



# mirror image?

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WALKER

*Have you ever wondered where that voice inside your head comes from?* You know the one: When you

look in the mirror, it tells you that your shoulders are shapely and that your legs are strong, so strong that they'll take you wherever your heart desires. Or maybe it tells you that your shapely shoulders instead belong on a linebacker or that those strong legs resemble ancient redwoods.

What makes that little voice build us up or break us down, sometimes no matter what we do? And if you fall into the latter category like so many women, what can you do to vanquish the demons and love yourself? Much as we like to blame unrealistic models of women on the media, they aren't the only culprits. According to ongoing studies, your body image could be a result of your own mother's behavior and her comments regarding weight-loss issues such as diet and exercise. In fact, moms might unwittingly be the first to teach their daughters the stereotypes of thinness and beauty that plague our society.



## model behavior

Of course, most mothers have a tremendous effect — good and bad, because parenting isn't an exact science — on their children's lives. So it may not surprise you to know that mothers make direct contributions to our ability to accept our bodies. Those preoccupied with their weight and diet can unconsciously pass these behaviors and concerns to their daughters, some of whom have adopted these values as young as 8 years old.<sup>1</sup> Andrew J. Hill, PhD, and Victoria Pallin at the University of Leeds in England found that these same adolescents learn their self-worth depends on their weight and appearance, and that they can boost their self-worth only by controlling their weight.<sup>2</sup>

"The most common explanation is a social learning account of transmission," says

Hill, chairman of the Association for the Study of Obesity at University of Leeds. "Mothers are the gatekeepers of family nutrition, and they're the most obvious role models for eating and weight issues in their growing daughters. However, this may be oversimplistic. Some studies have reported correlations between the current dieting of mothers and daughters, others have not. Part of the problem in establishing such links is that the majority of mothers are dieting or have recently dieted."

When mothers create an environment that emphasizes thinness — by using disordered eating patterns or excessive exercise as the way to attain the desired body — they teach their kids that these are acceptable and normal behaviors. When researchers at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, studied fourth- and fifth-graders and their parents, they found that daughters whose parents expressed weight concerns were dissatisfied with their bodies and made greater efforts to

lose weight. Those mothers who dieted regularly tended to complain about their weight, and their daughters were more likely to be concerned about getting or being fat.<sup>3</sup>

*if you don't  
have anything  
nice to say. . .*

Yet do parental comments about weight necessarily affect a girl's self-worth, and are girls more affected than boys? The Kenyon College researchers found that a mother's comments about her daughter's weight were significantly related to weight-loss attempts by the latter. A father's comments weren't seen as a significant influence alone, but they did have a greater effect on the child's weight-loss concerns when paired with a mother's com-

ments. This same study also found that girls received more feedback about their appearance than boys, and that it was associated with poorer body image.<sup>3</sup>

"We know from retrospective surveys that kids who recall receiving comments from parents regarding appearance have more dissatisfaction as adults," says J. Kevin Thompson, PhD, author of the book *Exact Beauty: Theory, Assessment and Treatment of Body Image Disturbance* (American Psychological Association, 1998). Thompson and his colleagues at the universities of Central Florida and South Florida asked female and male college undergraduates to recall any feedback from either parent about their appearance as it related to their body images. Findings indicated that mothers were more likely than fathers to comment on appearance, affecting the students' body images into adulthood.<sup>4</sup>

