Improving Self-esteem and Body Image

Promoting a Healthy Body Image in the Classroom

Tag Words: Body Image, Self Esteem, Media, Lesson Plans, Bulimia, Anorexia, Eating Disorders, Depression, Mental illness, Public school, Female Beauty, Inner Beauty, New Jersey Board of Education, Self Worth, Self Value, Health Class

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Summary

Body distortion is when a person sees his or her body shape and size in an inaccurate fashion. Self-Esteem is one’s perception of him/herself as a whole. Self-Esteem is something that is developed over time. We wrote a proposal to the New Jersey Board of Education incorporate awareness of body image, self esteem, and the effects negative body image and a negative self esteem can have on an individual. Our goal is to create awareness of our issue.
The Issue: Body Image

Body distortion is when a person sees his or her body shape and size in an inaccurate fashion. This way of thinking peaks during adolescents. An individual sees their body in one way, while others see it a different way. For example, a young girl may see herself as having wide hips and large thighs, but in reality they are perfectly normal or even very skinny. Some individuals become obsessed with their appearance and weight. They feel they never look good enough, or are never skinny enough. It can begin interfering with everyday life and daily activities. They may become so unhappy with their body, they may not want to leave the house. It will eventually interrupt their everyday lifestyle, and may even affect their relationships. Body dissatisfaction and body distortion can be dangerous to a persons’ health and lead to eating disturbances along with many other psychological and health problems.

Childhood experiences play an important role in the development of self-esteem. People with a healthy self-esteem have a sense of pride for themselves and control over their behaviors. Body image is one’s perception of his or her physical appearance and how they value themselves. Individuals with a poor body imagine has a distorted perception of the way they look. They will tend to compare their bodies to the others.

The issue is that the media is creating and unattainable ideal image for girls and boys that is not realistic. It affects those who are most vulnerable, those that are going through puberty, adolescents. Therefore, it is important for parents to realize that they may be contributing to their children’s negative self image. Adolescents hit puberty during middle school and therefore, it is why we have decided that they should be aware of all the effects of having a negative body image during this time. It is important for them to remember how important it is to see themselves in a positive manner.

The NJ board of education does not have a specific section in its New Jersey Core Curriculum Standards that presents its students with the issues of self esteem, body image, and any mental illnesses and eating disorders it can potentially lead to. These illnesses can include anorexia, bulimia, depression, etc. These mental illnesses can lead to serious consequences if not treated. It is important for the public school system to educate its students about the importance of self-esteem before students begin to develop these illnesses. It is important students are aware and how important it is to have and maintain a positive body image.

Summary:
Adolescence is a time of change where young individuals find out who they are and where they fit in. They look to their family, peers, and the media to develop their beliefs and behaviors. Adolescents tend to be vulnerable targets for the media because they have low self-esteem. They begin worrying more about what they look like and how they can improve their physical appearance in order to be liked by peers. Body image is influenced by many factors including peers, family, and media. The unrealistic portrayal of the ideal body shape along with the increasing body weight of our population has been a huge contributor to body image dissatisfaction, particularly among young girls and increasingly among young boys (Smolak, 2004). Once girls and boys hit puberty they experience many changes in their body and tend to develop a negative body image because they are unsatisfied with their appearance. Negative body image can lead to unhealthy eating patterns,
extreme dieting behaviors, and the development of more serious eating disorders (Skemp-Arlt, 2006).

At times an adolescents’ family, especially their parents are contributors who promote a negative body image for their children and may not know it. They add on to the pressures to be thin by making a variety of comments that affect the adolescents’ self esteem and desire to lose weight. Parents may comment of their own weight, suggestion that the child lose weight, or make joking comments referring to the child’s weight. Adolescents are also influenced by what their parents do; such as if a parent is dieting the child is likely to pick up this behavior (Skemp-Arlt, 2006).

