gain a clearer picture of the level of thin ideal internalization preadolescent girls have (Harrison & Hefner, 2006).

Harrison (2000) examined television viewing among preadolescent females and found that television viewing predicted eating disorder symptomology; however, it did not regularly predict favoring thin body shapes. This finding suggests that preadolescents may begin engaging in unhealthy diet and exercise behaviors shown on television before they have actually internalized the thin ideal. Television viewing was found to lead girls to select a thinner body size to represent themselves and a heavier body size for the ideal size of women. This finding was surprising, as one would expect television viewing to lead girls to overestimate their own body size while selecting a thinner ideal size for women. Harrison also discovered that even girls who were not interested in diet or exercise were found to have increased disordered eating when they experienced increases in television viewing. This may be due to girls being exposed to dieting images and ideas which can lead to changes in their eating related thoughts and behaviors.

If girls are internalizing the thin ideal from television viewing and changing their eating behaviors based on this ideal, then increased television viewing should predict thin body shape standards; however, this was not found to occur (Harrison, 2000). It may be that media messages around eating and exercise impact preadolescent girl's eating-related thoughts and behaviors prior to them internalizing the thin ideal body standard. Girls who had an interpersonal attraction to average weight female characters were found to have heavier ideal body standards for females and less importance was placed on being thin (Harrison, 2000). This attraction to average weight female characters seemed to serve as a protective factor when it came to favoring the thin ideal.



It seems as though young women are influenced by the media from a very young age. It is important to recognize that the influence of the media occurs over time and there is a process that young women seem to go through as they are continuously exposed to the media. Brief exposures to the media add up over time and over time young women's body dissatisfaction seems to increase. As young women are exposed to different forms of media they begin to become more susceptible to things such as diet and weight loss along with considering alternative body sizes for both themselves and the models they see in the media.

### **Different forms of media.**

The media has a significant influence on individuals of all ages but it can be especially influential to young women as they are developing their sense of identity and who they are as individuals. As young women flip through magazines and television channels they are bombarded with images of models who are thin, attractive, and depict a limited vision of female beauty. The media provides teens with a variety of messages telling them how they can attain society's ideal level of thinness. These messages are sent through magazine articles on how to lose weight, weight loss advertisements, and advertisements for a variety of products that are supposed to help young women get closer to achieving an ideal body and appearance. Botta (2003) discussed that adolescents study media images in order to gain an understanding of what is beautiful and how they are expected to look. They compare themselves to the media's standards of beauty, and they work to present themselves similar to the models they see in the media (Botta, 2003). A variety of different forms of media have been looked at when discussing the influence media has on body image. These forms of media include magazines, advertisements, television, websites, music videos, and toys. Statistics from the Kaiser Family Foundation provide support for the importance of looking at these different forms of media. According to a news release from the Kaiser Family Foundation (2009), individuals between the

ages of 8 and 18 spend an average of 4 hours and 29 minutes a day watching television, 2 hours and 31 minutes a day listening to music, 1 hour and 29 minutes a day on the computer, 38 minutes a day looking at print media, and 25 minutes a day watching movies.

### ***Magazines.***

*Seventeen*, *Teen*, *Girls' Life*, *J-14*, and *Teen Vogue* are just a few of the magazines young women may be found looking through. Magazines are packed full of articles telling young women how to lose weight, what the latest fashion trends are, and advertisements for products they can use to achieve the same look as the model depicted in the advertisement. While these advertisements can be misleading, magazine advertisements have been found to play an important role in showing girls the steps they need to take in order to develop an ideal body (Dunkley, Wertheim, & Paxton, 2001).

While the media influences young girls and the attempts they make at achieving society's beauty ideal, young girls also seek out specific forms of media based on what they are hoping to achieve through using the media. Tiggemann (2006) found the relationship between media exposure and body image is likely reciprocal with girls selecting specific media content for certain purposes, including body image, along with experiencing body image consequences as a result of viewing the media content. This media viewing can become cyclical with adolescents seeking out specific media as a result of their body image concerns and after seeking out media, their body image concerns are often exacerbated. While a cycle was found to develop between seeking out media and body image concerns, no direct causal effect can be found linking media exposure to body image and eating disturbance (Tiggemann, 2006).

The type of magazine and how young women use magazines can greatly influence the impact magazines have. Botta (2003) found reading health and fitness magazines to be a

significant predictor of adolescent body image and eating disturbance along with being linked to a drive for thinness and increased anorexic and bulimic intentions and behaviors. The way in which an adolescent approaches looking through a magazine can influence the extent to which she is influenced by the magazines. For example, adolescents who focus on the content of magazines have been found to engage less in eating disordered behaviors while focusing on the model's body size and shape was found to be linked to body image and eating disturbances. Adolescent girls engaging in critical body image processing, which is being critical of the models and athletes they view in the magazine, has been linked to the girls having greater anorexic and bulimic behaviors, a greater drive for thinness, being less satisfied with their bodies, and partially linked to increased muscularity (Botta, 2003). Dunkley et al. (2001) also found weight loss information from magazines to be linked to dietary restraint in adolescent girls.

Adolescent females do not always read magazines in isolation. Magazines can also provide adolescent females with topics of conversation when they are talking with their peers. Jones, Vigfusdottir, and Lee (2004) found a relationship between appearance magazines and body dissatisfaction, although the correlation was not strong. Due to the lack of strength in this finding, the authors speculated that magazine images, on their own, may have a small impact on body image. It may be that girls who read appearance magazines are also having conversations with friends about their appearance and appearance magazines provide them with topics of conversation. Fashion magazines, on their own, have been found to lead adolescent females, who are anxious about their weight, to use diet pills or appetite suppressants (Jones et al., 2004). Reading fashion magazines may increase girls' desires to be thin; which may result in girls not

going about achieving their desired level of thinness in a healthy way (Thomsen, Weber, & Brown, 2002).

Magazine content has also been found to influence adolescent females psychologically. A positive link was found between media body comparison and body dissatisfaction. Females with low self-esteem and depressed mood were found to have greater media body comparison; this suggests negative mood may promote seeking out information concerning oneself in relation to others (Van den Berg, Paxton, Keery, Wall, Guo, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007). It has also been found that women who viewed idealized images of women were found to have increased body shame and appearance anxiety. The impact of being exposed to an idealized image on appearance anxiety was higher for women who were high self-objectifiers, meaning these women tend to value their appearance over other abilities and attributes (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Monro & Huon, 2005). Whether or not the advertisement was body related was not found to have an effect on body image (Monro & Huon, 2005).

The Media Practice Model (Steele & Brown, 1995) helps to explain how, young women may seek out the type of magazines they read based on the information they are hoping to attain. For example, young women may use the process of selection to choose a specific magazine based on what they are hoping to achieve by looking at the magazine. The way in which the young woman interacts with, or looks through the magazine she selected, will also be based on what she is hoping to achieve. The application process can be applied when considering why the adolescent selected that specific magazine. For example, was she looking for weight loss tips, suggestions on what beauty products she should use, and/or advice on how she should dress? Thomsen, McCoy, and Williams (2001) looked at how women who first developed their eating disorder at the age of 15 used fashion and beauty magazines and how this use influenced their

eating disordered thoughts and behaviors. Women in the study stated they did not blame the media for their eating disorder; however, they felt it played a significant role in their illness. Many of the women heavily interacted with the media beginning in the early years of adolescence and this interaction increased after they developed their eating disorder. Findings suggest the women used magazines for specific emotional needs that were impacted by other personal and family factors. Women in the study were found to hold very high expectations for themselves, friends, family, and even the world. Many of these women grew up in families where they were the caregiver and they were often trying to protect family members from harm. As a result of them personally, along with the broader world, not living up to their expectations and their desired level of perfection they tried to achieve control. These young women believed if they could be perfect than everything else that was not working out the way they desired would begin to fall into place. With these young women searching for ways to be perfect, the media provided them with standards of perfection they could strive to achieve and the messages sent through magazines fit with the way of thinking these young women had.

For these women, beauty and fashion magazines were viewed as a “how-to manual” they used in an attempt to obtain the impossible standard of thinness that had been placed before them. Many of the women compared their bodies with the images they saw in the magazines and for some it became a competition to see if they could become thinner than the models in the magazines. Findings from the study suggest that the most significant and influential level of media use occurs once the eating disorder has been triggered. As the women’s eating disorders became worse they found themselves receiving messages from their family and friends that they were too thin and that they needed to start eating; however, the messages and images they saw in the magazines were encouraging them to continue working on achieving their desired level of

thinness and the magazines provided them with tips on how to do so. For women struggling with eating disorders, magazines provide them with support and role models and helped them to believe their ideal self might actually be attainable. The authors, based on findings from the study, suggested that, while the media adds to the maintenance of sociocultural preferences for thinness, the strongest, most harmful impact appears to take place after eating-disorder symptoms have become evident in at-risk adolescents (Thomsen et al., 2001). The authors stress that by holding the media solely responsible for the cause of eating disorders, they are taking the attention off of the core conflicts and concerns of these young women with anorexia (Thomsen et al., 2001).

