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Cute and Counting: The Body Image Low Down

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REFLECTIONS OF THE EVALUATOR OF THE ESSAYS

Evaluating the written work of others is never an easy task. One looks at the presented materials, and knows that long hours and hours of editing have gone into the final product. Good writing is a form of art. Just as painting, sculpting, or dancing, can be appreciated, so too can good writing.

There are very specific steps taken in an appraisal of this kind. First, the essays are read “for pleasure.” One looks for a delicious introduction that “draws” you into the paper, a certain flow of the wording that is creatively appropriate, and a dynamite ending that leaves you wanting more. Notes are taken as one reflects on what has just been read. Next, a simple scale for adjudication of each of the common criteria for essay writing is developed. After waiting several hours or even a day, the essays are read once again - this time with the aid of the evaluation piece. Final notes are taken, and the determination is made.

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Congratulations, essayists. Your work is appreciated.

Dr. Jan Albrecht
Professor of Education
peers have a huge influence on how girls view their bodies. Physical looks go way beyond hair and makeup. Let's rephrase that: physical looks go below hair and makeup. Society is fascinated with a large chest, tiny waist, cute butt, and small thighs. This beauty ideal has become almost impossible for women to achieve (Tiggermann, 2001), and has become the source for many problems that result when girls don't have the right figure. Though these perceived imperfect bodies are usually at the fault of genetics, girls are often teased and isolated by those born with the ideal figure. Dr. Kris Gowen, from the Stanford Center on Adolescence, presented her study in 1998 that girls who are ridiculed and isolated by peers, or lack receiving kind acts by peers, have a lower body satisfaction, regardless of their actual weights or pubertal status ("Body Image", 1998). Female teens blame themselves for their "flaws" and suffer through the consequences.

By age thirteen, 58% of American girls are unhappy with their bodies. By age seventeen, that percentage increases to 78% of girls ("New Book", 1998). This body dissatisfaction can lead to lowered self-esteem, diet obsessions and eating disorders, bad grades in school, and poor or fewer relationships. Though self-esteem is paramount to the development of adolescents, it teeters on the body image perception. Much of self-confidence comes from a person's looks, and when society and peers deem that look as the wrong one, confidence and self-esteem both go down the tube. A 1990 report issued by the American Association of University Women documented that the typical White female has a 33% decline in self-esteem during her adolescence (Pesa, 1999). Even with a positive and supportive home environment, self-esteem can plummet due to today's ideals that have influenced these young girls. The pedestal of perfection keeps rising, and most teens just can't hold on.

A low sense of self-esteem concerning body image almost always leads to dieting. It is a typical scene where a girl looks in the mirror and complains of her big hips and love handles and immediately proclaims that she is going on a diet. This is a daily routine for most teens who never feel their bodies are quite right. Even female athletes who exercise and are in shape may complain about having too broad of shoulders or too big of arms and calves, and they view dieting as the answer to even these problems. Dieting has become very common among adolescents, even when there is no medical need for weight loss. Data from a 1997 Youth Risk Behavior Survey has indicated the extensiveness of female adolescent dieting behaviors. Those attempting to lose weight were 59.7%, and those actually dieting were 45.7% (Pesa, 1999). Dieting has become an obsession to young girls. They strive for the perfect body, and 15% of teen girls diet in an attempt to look like the icons portrayed by the media ("New Book", 1998). How far will girls go to look like today's hot stars? Well, to some, the idea of looking like Britney Spears or Tyra Banks is a bit far-fetched, but for many girls, these celebrities are the models of perfection that must be emulated. Unfortunately, many girls will go beyond the limits of dieting, which lead to eating disorders. These eventuate from continuous body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. No matter how thin a young girl may be or become, she keeps on viewing herself as overweight. The thought of binging and purging begins to sound more appealing than having to look at her "fat" body in a mirror. Eating disorders have been the cause of hospitalizations and even death. This has occurred because of a distorted reality of body image in the eyes of teen girls.

