



Body Image and the Obesity “Epidemic”

Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

June 2007

Written by: Kathy Nesteby

Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force

In recent months, the obesity “epidemic” has increasingly been in the news. Nearly every mainstream media outlet has covered this as an emerging health crisis. A variety of statistics are cited, accompanied by photos and video illustrating the increasing waistline of Americans. Whatever the statistics and regardless of hype, it is generally agreed upon that Americans are definitely heavier than we’ve ever been before (although I’m forced to wonder who has the authority to declare something an epidemic).

So, why is this important to those of us who work with and on behalf of young women, you ask?

Certainly, anyone who has ever met an adolescent girl understands the gravity of body image challenges she faces. We are often in a position to assist young women in discerning the fallacies and shortcomings of advertising that uses women’s bodies to sell everything from clothing to motor oil. But, what happens when the young women we work with *are* overweight or obese? Do we encourage them to accept themselves just the way they are, to defy societies beauty standards? Do we put body image on the back burner in favor of other, more pressing demands? Do we impress upon them the importance of physical health?

When the common characteristics and experiences of young women in the juvenile justice system are taken into account, this issue takes on an even higher level of importance. For example, because young women in the juvenile justice system experience a high rate of physical and sexual abuse, their relationship with their body is already strained. They may use food as a coping tool more than the average teenager and due to heightened levels of self-loathing, they may not *want* to be healthy. This can put them at higher risk for weight and other health-related challenges.

Obese teens are more likely to be depressed as well. Lack of exercise diminishes production of helpful hormones like endorphins that elevate mood and high sugar, high calorie foods cause short term spikes in mood that inevitably have a crash at the end. Beyond the physical, there is also the fact that obese teens are picked on mercilessly. The “fat kids” of the world seem to be one of the few groups it is still acceptable to make fun of without remorse. Is it any wonder obese girls are more likely to get depressed? There are few insults more painful to a teenage girl than calling her fat.

Young women who are obese may face serious health problems in the future if they haven’t already. Learning to take care of themselves physically is an important task for young women. It is also crucial that they learn to be gentle with themselves in this process. Health can not be measured solely by a number on a bathroom scale.

It is important that the physical as well as mental, emotional and social needs of girls be taken care of with compassion. This is particularly true in residential programs that control what girls eat and when they can exercise. Recreation time can and should be more than the bare minimum required to meet licensing standards and fresh produce and lean meats should not be items sacrificed to save money in the budget.

It is a delicate balancing act for professionals to address physical health without pushing the sensitive body image button of teenage girls, but there is value in walking that tightrope. A strong, healthy body capable of physical activity can be a real boost to a young woman’s self-confidence.

**“Programs must address the unique health needs of females,
including nutritional concerns and regular physical activity.”**

Component #9

from *Providing Gender-Specific Services for Adolescent Female Offenders: Guidelines & Resources*,
a publication of the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women.



Brace yourself!

Perhaps you are one of the few, the proud, the ladies who have never worried a day in their life about their weight. If so, more power to you! But in all likelihood, if you are female, you have worried about your weight and probably still do on occasion. It's an experience shared by millions of American women.

Chances are, regardless of what your opinion is exactly, it is strong. This is what makes weight such a hot button issue for adult women professionals. Men may have strong opinions as well, but weight loss is decidedly female terrain. As such, female professionals must cultivate a level of self-awareness regarding this particular topic. Learn what pushes your buttons and practice remaining focused on what is best for the young women you are working with rather than reacting to their situation based solely on your experiences and/or struggles with the issue of weight. Use caution with trite platitudes like, "you should be happy with yourself just the way you are" or "you just need to exercise more and eat less."

It is one of those topics that forces professionals to make sure they've dealt with their own "stuff" and it may be uncomfortable. Bottomline, young women deserve empathy, support, information and honesty as they struggle with their body image and physical well-being.

June 2007 ~ Body Image and the Obesity "Epidemic"

The Girl Connection

newsletter is provided as a service of the Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force.
For back issues of *The Girl Connection*, more information about the Gender-Specific Services Task Force,
or if you are willing to receive future issues via e-mail to save mailing costs, please contact us:

Kathy Nesteby, Coordinator
Iowa Commission on the Status of Women
1-800-558-4427 or (515) 281-6915
Kathy.Nesteby@iowa.gov
www.state.ia.us/dhr/sw/girls

**PLEASE
COPY
AND
DISTRIBUTE
WIDELY**

Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force
Iowa Commission on the Status of Women
Lucas State Office Building
Des Moines, IA 50319