As the results from the studies suggest, the print media and magazines are not solely to blame for the development of body dissatisfaction and the development of eating disordered behavior; however, it does seem to have a significant influence on young women. Not only is it important to be aware of the messages magazines can send women but it is also important to be aware of the intentions of the women who are viewing these magazines. If young women are viewing these magazines as a guide for how to achieve their desired body they are likely to be negatively influenced by the advertisements they view, the models they see, and the dieting tips they come across. While magazines are not solely to blame for body image issues, they do play a significant role and if young women are already concerned about their appearance, magazines can play on these vulnerabilities and lead women to engage in risky dieting and weight loss behaviors that they otherwise may not have considered.

### ***Advertisements.***

Advertisements are another area where young women are bombarded with images of thin, beautiful models. For young women, the extent to which they have internalized the thin

ideal as well as how often they engage in social comparison impacts the level to which they are influenced by the models they view in advertisements. Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) found that the degree to which women have internalized sociocultural attitudes regarding thinness and appearance was found to moderate the impact advertising has on women's anxiety related to their bodies. Women who have highly internalized the thin ideal were found to have higher body-focused anxiety when they viewed advertisements with thin models as opposed to when they viewed advertisements with average sized models or no models. The women who participated in the study had an average BMI. The authors suggest that as a result of this, women may not have seen a significant difference between their bodies and the bodies of the average-sized models in the advertisements; this may have caused them to not experience increased body-focused anxiety when viewing average sized models (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004). For college-age women, viewing thin-ideal body images led to increased negative affect and body dissatisfaction. Simply viewing advertisements that showed only parts of a model was found to draw just as much social comparison and resulted in as much negative affect and body dissatisfaction as when the women viewed advertisements showing a models full body (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004).

Appearance-related commercials can also have a significant impact on how young women view themselves. Viewing such commercials can lead to internalization of the thin ideal, body dissatisfaction, and can negatively influence one's mood. Research has found that appearance-related commercials can lead adolescents to have decreased confidence, increased anger, and body dissatisfaction. Findings suggest that not only do images of attractiveness lead to dissatisfaction with one's appearance but they also activate an appearance schema that causes an increase in appearance dissatisfaction (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002). Researches have also

looked at the influence small changes in body dissatisfaction can have on body image over time. Adolescents females who were most negatively impacted at age 15, when they were first exposed to 10 minutes of appearance or non-appearance related commercials, were found to be more dissatisfied with their bodies and voiced a stronger drive for thinness at the two-year follow-up (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003).

Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) and Tiggemann and McGill (2004) provide suggestions for how advertisers can alter their approach to advertising in order to still make their advertisements effective while helping young women to not be as negatively impacted by the advertisements they are presented with. They suggest that advertisers can use attractive, average-sized models in their advertisements to avoid causing increases in women's body focused-anxiety and still sell their products. Also, because product and brand names associated with body-part images were recalled less often than were full-body images, they suggest that for the sake of women's health as well as commercial reasons, that advertiser's not use body-part images.

These findings and recommendations are encouraging for both advertisers and young women who are influenced by the media on a daily basis. Advertisers can still have effective advertisements using attractive, average size models shows that there are ways the media can alter their approach to advertising while still being effective. In other words, stick thin models are not a necessary part of successfully selling a product. Over time, as more advertisers begin to make such changes, young women may find themselves feeling less pressure to look a certain way and advertisers may begin to recognize and not feel they have to portray a certain image of a female in order to fit what society has come to expect from advertising.



### ***Television.***

Today, young women are easily able to access television shows that can greatly influence how they view themselves and the messages they receive regarding what is viewed as being beautiful and attractive. While young girls living in the United States have most likely been exposed to some form of television their entire lives, this is not the case for adolescent girls growing up in Fiji. The influence Western television was having on disordered eating among ethnic Fijian adolescent girls was studied (Becker, Burwell, Gilman, Herzog, & Hamburg, 2002). Prior to the introduction of Western media, this population had been fairly media naïve and eating disorders had previously been rare. Television was first introduced to the area in 1995; this was when the first study took place and then again in 1998, three years after television was introduced. Findings showed a significant increase in the prevalence of two key indicators of disordered eating, high scores on the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT) and girls making themselves vomit to lose weight.

The introduction of Western television seems to have taken away from the protection Fijian cultural traditions had previously provided against dieting, purging, and body dissatisfaction. As adolescent Fijian girls become aware their traditional culture is not able to equip them on how to discuss the unique challenges posed by rapid changes in society, they are able to look to television for a “template” on how to be successful in engaging in the Western lifestyle. For these adolescent girls, whose culture encourages a strong attentiveness to appetite and weight change, Western television provides them with a narrow range of body shapes compared to those of ethnic Fijians. Actresses shown on television are often thin and associated with icons of status which are pleasing and often inaccessible to Fijians, this may cause Fijians to associate thinness with glamour. As a result of Western television being fairly new to Fijian

adolescents, they may not be aware of the fact that television images are often altered and artificial (Becker et al., 2002). As a result of this lack of knowledge, they may not realize the level of thinness they are aiming to achieve may not be possible and if they do achieve this level of thinness it will result in them being faced with a variety of health concerns.

*Genre of television viewed.*

Over the years it has been said that watching too much television is bad for individuals; however, the question can be raised as to whether it is the amount of television one watches that is bad for them or if it has more to do with the content individuals are watching. Along with looking at what individuals are watching, it is important to look at how they are using the information they attain through watching television. Tiggemann (2005) looked at these very things, in his study of the amount of television viewed, the genres watched, motives for viewing specific television shows, and adolescent's body attitudes. Findings showed that the total amount of time spent watching television was not linked to the body image variables; however, the type of television was. For example, viewing soap operas was linked to the internalization of the cultural beauty ideals and a drive for thinness, along with appearance schemas. Adolescent females who watched television for social learning purposes were found to develop negative body image; however, watching television for enjoyment was not found to impact body image. Results suggest that what adolescents watch has a greater impact on body image than the amount of time they spend watching television.

*Television featuring plastic surgery.*

Unlike young women living in Fiji, young women living in the United States are able to view dating shows, plastic surgery and makeover shows, shows telling individuals what they should and should not wear, and weight loss shows on a variety of different television stations.

Derenne and Beresin (2006) investigated how the public's perception of the ideal female body type has always been impacted by the dominant political climate and cultural ideals; however, in today's culture the media has a greater presence than ever before. The authors discussed how women are constantly being sent messages telling them they are not thin enough or attractive enough. Reality television shows featuring plastic surgery and significant makeovers have become more and more common; however, healthcare professionals have criticized these shows for supporting an unhealthy body image. For example, the reality television show "The Swan" features women being separated from their families for weeks while they undergo dieting, exercise regimens, makeovers, and plastic surgery. After undergoing these drastic changes, women compete in a beauty pageant to win the title of "The Swan". Markey and Markey (2010) looked at reality television shows that use cosmetic surgery and how these shows impacted young adults' interest in altering their physical appearance through cosmetic surgery. Young women were more likely than individuals who were satisfied with their appearance to consider surgically altering their appearance if they were dissatisfied with how they looked. Individuals who watch television shows featuring cosmetic surgery are more likely than individuals who do not watch cosmetic surgery shows to desire altering their faces or bodies through cosmetic surgery. Findings suggest that viewing television make-over shows may, temporarily, lead young women to desire having their own makeover. The question was raised as to whether having numerous cosmetic surgeries can result in individuals being more satisfied with their physical appearance or if it causes them to realize that there is always something more they can change.

Harrison (2003) did a similar study; however, she did not look at reality television, instead she looked at college female perceptions of ideal female proportions and their approval of engaging in surgical procedures to fit these ideals. College women who were exposed to ideal-

body television images were found to idealize a smaller waist and hips, and medium-sized bust. These women were also found to approve of surgical body-alterations. Smaller-chested women who viewed thin ideal television were also found to approve of breast augmentation, while larger-chested women were found to approve of breast-reduction surgery. The finding that exposure to thin ideal television was associated with women being open to surgical procedures presents another adverse outcome of viewing thin ideal television; not only might women develop eating disorders, they may also undergo risky operations to fit the thin ideal. Results from the study suggest that although young women may say they are not interested in television that focuses on attaining an ideal body shape, being exposed to such ideals was linked to attitudes favoring thinness and approving of surgical procedures to alter one's body.