The obsession with body image may also lead to insufficiency in school. Sometimes the loss in self-esteem from body dissatisfaction causes grades to drop. There doesn't seem to be a purpose to motivate the student in her studies. She becomes listless and doesn't seem to care about school at all. The power of mind over body is not at work, for her perceived physical faults cease attempts at accepting who she is and what she looks like. Success in school may also suffer because many adolescent girls would rather be skinny than get good grades, plain and simple. They focus mainly on their looks and popularity and how far they can climb up the social ladder. The only test they want to succeed at is who has the best clothes, who wears the lowest dress size, and who can attract the most boys. This asserviveness to physical appearance goes beyond the boundaries of "looking nice" and greatly affects a student's school performance.

Body image can also greatly affect relationships. When a young girl feels pushed aside by peers for not having the ideal body image, she will most likely make friends with other isolated girls. But what's the good of a group of girls with low self-esteem having a pity-party? Can they really help each other, or would they even know where to start? These relationships would be bound by a shared sentiment, and though there is a common ground, it is not a strong foundation. In other situations, the craving for popularity binds many girls in a friendship, which actually takes the shape of a strict social contract. There are high standards that must be kept to remain in the group of "friends." If you gain a little weight over the summer, accidentally get a bad haircut, or break out with your own version of a pizza face, you might be kicked out of this popular clique. As for the quality of these friendships, there is not much to be said, except that they are quite unstable. At one moment, girls are hugging and laughing, and at the next they are bitching and crying. Gossip seems to connect the tangled web, and yet pulls it apart at the same time. Girls who choose friends based on looks will most likely experience a false sense of belonging and must sort out their true friends after adolescence, when the obsession over body image calms down.

So back to our Abercrombie model, what does she have that most girls don't? Answer: the perfect body image, clothes and looks. She is the epitome of our greatest ideal, the present-day Marilyn Monroe, the American Princess Diana. Yet in reality, she is also the cause for confusion and suffering amongst adolescent girls. From spending many hours and dollars on the perfect outfit, to never eating breakfast to save a few extra calories, to having peers that critique every flaw, this ideal body image has been much more of a problem than a benchmark for adolescent girls. They have been pressured into sacrificing a part of their self to obtain the look they are expected to have.
Body image a major concern for girls regardless of weight and pubertal development. *Women's Health Weekly*. (1998, August 31)


I sometimes watch the water while I canoe across a lake. I plunge my paddle in, straining to push it behind me (kind of like regrets), and pull the dripping paddle out as I watch the lake bottom float by. In that moment of ascension, where the paddle ceases its intrusion on the lake, two tiny whirlpools are left behind. They go careening through the glassy surface, confident and crazy in their finite swirling. I feel like that sometimes.

My companions and I are only beginning to dry ourselves from the hormone bath that is adolescence. We have this vague sense that somewhere in ourselves we contain an essence, the very core of who we are. It still feels soft and unformed; it's our eighteen-year embryo, and if only we could define it - feel its boundaries — we'd really know ourselves.

We sit alone on our dorm-room floors, staring blankly at a catalogue of classes. We don't understand how we're expected to anticipate our future when we are only beginning to understand ourselves. In our frustration we pick rashly. History, English, art, and photography — one of each sounds good.

We're overcome with frustration. We have life; we feel and we sigh. We see people in movies, on the street, in buses, all living with a confidence, a recklessness, an intensity we envy. They seem to have defined themselves; we have not. We're still timid and hesitant. We know we're made of the same stuff as those we admire, but how can we live our essence if we cannot define it? Such are our thoughts as we fling ourselves into our beds. We sigh as we fall asleep discontent. Then something happens. We go to our classes on myriad subjects. Some classes we adore, others we loathe, and in the end we're left with the very thing we could not find — the beginnings of a deeper identity. The edges of our essence are felt by our likes and dislikes, our passions good and bad. The way we respond to our classes illuminates the veiled characteristics we never knew we had. Maybe we're nothing more than we ever were, but we see more clearly.

We are not yet the twisting, dancing, careening souls we wish to be. The paddle is still in the water and we are not ready to live crazy, glorious lives. But we revel in this exploration, this process of defining ourselves. Like children who've grown to peer over kitchen countertops, we grab and chew each subject and concept we can. We feel more defined, we see ourselves for what we want to be. This is merely a beginning.

I want to careen through a placid world with turbulence. I want to spin until I no longer can. But now are the moments for explorations and definition. Only when I know the essence that is me can I leave swirling.