## bringing up "generation love thyself"

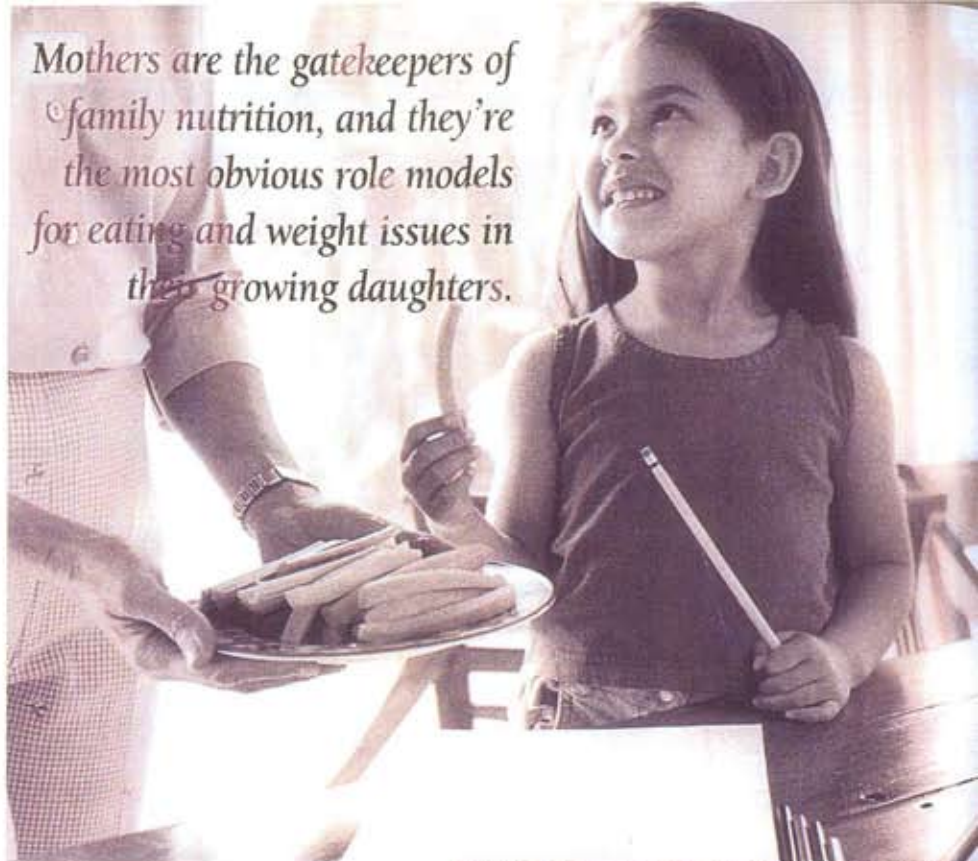
When asked how parents can instead promote a healthy body image in their daughters, Hill responds: "Children are sensitive to what parents think about their own bodies and the body image of others around them. If we're happy with the way we look, then our children are more likely to follow suit. Conversely, if body image is a major issue in the house, and



everyone on TV, in the magazines and in the news is commented on for their weight, shape and eating behavior, then this prioritization is likely to be reflected in children's attitudes and behavior."

It isn't a stretch to believe that teaching children to judge people on their merits rather than on appearance could be key. In addition, children should be encouraged to talk about anything they find distressing, particularly body-image concerns. "If they're having problems with their own body image, they need to have people with whom to talk. For younger children, parents should be the first point of call," Hill explains. Older children are increasingly

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affected by peer pressure, so you may want to keep tabs on whether your kids are receiving negative body-image feedback from their friends.

Remember, children's bodies change continually as they grow. You probably recall how you felt going through puberty, as much as you may have tried to forget; don't be critical as your children experience the same changes. What may be excess baby fat and bad skin now could be lean muscle and a captivating face in just a few years. And no one need be embarrassed by such growing pains.

## thwarting your own body-image devils

In his book, Thompson and colleagues explore various treatments for correcting a poor body image, listing one of the most effective approaches as a cognitive-behavioral strategy. This intervention explores the origin of body-image disturbances and attempts to eliminate these feelings through a multistep program. The *Body Image Workbook: An 8-Step Program* (MJF Books, 1997), written by Thomas F. Cash, PhD, is considered a highly effective example of the cognitive-behavior methodology. (For examples, see "The First Steps to Loving the Person in the Mirror.")

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## the first steps to loving the person in the mirror

In *The Body Image Workbook: An 8-Step Program* (MJF Books, 1997), Thomas F. Cash, PhD, explores the origins of body-image disturbances and how to overcome their influences.

### His approach and exercises include these steps:

- ♥ Explore your own body image, then set goals to change it.
- ♥ Identify your perceptions about your body and your body image.
- ♥ Correct your destructive inner voice or "private body talk."
- ♥ Face your fears and destroy rituals that are self-defeating.
- ♥ Reward your body with affirming and enhancing activities.
- ♥ Learn to be comfortable with your body.

time, you'd probably guess that regular exercise has been found to be effective in enhancing positive feelings about your physical appearance. Studies show that byproducts of exercise such as better health and greater self-confidence assist in the treatment of body-image disturbances.<sup>3</sup>

If for some reason exercise hasn't proven to be a panacea, Thompson suggests: "Model acceptance of [your] own body, and try not to talk about dieting as a means to greater self-esteem." This may seem like a tall order in a culture plagued with super-skinny, lollipop figures of women. If it seems impossible, try the following strategies offered by Thompson:

- Fight the tendency to buy into media-promoted standards.
- Don't engage in the social comparison process: Don't choose the most attractive person in the room against whom to compare your own appearance.
- Adopt the belief that diversity is better than adhering to one standard or model of attractiveness.
- Recognize that people who tease you about your appearance are trying to gamer power over you. Be assertive — tell them to stop, and explain how it makes you feel.

Fortunately or unfortunately, your inner monologue influences all that you do. If yours is bringing you down, take the time and effort necessary to change it. You work too hard in life to have your efforts thwarted by the past and the voice it created. **2**

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