These findings suggest that reality television and television shows portraying the ideal body are related to young women being open to the idea of undergoing cosmetic surgery and, as it becomes more common, they may begin to view cosmetic surgery as being a normal part of life. Young women may not recognize the risks that go along with undergoing such procedures and, as Markey and Markey (2010) point out, once young women begin undergoing surgeries they may come up with more and more areas that need "fixed". Young women may reach a point where they are putting their lives and health at risk, not only by dieting or starving themselves, but also through undergoing risky, unnecessary procedures in an attempt to fit a particular ideal.

#### *Portrayal of characters on television.*

Along with watching reality television shows, research has been done regarding the type of characters shown in prime time television shows and how these actors are portrayed within their specific role based on their size. Greensburg, Eastin, Hofschire, Lachlan, and Brownwell (2003) discussed how there seems to be neglect toward overweight individuals and a

disproportion of thin male and female characters. The authors discussed how an overwhelming focus on thinness may have a significant effect on self-esteem, employment concerns, and interpersonal relationships for viewers who are overweight. Findings showed that thin women were portrayed in a positive light while overweight women were portrayed negatively. Overweight characters were often ethnic minorities (African American males and females had larger body types than White males and females), older (60 or older for males, 40 or older for females), married, unemployed, guests on television shows (most common with men, they were not regular characters on the television show), less likely to have romantic interactions, date, or be in sexual relationships, and were more often shown as being the objects of humor (larger characters appeared more often in comedy shows than in dramas) (Greensburg et al., 2003). Television shows portraying overweight characters in this way are sending young women the message that overweight individuals are not successful and are not as attractive as thin individuals. These messages may cause girls to feel they need to place a significant focus on their weight if they want to be successful when they get older and be viewed as attractive. This portrayal of overweight versus thin characters also sends young women the message that how an individual appears on the outside is really all that matters.

*Television in social context.*

Although young women can easily access a variety of different television shows and advertisements simply by turning on the television, it is important to remember young women are not always watching television alone. Young women may be watching television with friends, siblings, or their parents. Depending on the ages of the individuals with whom they are watching, the content of the media may not be appropriate for them. Harrison and Hefner (2006) suggest that young girls often watch television with older siblings or their parents, which could

cause them to be exposed to a variety of adult-oriented programs providing them with the opportunity to experience adult concerns around dieting, weight loss, and what adults view as being attractive. Derenne and Beresin (2006) also presented the importance of parents and healthcare providers talking with children about the messages they are being sent through the media and how to achieve a healthy lifestyle. Parents should limit the amount of television their children watch and talk with them about the messages they are being sent through television shows and advertisements (Derenne & Beresin, 2006).

Television plays a significant role in the lives of young women; unfortunately they cannot always control the type of media they encounter. For example, today televisions are not only in our homes, they can also be found in restaurants, airports, and healthcare facilities. While being in these locations, young women have little, if any, control over the television they are viewing. It is important that parents are aware of the negative influence television can have on young women and how important it is that they talk with their daughters about what they are viewing as well as consider what they are watching both with and without their daughters present.

### ***Websites.***

According to the Pew Research Center and American Life Project, 93 % of adolescents use the Internet. Thirty-one percent of adolescents who use the Internet are searching for information on dieting, exercise, and health. Seventeen percent of adolescents were found to search for information on topics that are uncomfortable for them to discuss with others, such as sexual health, mental health, or drug use (Pew Research Center and American Life Project, 2011). While the Internet serves as a wonderful source to get information quickly, it can also be filled with dangers. For example, young women struggling with body image issues or eating

disorders may turn to the Internet to try to find helpful information; however, they can easily stumble across websites that encourage or normalize eating disorders, provide information on how to lose weight quickly, and provide a “support system” for losing weight they may feel they are lacking. Andrist (2003) discussed how “pro-ana” (pro-anorexia) and “pro-mia” (pro-bulimia) websites have been developed that encourages individuals who are at risk for eating disorders to starve themselves, binge and purge, or purge (Andrist, 2003). Andrist (2003), Norris, Boydell, Pinhas, and Katzman (2006), and Wilson, Peebles, Hardy, and Litt (2006) all touched on the fact that young girls may stumble on pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites by mistake. These young women may be seeking help for their eating disorder and instead of finding helpful information they come across websites encouraging them to continue with their eating disorder and provide them with additional ways to lose weight (Andrist, 2003; Norris et al., 2006). These websites often do not provide explanations regarding the content contained within the website (Norris et al., 2006). Norris et al. (2006) discussed how websites provide “thinspiration,” images meant to encourage and motivate girls to continue and sustain their weight loss. Such images were found on a majority of the pro-ana websites evaluated, offering visual representations of the distorted body image of anorexia. “Tips and Tricks” are also provided on these websites; these sections were found to contain the most serious medical risks for young women. These risks came in the form of promoting fasts, laxative use, and complementary and alternative medicines. The unreliable information girls receive through these sections may increase the short- and long-term medical risks linked to anorexia (Norris et al., 2006).

Pro-eating disorder and pro-recovery websites seem to both have a negative impact on young women, in spite of the fact that pro-recovery websites would seem to be meant to encourage young women to overcome their eating disorder. Wilson et al. (2006) found that the

use of pro-eating disorder and pro-recovery websites was linked to more hospitalizations, with curiosity being a common reason given for visiting these websites. Many young women who visited pro-eating disorder websites reported learning new techniques for weight loss and purging; many of these young women began using the techniques they learned from visiting the websites. In spite of the fact that pro-recovery sites are meant to help girls as they recover from their eating disorder, these sites were found to have threats. Findings also showed that pro-eating disorder websites downplay the belief that eating disorders are a disease, which may lead young women who visit these websites to view eating disorders as not being serious.

Young women struggling with eating disorders often try to hide their illness or deny to others that they have a problem. While young women may not feel comfortable talking openly about their eating disorder to others, pro-ana and pro-mia websites provide them with a place where they can talk openly without feeling judged. Andrist (2003) discussed how many girls, who suffer from eating disorders, often have a lot of shame and secrecy around their disorder. While girls may try to hide their eating disorder and feel they do not have a support system; today, with the Internet, these girls are able to find a support system through pro-ana and pro-mia websites that encourage young women to carry on the dangerous acts they are engaging in as well as provide them with additional tips on how to achieve their desired level of thinness. Through these websites, girls are able to encourage one another, share their stories, and share tips on how to lose weight quickly (Andrist, 2003). Norris et al. (2006) also touched on the supportive sense of community that can be found in these websites. They discussed how websites offer and promote a supportive community for those with anorexia, which encourages the continuation of the eating disorder without any form of treatment (Norris et al., 2006).



Similar to the shame and secrecy that goes along with trying to hide eating disorders; young women often seek out these websites without their parents' knowledge. Parents may not be aware that their daughter has a problem, let alone aware of the fact that she is seeking out support, encouragement, and advice from websites encouraging her to continue with her eating disorder. Wilson et al. (2006) found the use of pro-eating disorder and pro-recovery websites to be prominent among adolescents with eating disorders, and parents of these young women often had little knowledge of the websites their daughters were using. Girls who used pro-eating disorder websites were found to have a longer length of eating disorder and less time devoted to school activities.

Although the studies looking at these different websites are specifically looking at young women who are struggling with eating disorders, I feel it is important to recognize that these websites are a form of media that anyone can view and, as mentioned in the studies, these websites may be stumbled upon by chance. Girls who may not have an eating disorder but are struggling with body image issues and body dissatisfaction could come across such websites and learn about different techniques to make themselves thinner. They may also read information that does not present eating disorders in a negative light that may allow these young women to rationalize the risky behaviors they are engaging in as a result of viewing such websites. Although these websites can negatively impact young women who are struggling with body dissatisfaction, it is important to remember that simply because a young woman is dissatisfied with her body does not mean she will develop an eating disorder.