Media images of the “ideal” body type affects adolescents’ body image. The inaccurate portrayal may lead to body dissatisfaction, dieting, and eating disorders. Adolescents are greatly affected by the media, because they are going through many changes and feel insecure. They tend to compare themselves to the ideal body image that they see in films, magazines, television, and billboards. The media’s portrayal of skinny is beautiful is detrimental to our society, especially adolescents because they do not realize the media portrays the ideal body image unrealistically. Men are thought to be toned and muscular, while women are expected to be tall and thin. These “perfect” images are portrayed in magazines, television, billboards, film, and models. The media’s representation of beauty is exclusive and unrealistic, and is unattainable for the majority of people (Durham, 1999). Adolescents who look at the media and try to look like what they see on billboards and magazines often forget that the images they see have all been photo shopped. Girls constantly compare themselves to the ideal body images. They are exposed to these flawless images daily, and see that as the only way to be happy and loved. They will take part in harmful behaviors to their bodies to achieve the body shape and size they see in magazines and television. Many think only girls are affected by these images, but in fact the media as a huge impact on both boys and girls.

Boys are affected greatly by these “ideal body images” too. In the past, research has focused mostly on adolescent girls. Now researchers are analyzing influences by peers, parents and media on adolescent boys (McCabe & Riccardelli, 2003). Boys are portrayed in the media as tall, muscular, and toned. Boys try to increase muscle tone in order to achieve the ideal male body image. Boys’ body images are becoming just as affected by the media as girls, and are even partaking in risky behaviors to achieve the “perfect” body. They are going as far as to taking steroids to get more muscular, which is very dangerous to the body. Also the number of adolescent boys who have eating disorders is increasing. They are doing whatever it takes to achieve the body they see in the media.

Body dissatisfaction is at its highest during puberty. Adolescents feel their bodies are never good enough. Often times, if a person feels, helpless, hopeless, and/or worthless he may have a desire to engage in sever comfort eating. On the other hand a person may feel a sense of approval or acceptance from being thin, therefore they may starve themselves in order to lose weight. Some of the illnesses an individual may develop are listed below.

**Dieting:**
Dieting in order to lose weight is a common response to “ideal” images. Dieting can include any of the following: restricting amount of food eaten, avoiding particular types of food, and/or skipping meals for periods of time (Sahota et al., 1998). Dieting is very dangerous and can result in permanent damage to your body in the future. Many times when a teen diets they gain back
the weight they lose and sometimes even more. They also may start a trend of “yo-yo dieting” that may last the rest of their life. “Yo-yo dieting is when they start a diet and lose weight, but gain back the weight, and continue on with this pattern. They can never keep the weight off, and their weight fluctuates frequently. This is very bad on a person’s body and organs, and can lead to long term damage on the body. Dieting can also lead to many types of eating disorders.

**Depression:**
Depression is a mental disorder where the patient experiences low mood, low self-esteem, and loss of interest or pleasure in normally enjoyable activities. Depression is a condition that can greatly affect one’s family, work or school life. Depression often affects one’s sleep or eating habit and health in general.

**Cause of depression:**
Biological, social, and psychological factors all seem to play a role in causing depression. Depression can be activated by stressful life events. Negative early childhood experiences can also be an indication of depression later on in life. Also, experiments have shown that one from a family with a history of depression will have a higher chance of experiencing depression. Drug and alcohol use can also be causes of depression.

**Symptoms:**
A person suffering from depression often experiences a low mood and a negative view on life. The patient will also suffer from an inability to enjoy activities that he or she previously has enjoyed. Insomnia is very common among people with depression.

**Connection between self-esteem and depression:**
Low self-esteem can be a cause of depression, and it can also be a result of depression. A person with low self-esteem tends to not be comfortable with himself/herself. If one is not comfortable with himself/herself, and constantly trying to fit in to feel good about themselves (trying to lose weight to look better) they will tend to make wrong decisions. These wrong decisions can be bulimia or anorexia, etc. Making these bad decisions can cause one to lose a sense of self and a sense of achievement, thus making them experience a negative view on life in the process.

**Bulimia Nervosa/ Anorexia Nervosa:**
Bulimia nervosa is an eating disorder characterized as an individual possessing an overwhelming urge to overeat. Overeating is then followed by self-induced vomiting, purging, or excessive use of laxatives. Such individual has a morbid fear of becoming gaining weight (Fairburn et al. 1997).

