



Selling the *Perfect Body*

Mass media and business sell the *perfect* body. Look at the advertisements both on T.V. and in magazines. The girls look like little women. The women are rail thin, with no thighs—but large breasts. The *ideal* woman looks like Barbie®, while the *ideal* male is tall and athletic; his body has well-defined muscles and no visible fat. There are hundreds of products the average person can buy that will help obtain the *perfect* body. Americans spent \$32 billion in 1990 for weight control products and services to help attain our dream bodies.

The *reality* of what you see in pictures, is *not* what you see in real life. With the age of computers, pictures for magazines can be retouched. Legs are lengthened, thighs are made thinner, and imperfections are made perfect.

The selling of the *perfect body* gives children unrealistic expectations. They believe if they buy the right product or do the right thing, they can obtain the *perfect body*. This means that if you are not perfect, you have made bad decisions, and, therefore, you *are* bad. Children don't understand that valuable people come in all different sizes and shapes. This diversity is what makes humans so interesting.

Size Prejudice Awareness

The famous, or maybe we should say *infamous*, saying, “You can never be too rich or too thin” is shaping the U.S. picture of beauty. Children as young as six *know* that fat people are ugly, lazy, dirty, and stupid.

Prejudice against overweight children shows up on the playground. They are teased, called names, and are the last to be chosen for teams.

Prejudice against overweight children shows up in the classroom. Many teachers interact differently with overweight children and give them lower grades for equal work. Overweight females are less likely to get into elite colleges

than normal weight females with equal qualifications.

Even home is not a safe haven for overweight children. Many children are goaded into dieting by the very people they love and respect.

It is difficult for obese children to develop a healthy self concept because of prejudice practiced by other children, parents, and teachers.

Diversity Is Normal

Children and adults come in a wide variety of sizes and shapes. This diversity is controlled by genetics and environment.

Babies are born with a great range of weights and lengths. The average baby today weighs 7½ pounds and usually doubles his weight in five months and triples in a year. At one year old, growth rate slows down; however, *not all babies follow this pattern*.

During early adolescence another rapid growth spurt occurs. This usually starts as early as eight years of age—but might not start until 14 years of age. Usually the first thing that is noticed is a weight gain. The child may look chubby; next is a rapid growth of feet and hands followed by legs and arms. The body grows in length last. After a rapid growth spurt some children may look thin. Weight gain will follow. This pattern of growth is a product of genetics and the environment. A child that does not follow the same growth pattern as his peers, may not feel comfortable with this diversity.

There is no doubt that heredity plays a role in both shape and size of the human body. Children of thin parents have less than a **10 percent** chance of being obese. If one parent is obese, the child will have a **40 percent** chance of being obese. If both parents are obese, the child has an **80 percent** chance of being obese. In adopted children, the weight pattern is most often similar to their biological parents, not their adoptive parents. Where a child carries his weight is also connected to the child's heredity.

In some cultures, as well as some centuries, it is considered a status symbol to be overweight. It showed that you had the money to eat well. During times of famine or illness, the heavier person often can survive longer than the thin person. This cultural difference can cause confusion to recent immigrants into the U. S.

Size prejudice is not limited to weight issues. It is directed toward anyone who does not meet the norm in height, weight distribution, or proportion. It is so ingrained that most people don't even know that they are making a judgement.

Being Sensitive to Body Issues

It is important, as adults, to present a healthy body image. Children learn from listening and watching adults.

Ask these questions of yourself...

- ⊗ Am I happy about my body size and shape?
- ⊗ Do I talk about the things I like about my body?

- ⊗ Am I always on a diet? Do I talk a lot about being on a diet?
- ⊗ Do I talk about *bad* foods, or foods I cannot eat because I am on a diet?
- ⊗ Do I make mean remarks about other people's weight or height?
- ⊗ As a teacher, do I pay less attention to overweight students?

What can you do to help stop size prejudice?

- ❖ Develop and follow a non-size-prejudice philosophy.
- ❖ Don't talk badly about yourself and your appearance.
- ❖ Discuss with others, size prejudice and its impact.
- ❖ Value diversity, including size diversity.
- ❖ Respect others' bodies.
- ❖ Recognize that every body is a good body.
- ❖ Boycott companies who use very thin models in advertisements.
- ❖ Teach children about advertising and computer technology.
- ❖ Emphasize healthy nutrition messages.

Janet Kurzynske, Ph.D., R.D., L.D.
Extension Specialist in Food & Nutrition