Another type of website that can be influential to young women are the websites of teen magazines. The messages sent through these websites are similar to the messages sent through magazines; however, young women are able to personalize the website for their specific

interests, greater information can be directed at young women through websites, and they provide more of a sense of privacy for young women. Labre and Walsh-Childers (2003) looked at the content of magazine websites beauty section targeting teenage girls with a specific focus being placed on the images and messages related to female beauty and how they were circulated. While magazines can have a strong influence on adolescents, magazine websites reach adolescents in a different way. The Internet allows websites to be interactive and allows viewers to select content that is relevant to them. Sites are designed in a way to fit the needs of the user and ensure the adolescent will return to the site. Websites also provide girls with a sense of privacy and anonymity that cannot be attained through print media; this allows them to inquire about issues they may not feel comfortable discussing with someone or having others know they are interested in.

Another unique component of websites is they are able to post a greater amount of information at less of a cost than print media. Findings from the websites looked at in this study, which were *CosmoGirl!*, *Teen People*, *Seventeen*, and *Teen*, showed that three themes emerged. These themes included “Beauty as a requirement”, “Beauty is achieved through products”, and “We can help you find the right products” (Labre & Walsh-Childers, 2003, p. 387). The websites looked at within the study were found to present themselves as being friends and experts who provide solutions to adolescent’s problems with their bodies. While these websites portray a sense of being a friend, expert, or confidant, they do not tell girls they are fine the way they are; instead they take advantage of girls’ insecurities with their changing bodies to promote body dissatisfaction and the purchasing of products. Society portrays beauty as being physical perfection; however, magazines and websites claim girls can attain this ideal through the use of products, which can lead them on an endless search for the right product and cause psychological

distress. While adolescent girls have been found to recognize the purpose of media content, it seems they are often not prepared to resist the messages. Some of the messages presented within the websites suggested that in order to be beautiful one has to have physical perfection, beauty leads to success, girls are not okay simply the way they are, every part of a girl's body has to be perfect, and beauty experts are able to give girls advice on the products and techniques they will need to attain societies standard of beauty (Labre & Walsh-Childers, 2003).

As I read through the articles on pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites along with adolescent female magazine websites I was amazed at the tactics used to attract young women to these websites. Young women are at a time in their lives where they are not sure of who they are and they are uncomfortable with their changing bodies. Websites, like the ones discussed above, provide young women with a sense of support, understanding, and encouragement that they can attain their desired level of thinness and beauty, while still allowing young women to attain a level of privacy regarding their concerns. Young women are sent so many mixed messages through such websites; unfortunately, the message that "they are beautiful just the way they are" is a message that does not seem to frequent the websites seeking to attract young women's attention.

### ***Music videos.***

Music videos are another form of media that can have significant influences on young women. Music videos not only send messages to young women regarding how they should look, they also send young women these messages through the lyrics of songs. Bell, Lawton, and Dittmar (2007) found that adolescents and emerging adults who were exposed to thin models in music videos had a larger increase in body dissatisfaction from pre to post exposure compared to girls who only listened to song lyrics or were involved in a word recall intervention.

Borzekowski, Robinson, and Killen (2000) found that being exposed to music videos was associated with increased perceptions of importance on appearance and weight concerns; this was found to be especially true for Caucasian and African American adolescent females (Borzekowski et al., 2000). Young women who were in the music video and song lyrics group were found to have lowered mood compared to girls who were in the word recall intervention; however, there was not a difference on the impact of mood for young women who viewed thin models compared to those who did not suggesting lowered mood may be independent of body dissatisfaction. The authors suggest the negative effect of music videos on adolescent girls' body satisfaction may be due to the depiction of thin models as being an age-appropriate, aspirational role model for adolescent girls (Bell et al., 2007).

Music plays a significant role in the lives of young women and offers them a way to express themselves and how they are feeling. While music is a wonderful form of media, it also comes with risks. For example, music videos to songs young women like may not be age appropriate and may send young women messages on how they should dress and the size they need to be in order to be accepted or viewed as beautiful. It is important for parents to pay attention to the music their daughters are listening to and be aware of the messages being sent through both the lyrics as well as through the music videos. With there being such a wide variety of music available today it is important young women are educated on the messages they are sent as well as on how viewing music videos and listening to song lyrics can influence them. For example, the country song *Perfect Girl*, sung by Jb and the Moonshine Band (Patterson, 2010), recently caught my attention. The song has the following lyrics,

She gotta be five foot eleven

She smells like heaven

She measures thirty six twenty four thirty seven  
She got full intention of financially supporting me  
She got some big ol' boobies  
A countrified booty  
And she don't get mad if I watch dirty movies  
If anybody knows where the perfect girl might be  
Won't you tell her bout me.

I recognize that not all songs send such messages; however, I do believe it is important that parents are aware that songs with such messages are being played and are easily accessible to young girls. While the song and music video could be viewed as being a joke, young girls may not take it this way, instead they may feel that in order to be viewed as the “Perfect Girl” they have to meet this checklist of criteria.

A song that sends a completely different message to young women, as well as listeners of all ages, is the song *Beautiful* sung by Christina Aguilera (Perry, 2002). The song has the following chorus,

'Cause you are beautiful no matter what they say  
Words can't bring you down, ohh, no  
'Cause you are beautiful in every single way  
Yes, words can't bring you down, ohh, no  
So don't you bring me down today

I love the message that is being sent through this song, that everyone is beautiful just as they are. The music video for this song depicts a girl struggling with anorexia, a boy striving to achieve the muscular body he feels is expected of him, a gay couple, a cross dresser, a young girl being

bullied by her peers, a young man who has a Gothic look to him dressed in all black with spiked hair and piercings, and an African American young woman tearing out the pages of magazines showing images of stick thin models and throwing the pages into a fire. While I feel the lyrics of the song and the music video do a wonderful job depicting the many different struggles individuals face and that in spite of these struggles they are beautiful and accepted for who they are, I do have some concerns regarding the video along with Christina Aguilera's appearance. I feel that young girls watching the video may see the anorexic teen standing in her bra and panties, the thin young woman sitting in a t-shirt and panties tearing out the magazine pages, and Christina Aguilera who is thin, and although she is fully clothed, she is wearing a form fitted tank top that reveals her midsection, may lead young women to feel they should look like the young women in the video to be viewed as beautiful. Young girls may not be able to understand the message that is being sent through the video that girls do not have to be anorexic to be beautiful or look like the models in the advertisements; instead they may feel the video is telling them this is how they need to look to be viewed as beautiful. Christina Aguilera is a pop artist who young women may look up to. She fits society's ideal for female beauty and she is often shown wearing clothes that objectify and sexualize her body. While her song *Beautiful* sends the message to young women that they are beautiful exactly as they are, the message she sends with how she dresses and presents herself does not necessarily fit the message of her song.

### ***Toys.***

Barbie is a doll most young women either owned or played with at some point when they were growing up. Although Barbie is still a popular today, her body proportions are something that have been questioned over the years. Studies have looked at the influence Barbie has on preadolescent and adolescent girl's body image. Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive (2006) found that

preadolescent girls who were exposed to images of Barbie were found to have greater body dissatisfaction while exposure to Emme dolls, which represents a United States size 16, was not found to cause body dissatisfaction. Exposure to ultrathin images was linked to a decrease in young girl's body esteem, their satisfaction with their body size, and led them to desire a thinner body. The impact exposure to ultrathin images has on young girl's self-concept and self-evaluation seems to be direct; these young girls have not yet internalized cognitive self-concept structures, such as the thin ideal. Findings suggest that by age 7 to 8 girls have often internalized the thin ideal; suggesting their desire for thinness is a result of this internalization instead of being due to the direct exposure to Barbie or other stimuli. Results also showed older girls had an increased desire to be thin after being exposed to the Emme doll. The authors suggest older girls, who have internalized the thin ideal, may see the Emme doll and have the fear that they will grow up and look like the doll. These girls were not dissatisfied with their current bodies; however, they did desire to have a thinner body when they were older.

For many young girls, Barbie serves as a role model and provides them with a sense of what they should look like when they grow up. Kuther and McDonald (2004) found that overall, girls felt Barbie represented perfection; however, girls in the study felt she was too perfect and had an unrealistic body. Dittmar et al. (2006) discussed how it is believed that Barbie's ultrathin body proportions serve as an inspirational role model for young girls, which has been found to lead to body dissatisfaction. Many girls felt Barbie could have a negative impact on girl's views of beauty, body image, and self-concepts. One girl said, "I think she is too thin and does not show the best example for young kids. Sometimes my friends when they were younger wanted to be like her because she was thin, now if they did they would die" (Kuther & McDonald, p. 48, 2004). It was Barbie's being "fake" and "perfect" that caused a majority of girls to dislike her.

They also viewed Barbie as being phony due to her figure and her having so many careers (Kuther & McDonald, 2004).