Anorexia is another major eating disorder affecting adolescents throughout the United States. Anorexia is the most common eating disorder among adolescents. Those with anorexia nervosa have an intense fear of gaining weight, therefore starving their body. Those with anorexia, starve themselves, avoid a high caloric intake, and exercise persistently.

**Cause of Bulimia Nervosa/ Anorexia Nervosa:**
Those with Anorexia Nervosa not only believe they would lead a more content life being thin, but also exhibit characteristics of being perfectionist (American Academy of Family Physicians. 2009).

Although causes of Bulimia Nervosa are not fully know, often times, the disorder is linked to feelings of stress, anger, sadness, boredom, or anxiety. Most commonly, Bulimia is associated with feelings of grief and distress. In engaging in an act of overeating the individual feels comfort from the foods he/she has consumed. However upon bingeing, the person feels sever guilt for losing self-control.

**Binge Eating:**
Binge eating is similar to that of bulimia nervosa but without the purging. It consists of multiple episodes of binge eating without performing any purging behaviors. An episode of binge eating occurs when an excessive amount of food is consumed in a short amount of time. Many of these binges are due to emotional eating and this disorder causes them to be overweight.

**Treatment for Eating Disorders:**
In treatment of an eating disorder it is crucial to address self esteem as low self esteem acts as a negative motivator. Treatments for eating disorders often include hospitalization in conjunction with psychological counseling. Although hospitalization is not always required, it is often necessary.

Psychological therapy focuses on the patient bettering their eating habits. They are instructed to eat three meals and two snacks a day while avoiding unhealthy diets. Also, psychological counselors focus on reducing the individuals concerns about body weight and shape. Affected individuals are taught to understand and reduce the triggers of binge eating but examining their relationships and emotions. Lastly patients are taught proper coping skills to prevent future relapses.

**Community service project: Proposal**

We wrote a proposal to the New Jersey Board of Education incorporate awareness of body image, self esteem, and the effects negative body image and a negative self esteem can have on an individual. Our goal is to create awareness of our issue. In order to do so, we propose the New Jersey Board of Education add a new Core Curriculum Standard that includes students be knowledge about this subject matter as early as sixth grade. In order to learn about the issue we suggested a possible self-esteem and eating disorders workshop to be incorporated into the sixth grade health curriculum. We want to create standards so high school students are aware of the importance of self-esteem and the seriousness of different eating disorders or mental illnesses.

Depending on how each middle school is set up, we know schools vary slightly when it comes to their physical education and health schedules. Some schools have two semesters of health and then follow with two semesters of physical education. Other schools will have physical education three days a week and health two days a week. Whatever the case may be the following are objectives for daily lesson plans.
To whom it may concern;

The NJ board of education does not currently have a specific section in its New Jersey Core Curriculum Standards that presents its students with the issues of self esteem, body image, and any mental illnesses and eating disorders it can potentially lead to. These illnesses can include anorexia, bulimia, depression, etc. These mental illnesses can lead to serious consequences if not treated.

The issue is that the media is creating and unattainable ideal image for girls and boys that is not realistic. It affects those who are most vulnerable, those that are going through puberty, adolescents. It is also important for parents to realize that they may be contributing to their children’s negative self image. Adolescents hit puberty during middle school and therefore, it is why we have decided that they should be aware of all the effects of having a negative body image during this time. It is important for them to remember how important it is to see themselves in a positive manner.

A negative self-esteem and a negative body image leads to different eating disorders and mental illness and therefore, we ask that the New Jersey Board of Education implement a strand focusing on self-esteem and the seriousness of different eating disorders or mental illnesses into its New Jersey Core Curriculum Standards. Girls as young as five already have a sense of their body image whether they hear about it from their parents or the media. In addition a negative body image affects both females and males. Students begin their adolescence when they hit their teens and therefore we suggest that they know about self-esteem and body image by the sixth grade. Students in the sixth grade are between eleven and twelve years old. We believe this is the ideal age to being about awareness on this subject matter because the earlier they know about it the less likely they will develop a negative body image. It is important to develop this strand not only to make students aware of all the problems a negative body image and self-esteem may lead to but to also begin to develop a healthy positive body image of themselves. It is important for the public school system to educate its students about the importance of self-esteem before students begin to develop these illnesses. It is important students are aware and how important it is to have and maintain a positive body image.