It seems that a majority of young girls grow up playing with Barbie and many of these young girls aspire to be like Barbie when they get older. Young girls need to be aware of the fact that Barbie is just a doll and that her figure is not attainable. The perfection that goes along with Barbie is something that needs to be addressed and discussed with young girls. They need to know there is no one body size that is “perfect” and a person does not have to have certain job or be a particular size in order to be successful or accepted by others.

It is also important to recognize that young girls are influenced by other toys and characters aside from Barbie. In looking at images of some of the toys and characters young girls grow up with, I noticed some of these character’s “figures” have changed over the years. For example, Strawberry Shortcake has transitioned from having a fuller, younger looking figure, wearing a poufy dress and having short curly hair to having a thin figure, with long straight hair and wearing a more form-fitted dress. Dora the Explorer has gone from having a very short, childlike figure and wearing a t-shirt and shorts to being much taller, thinner, and wearing a short dress with leggings.

## **Summary**

There are a variety of different forms of media that influence young women and how they view themselves. Regardless of the form, media is related to girls internalizing the thin ideal, striving to look like models they see in the media, and developing disordered eating and weight concerns. Blowers, Loxton, Grady-Flessner, Occhipinti, and Dawe (2003) discussed how the perceived pressure from the media plays a large role in the level to which girls internalize the thin ideal. Internalization of the thin ideal was found to mediate the relationship between media’s



pressure to be thin and the feeling of body dissatisfaction. The authors suggested that young women who have not internalized the thin ideal are less likely to experience body dissatisfaction when they experience society's pressure to be thin. Overall, findings showed that media exposure is related to women's overall dissatisfaction with their bodies, increased focus on appearance, and stronger endorsement of disordered eating (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008).

As young women flip through magazines or watch television shows, they not only are bombarded with images of thin models, they also come across discussion of dieting and weight loss as well as viewing weight loss commercials and advertisements. For young women, hearing and seeing the same message over and over again can lead them to begin to think they need to diet in order to look like the models they see in the media. The more they hear about dieting, the more normal it becomes to them, it may be viewed as something that women have to do in order to be accepted by today's society. The danger comes when young women take dieting to an extreme and engage in unhealthy behaviors in an attempt to achieve their desired level of thinness. Field, Camargo, Taylor, Berkey, Roberts, and Colditz (2001) found that girls attempting to look like models in the media leads to weight concerns and them becoming a constant dieter. Young women who attempt to look like females in the media are at increased risk for developing bulimic behaviors (Field, Javaras, Aneja, Kitos, Camargo, Taylor, & Laird, 2008). Peterson, Paulson, and Williams (2007) made an interesting observation regarding dieting and eating disorders. They discussed how the media's portrayal of weight loss through dieting programs, pills, or exercise is portrayed as positive, while the portrayal of bulimic behaviors is often negative, which may steer adolescents away from using this as a weight loss method. While Peterson, Paulson, and Williams make a valid point, I think that simply because dieting is viewed in a positive light does not make the approaches shown in the media any healthier than

the weight loss approaches taken by individuals struggling with bulimia. Individuals who are on diets may take pills that cause them to lose weight in a similar way that individuals with bulimia may take pills to help them lose weight. I think it is important that individuals are educated on the difference between healthy and unhealthy weight loss and be made aware of how the media is portraying weight loss.

For young women, it is not just that they desire to look like models in order to fit society's ideal level of thinness; they also believe that their life will be better if they look like the models in the media. Engeln-Maddox (2006) found that college women believed their lives would change in important and positive ways if they looked like models in the media. Women believed they would be socially competent, successful, and well adjusted if they looked like models. In spite of wanting to achieve the level of thinness of models in the media, young women did voice a concern that looking like the media ideal may cause them to become superficial and solely focused on how they looked. Women who reported feeling life would be better if they looked like the media ideal was found to be dissatisfied with their appearance; however, this finding was only true to the extent to which individual's beliefs promoted acceptance of the thin ideal.

The media influence young women in so many aspects of their lives. It is important that parents as well as young women are aware of the many varieties of media that they are faced with on a daily basis. Simply being aware of the influence the media can have on young women will not protect them from the media's influence. Having support from parents, who are aware of the challenges young women are being faced with, can help young women as they face the daily challenges the media and society place on them to be thin.

Upon looking at the research, it is clear that sociocultural influences impact young women's body image in a variety of ways. Based on the findings from the research previously discussed it is important to consider the role Family Life Educators (FLEs) can have in educating families on the many influences peers, family, and the media can have on young women. It is important that parents are educated on and aware of these influences along with being educated on things they can do to help their daughters deal with the constant pressures they feel to fit society's ideal of beauty. Along with educating parents, it is important for parents to talk with their daughters openly about the media and the messages they are being sent. FLEs can provide parents with activities they can do with their daughters that will educate them on, and make them aware of, these different influences through hands on activities as opposed to simply listening to a presentation or sitting down and talking with their parents.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

In the future, I think it is important for more research to look at how sociocultural influences impact young women of different ethnicities. While I came across a few studies in my research, the majority of the research focused mainly on Caucasian females. With different races and ethnicities having different body ideals it is important to have research that is applicable to other ethnicities aside from Caucasians. I also think it is important that more research be done on body image and sociocultural influences here in the United States. While a significant amount of the research I looked at was from the United States, a significant amount was also done in different parts of Australia. These articles often addressed the influence of peers, media, and/or family on body image in Western Cultures. While the United States and Australia are both western cultures, I think it is important to have research that is done in the United States to

ensure that the findings are applicable and more generalizable to young women as opposed to making it applicable by focusing on the larger western culture.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPLICATION**

### **Family Life Education**

Parents play a vital role in their daughter's development, especially during her younger years. As a result of this, programs designed to educate parents on the sociocultural influences (peers, family, and the media) that can impact their daughter and how she views herself are important. Parents may not realize that as their daughters flip through magazines, they may be comparing themselves to the stick thin models they see and are becoming dissatisfied with their bodies because they do not look like the models that depict what society has deemed as female beauty. Parents may also not recognize that offhand comments they make regarding dissatisfaction with their weight or commenting on the attractiveness of an actress on television can send their daughters the message that their weight and how attractive they are is important, especially as they get older. Programs educating parents on the influence of family, peers, and the media on young women's body image will be more effective if they are presented by professionals who have a strong knowledge base on this topic and are experienced with working with families. Professionals in the field of Family Life Education (FLE) would be well equipped to educate parents and provide them with ideas on how to talk with their daughters.

Family Life Education "is any organized effort to provide family members with information, skills, experiences, or resources intended to strengthen, improve or enrich their family experience" (National Council on Family Relations, NCFR, 2011). FLEs work with families to educate them on human growth and development across the lifespan. The core concept of FLE focuses on relationships which help individuals develop their personality, make choices they are dedicated to, and help them build self-esteem (NCFR, 2011).

NCFR developed a framework explaining the different areas FLEs focus on over the course of the lifespan. The areas within the framework include: Families in Society, Internal Dynamics of Families, Human Growth and Development, Interpersonal Relationships, Parent Education and Guidance, Human Sexuality, Family Resource Management, Family Law and Public Policy, and Ethics (Bredehoft, 1997). With their knowledge and experience in a broad range of areas and their dedication to families, FLEs would be ideal professionals for educating parents on how sociocultural influences can impact their daughter's body image.

### **Operational Principles of Family Life Education**

The operational principles of FLE are designed to serve as a guide to the professional actions and obligations of the Family Life Educator. Seven principles have been defined; however, three of these principles stood out to me in thinking about developing a program to educate parents on how sociocultural influences can impact their daughter's body image. These principles include: "Family life education should be based on the needs of individuals and families", "Family life education programs are offered in many different settings", and "Family life education should present and respect differing family values" (Arcus, Schvaneveldt, & Moss, 1993).

*Family life education should be based on the needs of individuals and families* (Arcus et al., 1993): While it is important to develop programs to assist and educate families on different issues, it is also important to have some flexibility within the program to allow participants to have some input in the information they are receiving. In thinking about this in relation to sociocultural influences and young women's body image it may be helpful to first give parents the opportunity to share their thoughts on influences that may impact their daughter's body image. After allowing parents to share their thoughts, the Family Life Educator can build on

what the parents have said and talk with them about what the research says. In discussing the importance of parents being involved and aware of what their daughter is watching, reading, and listening to; instead of providing parents with a list of activities they can do with their daughter, it may be helpful to allow parents to brainstorm ideas on how they can talk with their daughters about these issues without causing their daughters to feel as though they are being lectured. Another important consideration for FLEs is the content of the program and the age range being targeted. Studies looking at the impact of prevention and intervention programs have found that if the program is offered too late it may not have an impact on participants due to their attitudes already being set (Wiseman et al., 2004). Based on this finding it seems it may be beneficial to target parents whose daughters are in preadolescence (age 8 to 10).

*Family life education programs are offered in many different settings* (Arcus et al., 1993): It is important to remember that FLE does not take place in one specific setting; instead, FLEs can reach parents in a number of different settings. For example, they could offer a program educating parents of girls between the ages of 8 and 10 on sociocultural influences and body image, through their daughter's school or Girl Scout troop. Programs could also be offered through churches, family service agencies, or community centers/clubs. It is important for FLEs to make themselves available to families, especially since families may not be familiar with FLE, or if they are they may not know where to seek such services.

*Family life education should present and respect differing family values* (Arcus et al., 1993): Values can be a sensitive subject and if individuals feel their values are in question or being challenged they may purposefully avoid certain situations. When working with families, values are going to be brought up. Simply because individuals have different values does not mean they have to avoid talking with one another, instead it means that they have to be

considerate and respectful of one another's beliefs. For FLEs it is important to present different viewpoints and respect different values. It is also important to educate parents on the importance of sharing their values with their children at a young age. While parents cannot protect their children forever, they can provide them with a strong foundation and value system as they grow up and trust that they will carry those values with them as they get older and are influenced by sociocultural influences, especially peers and the media.

With their focus on and dedication to the education of families it would be beneficial to develop a program that educates FLEs on how peers, families, and the media can influence young women's body image, while also providing them with tools to educate parents. Although research has looked at the influence peers, families, and the media have on young women's body image, a significant amount of research focuses on the influence of the media. Given the significant focus on the influence of media it would be beneficial to focus on this specific influence and look at the role the family, especially parents, have on young women's experiences with the media.

### **Program for Parents**

While developing a program for parents, it is imperative to present the information in a way that does not leave them feeling as though their parenting is being critiqued or questioned. While the program needs to educate parents on ways they can talk with their daughters, be more aware of the media's influence, and provide them with activities they can do together that will allow them to look at the media in a different way, it also may be beneficial to give parents time to reflect on and discuss their experiences with the media and messages they heard that had a significant impact on them when they were their daughter's age. Having parents reflect on such



times may help them relate to and understand what their daughter is going through. Refer to Appendix A to view a reflection activity that can be used with parents.

It is important to talk with parents and see how aware they are of the different forms of media their daughters are using. For example, what television shows she watches, what magazines she reads, what websites she frequents, and what type of music she listens to. It is important for parents to be aware that simply because they do not buy their daughter a specific magazine does not mean she is not able to find access to it another way, for example through her friends or peers. Parents also need to be aware that information their daughter finds on the Internet can have a significant impact on her body satisfaction. For example, the Internet provides young women access to magazine websites, which allows girls to search for the specific content they are interested in and provides them with products and suggestions on how to achieve society's ideal of beauty. Also accessible on the Internet are Pro-ana (Pro-Anorexia) and Pro-mia (Pro-Bulimia) websites that girls can come across by accident. These websites support eating disorders and provide young women with encouragement and suggestions on how to lose weight rapidly in very dangerous ways (Andrist, 2003; Norris et al., 2006). Parents also need to be aware of the television shows their daughters are watching. It is often said that watching too much television is bad for individuals; however, research has found that it is not necessarily the amount of television young women watched that influenced body image but instead, the type of television shows watched were found to be linked to internalization of cultural beauty ideals and a drive for thinness (Tiggeman, 2005).

Along with being aware of what television shows their daughters are watching, it is also important for parents to consider what they, themselves, are watching and if it is appropriate for their daughter to be viewing. Research has found that young girls are often not watching

television alone; if young girls are watching television with an older sibling or with their parents the content of the television show may not be age appropriate (Harrison & Hefner, 2006). It is also important that parents take the opportunity of watching television with their daughters to talk with them about what they are watching (Derenne & Beresin, 2006). This gives parents the opportunity to talk about topics that may be uncomfortable to bring up but by being able to refer back to the characters in the television show it can make the conversation more comfortable for both parents and their daughters.

Parents also need to be made aware of the influence subtle, offhand, comments they make can have on their daughter. Mothers may make comments regarding needing to lose weight or wishing they could look like the actresses on television. Mothers also may have pictures of thin models posted on the refrigerator or the pantry door to help remind them of how they hope to look and deter them from eating too much. These subtle comments over time can begin sending young women the message that when they get older they will need to be concerned with their weight and that they are expected to strive to look like the models in magazines. Comments made by fathers can also have a significant impact on young women; especially since daughters look to their fathers as the most important man in their lives, who serves as a male role model for them as they are developing relationships with the opposite sex and learning what they should expect from their male peers (Swarr & Richards, 1996). Appendix A provides a reflection activity that can be used with parents to help them reflect on their experiences; become more aware of the forms of media their daughter uses, and help them consider comments that may be made within the home that can influence their daughter.

While there are a number of different influences that can impact young women's body image, it is important for parents to be aware of these influences and make a point to talk with

their daughters early. As parents look at all the different influences on their daughters they may feel overwhelmed and question whether they should even try to educate their daughters. It is important for parents to be aware of their family values and make a point to share those with their daughters over time (Villani et al, 2005). If parents make a point to talk with their daughters and share their values with her then it is ultimately up to her to decide the messages she will accept and take in, the friends she surrounds herself with, and the type of media she chooses to seek out. Refer to Appendix B for a fact sheet that can be used to assist parents in understanding the different influences that can impact their daughter's body image.

Parents may struggle to know how to talk with their daughter about the media and how it can influence her body image. They may fear that their daughters will feel as though they are receiving a lecture from their parents and will be unreceptive to what they have to say. It may be beneficial to approach talking with their daughters by doing different activities with them. For example, they could watch the movie *Spanglish* or *Real Women Have Curves* (Refer to Appendix C for an activity sheet). Both of these movies do a wonderful job of showing the struggles young women, who do not fit society's ideal level of thinness, can experience from those around them, especially family members. Another activity parents could do with their daughters would be to look through magazines together and talk about the advertisements, the models depicted, and the articles within the magazine and talk about the messages being sent, how realistic the models portrayed in the advertisements are and if beauty products can really make an individual look like the models shown in the advertisement (Refer to Appendix D for an activity sheet). With music being so easily accessible today it may be beneficial for parents to spend time listening to their daughters favorite songs. Parents could talk with their daughters about the message the song is sending and also watch the music video to see how the message

behind the lyrics and the music video compare. A final activity parents could do with their daughters would be to build a life size Barbie. While this would be a significant task to take on, it can be eye-opening for young girls to see the actual proportions of a life size Barbie, especially since Barbie is so often looked to as a role model by young girls.

Through educating parents and giving them the tools they need to talk with their daughters about sociocultural influences and body image FLEs can help parents talk with their daughters at a young age before they have accepted the messages so often accepted from the media as truth. As mentioned before, parents cannot protect their daughters from sociocultural influences; however, they can provide them with a strong foundation and knowledge base. By doing this parents are giving their daughters the ability to critically think about what they are hearing, reading, or viewing instead of simply accepting it as the way things are.

## CONCLUSION

Upon reviewing the research looking at the impact sociocultural influences (peers, family, and media) have on young women's body image it became evident that each one of these influences can impact young women's body image. In spite of the fact that each of these influences impact young women's body image no one influence can be singled out as being the cause of young women's body dissatisfaction. Although peers, family, and the media are all separate influences, they are all tied together by the fact that each of these influences can separately, or together, play a role in the body dissatisfaction experienced by young women.

Knowing the impact these sociocultural influences can have on young women's body satisfaction and understanding how early young women's body dissatisfaction and internalization of the thin ideal can develop, it would be interesting to see the impact these recommendations, if implemented, would have on young women in the future. For example, what impact could it have on the lives of Lori and/or Taylor if their parents take the time to sit down with them and talk with them about what they are viewing on television, help them understand that the appearance of models in magazines has been altered, and that Barbie's body proportions are not healthy or attainable? With young girls internalizing these messages and ideals at such a young age it is important for parents to not be afraid to talk with their daughters, to answer any questions she has, and take the time to remind her that she is beautiful just the way she is; that she does not have to look like her favorite cartoon character, actress, or the model on the cover of a magazine to be beautiful.

I feel Lori Gottlieb explained this issue best with a statement she made in the epilogue of her memoir. Lori wrote,

Did I have a disorder, or was my behavior the result of a larger disorder all around me? When *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Newsweek* run stories on the increasing numbers of high school-and college-age women flocking to plastic surgeons to be nipped or tucked or suctioned; when fashion models in the 1960s averaged 15 pounds lighter than American women of the same height, but those in the 1990s averaged 35 pounds lighter, when an ad for a new sitcom features a man who knows how to win a woman's heart—'Tell her she looks *too thin*'—*who or what is 'disordered'*? (Gottlieb, 2000, p. 237).

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix A

#### Take a Deep Breath and Relax

As parents of young girls entering into adolescence, you may be feeling overwhelmed, questioning how you can talk with your daughters, and worrying about the influence our media driven society may have on your daughter's body image. When your daughter was younger, it may have felt easier to protect her from outside influences. You may have even felt as though you were in control of whom and what she came into contact with. Over the years, our society has changed. We have become more media focused and an ideal level of thinness, that is neither healthy nor attainable, has been set for young women. Along with watching our society change over the years, you have also watched your daughter grow and become more independent and that sense of being able to control whom and what she comes into contact with is likely no longer present. While it is completely normal and understandable for you to feel concerned for your daughter as she enters into a time when she will soon be adjusting to changes in her body and developing a sense of identity, it is important to remember that she is still your little girl and you can still be there to help educate her and support her regarding different messages she may hear from peers, family members, and the media relating to body image.

Instead of immediately focusing on ways to talk with your daughter about the messages she is being sent through the media, comments she may hear from peers, or offhand comments she may hear around the home, let us first take a step back and remember what it was like to be your daughter's age. Below is a list of questions to help you reflect on your experiences when you were your daughter's age. Take some time to answer the questions below. If you are doing this reflection activity with your spouse, take some time to answer the questions separately and then share your answers with each other.

1. What do you remember most from when you were your daughter's age?
2. Who or what had the greatest influence on how you viewed yourself?
3. Did you read magazines? Which ones? What were your intentions in reading those magazines (i.e. enjoyment/pleasure, ideas on how to dress, beauty, etc.)?
4. Who did you watch television with? Looking back, do you think the shows you watched when you were age 8 to 10 were appropriate for you to be watching? Why?
5. Do you remember peers or your parents putting a significant focus on weight and appearance? What influence did this have on you?

Now that you have taken some time to think about what things were like for you when you were your daughter's age, let us begin talking about the different influences that may impact your daughter. Think about a typical day for your daughter. What does she do? Who is she around? As your daughter gets older she is going to be influenced by more and more outside sources. It is

important for you, as a parent, to take time to talk with her about what is going on in her life, get to know her friends, and take interest in the different forms of media she uses. By doing this, you are letting your daughter know you care about her and that you are interested in what is going on in her life. By showing this interest, you are inviting your daughter to communicate with you, to let you know what is going on in her life, and to let her know you are there for her if she has any concerns or anything she wants to talk about. As a parent, it is important to not wait for your daughter to come to you, instead go to her. By opening the lines of communication early you are letting your daughter know she can come to you with anything. Below is a list of questions related to your daughter. Take some time to answer these questions. By doing this you will get a feel for the different areas that may be impacting your daughter as well as gain an understanding of how aware you are of these different influences in your daughter's life. As you read through the questions, if you realize you are not able to answer some of the questions, use that as a first step in talking with your daughter, showing interest in that particular area of her life.

1. What is your daughter's favorite television show?
2. Does she have an actress she looks up to or would like to be like when she gets older? What do you think it is about this actress that makes her look up to them?
3. Does she look through magazines (remember: simply because you do not buy them does not mean she is not exposed to them)? What is her favorite magazine?
4. Who are your daughter's closest friends? What do they do when they are together (activities, talk about, etc.)?
5. What kind of music does your daughter listen to? What messages might be sent through the music she listens to?
6. What websites does your daughter frequent when she is on the computer?

Along with being aware of the outside influences that can impact your daughter, it is important to recognize that comments made within the home can also have a significant influence on your daughter's body image. As parents, it is important for you to think about the messages you are sending your daughter through comments you may make regarding your weight, diet, and/or exercise. For young girls, if they see their parents constantly focusing on their weight or what they are eating it may send them the message that being thin is important. It is also important to consider the type of media that is brought into the home and if it is age appropriate for your daughter. For example, your daughter is likely not always watching television by herself. It is important to think about the content of the television show along with the advertisements that may come on during that show. What messages might your daughter be receiving? Below are a set of questions to help you reflect on comments you or other family members may make regarding body image. As you are answering these questions think about how your daughter might take these comments, what messages might she be being sent? Remember, these questions are not meant to cause you to feel as though you are doing something wrong as a parent, instead they are designed to make you more aware of things you or other family members may be doing that you are unaware of. Often, we, as individuals, do things without even thinking about what or



why we are doing them. These questions are meant to help make you more aware of such instances.

1. Does your daughter hear you talk about wanting to lose weight, needing to watch what you eat, and/or being on a diet? What impact do you think this has on her?
2. How does your family talk about exercising/working out?
3. Are there pictures of models or actresses that are used to deter you from overeating and/or to continue on your diet? What influence might this have on your daughter?
4. Does your daughter hear family members tease her and/or other family members about their weight? What kind of message does this send to her?
5. Do you think your family puts a healthy (to stay in shape and have a healthy BMI) or unhealthy (always striving to lose weight, even if at a healthy BMI; excessive working out, constantly watching what one eats or counting calories) focus on weight and exercise? Why?
6. What comments, regarding actresses/actors, might your daughter hear when you and/or other family members are watching television?
7. How do you and/or other family members react when you see individuals (either in real life or on television) who are overweight?

After taking some time to answer and reflect on these questions, you may want to think about how you want to approach talking with your daughter about some of these influences. Perhaps as you were answering some of the questions, in this handout, you realized there were some specific things you did not know about your daughter or were not sure of. If this is the case, consider starting there. If, as you were reflecting on messages you or family members may be sending, you realized there are things you need to change around your home, consider making some of these changes. Start small; remember you do not have to make all of the changes at once. For example, if you or your spouse is on a diet, help each other to be considerate of what you say around your daughter. You do not have to feel alone in this, remember you can always talk with your spouse, other family members, friends, or a Family Life Educator in your area.

When you feel ready to start talking with your daughter about different media influences, consider using one of the activity guides you have been provided with. Perhaps you and your daughter can enjoy a movie night together or spend some time at a bookstore together looking through magazines. Remember to take things one step at a time and to trust yourself.

## Appendix B

# Fact Sheet

Family Life Education

## Helping Teenage Girls Process Media Images of Beauty

As young girls transition into adolescence they are at a stage of development where they are adjusting to their changing bodies and developing a sense of identity. During this time, young women are significantly affected by messages they receive from their environment (peers, family, and the media). As a parent, it is important for you to be aware of and supportive of the changes your daughter is going through. It is also important for you to have an understanding of the impact these sociocultural influences can have on your daughter. The information in this fact sheet has been created to educate you on the influence peers, family, and the media can have on young women's body image.

### **Peers' Influence on Young Women's Body Image**

- Peers voicing dissatisfaction with their bodies can lead young women to develop feelings of dissatisfaction with their own bodies.
- Conversations regarding appearance can cause endorsement of the thin ideal which in turn can be linked to body dissatisfaction.
- Young women who have higher body mass indexes (BMIs) than their peers tend to also have higher dissatisfaction with their bodies.
- Criticism of a young girl's appearance has been linked to internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction.
- Support from peers can act as a protective factor for developing body dissatisfaction.

### **The Family's Influence on Young Women's Body Image**

- Social support from young women's immediate support system can protect them from becoming dissatisfied with their bodies.
- Feeling accepted by one's parents is related to fewer feelings of body dissatisfaction.
- Parents being aware of their daughter's daily activities is linked to decreased concerns with her weight.
- A lack of support from parents is related to body dissatisfaction and trying to achieve the thin ideal.
- Spending time with mothers, who have their own weight concerns, is linked to increased risk for developing weight concerns.
- Conflicts between fathers and daughters have been linked to weight concerns.

- Around 1/4 of middle school girls are teased about their appearance by one of their parents.
- Around 1/3 of middle school girls are teased by at least one of their siblings regarding their appearance.
- Teasing by parents, especially fathers, and siblings is related to higher levels of body dissatisfaction, social comparison, internalization of the thin ideal, restrictive and bulimic eating behaviors, depression, and lower self-esteem.
- Fathers and older brothers serve as models for what heterosocial interactions should look like.
- Siblings have been found to participate in higher levels of teasing when the behavior has been modeled by a parent, particularly by fathers.
- Watching and talking about television with adolescents helps them feel cared for, which can increase their self-esteem, body satisfaction, and self-worth

### **Media's Influence on Young Women's Body Image**

- Different forms of media include: magazines, advertisements, television, websites, music videos, and Toys
- Media images may provide young women with an understanding of what is beautiful and how they are expected to look.
- Young women who focus on the content of magazines have been found to engage less in eating disordered behaviors.
- Focusing on the model's body size and shape has been linked to body image and eating disturbances.
- Weight loss information from magazines has been linked to dietary restraint.
- Reading fashion magazines can increase girls' desires to be thin; this may lead to girls trying to achieve their desired level of thinness in unhealthy ways.
- Beauty and fashion magazines can be used as a "how-to manual" in an attempt to obtain society's impossible standard of thinness.
- Viewing appearance-related commercials is related to decreased confidence, increased anger, and body dissatisfaction.
- The type of television show watched has been found to have a greater impact on body image than the amount of time spent watching television.
- Viewing television make-over shows may temporarily influence young women to desire their own makeover or plastic surgery.
- Young women who watch television with older siblings or parents may be exposed to adult-oriented programs that focus on dieting, weight loss, and appearance.
- Parents should limit the amount of television watched and talk with their daughters about the messages being sent through television shows and advertisements.

- “Pro-ana” (pro-anorexia) and “pro-mia” (pro-bulimia) websites encourage individuals, at risk for eating disorders, to starve themselves, binge and purge, or purge. These websites can easily be accessed on the Internet.
- Magazine websites are designed to fit the needs of the user and ensure they return to the site.
- Magazine websites provide a sense of privacy and anonymity that cannot be attained through print media.
- Magazines and websites claim society’s ideal of beauty can be attained through the use of products; this can lead to an endless search for the right product and cause psychological distress.
- Exposure to music videos has been linked to increased perceptions of importance on appearance and weight concerns.
- Exposure to ultrathin images may lower young women’s body esteem, satisfaction with their body size, and lead them to desire a thinner body.
- Attempting to look like females in the media leads to an increased risk of developing bulimic behaviors.

As a parent reading through this fact sheet, you may find yourself feeling overwhelmed by all of the influences that can impact your daughter’s body image. Remember that this fact sheet is designed to make you aware of the impact peers, family, and the media can have on your daughter. Being more aware of these influences can help you to feel more confident when talking with your daughter. While the information on this fact sheet can seem overwhelming, do not focus on the negative things that might happen to your daughter. Instead, take the information you have gained, think about changes you or your family can make to help your daughter, and use this fact sheet as a tool to aid you in talking with your daughter about these sociocultural influences.

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## **Appendix C**

### **Movie Night!**

**Audience:** Parents and daughters (age 8 to 10)

**Allotted Time:**

- Allow for the length of the movie plus time to talk with your daughter either during the movie (feel free to pause it at points you feel could lead to good discussion) and/or after the movie is over

**What You Will Need:**

- Movie (i.e. *Spanglish*, *Real Women Have Curves*)
- Television or computer

- DVD player
- Pen and paper to write down specific parts in the movie you want to be sure to discuss with your daughter
- A place where you and your daughter can talk comfortably

**Objectives:**

- Increase communication between you and your daughter
- Gain an understanding of how your daughter perceives herself
- Talk with her about comments her friends/peers have made
- Provide your daughter with the understanding and knowledge that she does not have to look a certain way to be viewed as beautiful or to be accepted

**How To:**

- Have some discussion questions prepared that you can talk with your daughter about after you watch the movie (A list of discussion questions has also been provided for you)
- Watch movie
- Choose specific scenes to discuss with your daughter (i.e. In *Spanglish* when Bernice's mother comes home with all new clothes for her that are all a size to small)
- After watching the movie, talk with your daughter about her initial reactions to the movie (i.e. what scenes stood out to her?, which characters did she identify with?, etc.)
- Share your reactions to the movie with your daughter, scenes that stood out to you, how you thought Deborah handled talking to Bernice about her weight, etc.

**Follow Up:**

- One or two days after watching the movie with your daughter, invite her to share any thoughts, reactions, concerns, etc. that may have come up since you last discussed the movie.
- If your daughter has anything she wants to discuss allow her to talk about it then or set a time when the two of you can talk.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How do you think Bernice felt when she found out her mother, Deborah, had bought her new clothes that were all a size to small? What message do you think that sent to Bernice?
2. Why do you think Deborah decided to buy Bernice clothes that were a size to small? Deborah felt she was encouraging/motivating Bernice to lose weight, do you agree with this? How could Deborah have approached this situation differently?
3. How do you think Bernice's father, John, handled the situation with Deborah bringing the clothes home for Bernice?
4. Why do you think John puts less of a focus on Bernice's weight than Deborah does?

5. How would you have felt if you were Bernice and found out you had been given new clothes that were all a size too small for you?
6. Do you think Bernice is overweight? Why or why not?
7. Deborah places a strong focus on exercise and weight, what influence do you think this has on Bernice?
8. Why do you think Deborah has such a strong focus on Bernice's weight?
9. Deborah places a significant focus on how beautiful Flor's daughter, Cristina, is. Why do you think she is so drawn to Cristina?
10. How do you think Bernice feels seeing her mother's reaction to Cristina? How would you feel if you were Bernice?

## **Appendix D**

### **Magazines: What are you really looking at?**

**Audience:** Parents and daughters (age 8 to 10)

**Allotted Time:** 1 hour to 1.5 hours

**What you will need:**

- Magazines that your daughter reads or will likely be exposed to
- A place you and your daughter are able to look through magazines and talk about the articles and advertisements within the magazine
- Do not feel you have to go out and buy magazines. You can always take your daughter to the bookstore and look through magazines there (perhaps make a "date" out of it)
- If there are specific magazines you are interested in looking at and are not able to find at a bookstore remember you can always look at the magazine's website online.

**Objectives:**

- Increase communication between you and your daughter
- To gain an understanding of the kind of magazines your daughter is, or is, interested in looking at
- To talk with your daughter about the models shown in advertisements; talk with your daughter about the thinness of the models and if she thinks that level of thinness is a realistic and attainable goal
- Talk with your daughter about how advertisements and magazines are able to alter the appearance of the models they show
- Help your daughter see that there are positive magazines (i.e. *New Moon Girls*, *Teen Voices*) available for her to look at; she does not have to feel the only magazines she can look at are *Seventeen*, *Girls' Life*, *Teen Vogue*, etc.



**How To:**

- Have a set of questions prepared ahead of time that you want to discuss with your daughter (A list of discussion questions has also been provided for you).
- Look at magazines (i.e. *Seventeen*, *Girls' Life*, *American Girl*, *New Moon Girls*), try to compare a more common teen magazine (i.e. *Seventeen*) with a magazine such as *American Girl*.
- After you and your daughter have each had a chance to look through the magazine (be sure you are looking through the same magazine) talk with your daughter about her initial reactions to the magazine. (i.e. What stood out to her most (advertisements, articles, models shown)?, What made these things stand out to her?)
- Select specific content areas of the magazine to discuss with your daughter (i.e. articles within the magazine, advertisements, the models show in the magazine)

**Follow Up:**

- One or two days after looking through magazines, ask your daughter if she has any other thoughts, reactions, or questions regarding the magazines you looked at together.
- If your daughter has anything she wants to discuss allow her to talk about it then or set a time when the two of you can talk.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What did you think of the models shown in the magazines we looked at? How do these models body sizes compare to a majority of the girls your age?
2. Would you read any of the magazines we looked at on a regular basis? Which one(s)? Why did you choose that/those particular magazine(s)?
3. How would these magazines be different if they did not include the models in the magazines?
4. What magazine advertisements stood out to you? What part of this advertisement caught your attention?
5. Many advertisements for beauty products depict a model in the advertisement; do you believe that using certain products will make you look like the models shown in the advertisements? Why or why not?
6. What topics did the articles in the magazines discuss? Do you think it is appropriate to include articles that talk about dieting and weight loss in magazines? Why or why not?
7. Why do you think magazines and advertisements photo shop models? (i.e., make them look thinner, taller, remove blemishes, etc.)
8. Do you think it is right for magazines and/or advertisements to alter the models body/appearance to make them more attractive? How might photo shopping models in magazines negatively influence readers?

9. What magazines do your friends read? What discussions have you had with your friends regarding these magazines?
10. What magazines do you enjoy reading? Why do these magazines appeal to you?