Attached you will find a “Suggested Curriculum” as well as websites to find possible lesson plans to make implementing this program as simple and effective as possible.

Thank you for your time and cooperation.

Sincerely,

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Jacklin Barreira       Virginia Dos Santos      Stella Chu
Objectives for lesson plans:

**Day 1:** An introduction to our six weeks workshop assuming students have health class once a week. Discuss with students about the workshop, and generally what the workshop is about. Have students do different activities among each other discussing their own self-esteem and the importance of high self-esteem. Have them take questionnaires to see how much they really know about eating disorders and their relationship with self-esteem and body image. Then, have students set goals for themselves about what they want to achieve by the end of the course.

**Day 2:** Begin to raise awareness among students about the serious consequences of low self-esteem and negative body image. Discuss with students what issues result from that, possible eating disorders.

**Day 3:** Continue discussion with eating disorders. Discuss the different symptoms and treatments relating to these eating disorders. Provide possible preventions of these eating disorders happening. Also provide possible suggestions and advices students can give among each other if they know someone with an eating disorder.

**Day 4:** Discuss what the media’s role in society. Discuss with students what the positive and negative effects they media have on society or among teenagers. Have students do activities among each other to talk about what the media has done for them in terms of their self-esteem and body image. Also, discuss how the media and its view on beauty have evolved over the years.

**Day 5:** Reflection day. Have students look at the goals they have set for themselves at the beginning of the workshop. Have students discuss among each other about whether these goals were reached. If they were reached, how they accomplished it, and if they were not reached, how they would like to accomplish it after the workshop. Discuss among each other about the workshop – what have helped them, what they liked about the course, etc.

**Day 6:** Exam. Students must take a written exam about the knowledge learned throughout the course. For example, the exams can include different symptoms of different eating disorders, possible preventions of these eating disorders, etc.

**Suggested Lesson Plans:**


Editorials

A Beautiful-Self Through Education:
An Attempt to Better Self-Esteem
Jacklin C. Barreira

The average U.S. woman is 5’4” and weighs 140 pounds whereas the average U.S. model is 5’11” and weighs 117 pounds. After viewing images of female fashion models, seven out of ten women felt more depressed and angry than prior to viewing the images. Such a distorted sense of beauty leads adolescent females to engage in self-destructive eating behaviors eventually leading to conditions such as Bulimia and Anorexia Nervosa.

Three Rutgers University students, Jacklin Barreira, Virginia Dos Santos, and Stella Chu, attempt to change New Jersey State curriculum in order to better young girl’s self esteem concerning health and body image.

These students researched the effects of body image and self esteem and its link to eating disorders. Upon finding a connection, these students took it upon themselves to involve the
Board of Education to minimize and eradicate the ignorance of eating disorders. By educating students at a young age of the harms caused by eating disorders, they would be less likely to engage in such destructive behavior throughout their adolescence.

Self Esteem is a major problem facing young girls beginning as young as elementary school level. If the NJ Board of Education implements a portion of required health class focused primarily on body image and eating disorders, these individuals would be better educated on the matter and reduce the risk of eating disorders later in life.

Barreira, Chu, and Dos Santos, have already contacted the NJ Board of Education and are waiting for them to pass this legislature.

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**Beauty is in the Eye of the Media:**
A look at Self-Image
By: Virginia Dos Santos

I wish I was taller. I wish I was tanner. I wish I had longer legs. I wish I had straight hair. I’m fat. I need to lose weight. I have heard all these comments come from women who I think are beautiful inside and out. If you have heard or made these statements before you can thank the media for influencing the way you think you should look. The media and fashion industry plaster advertisements of overly skinny models on their marketing, who on average are weigh twenty-three percent less than the average female and are approximately five inches taller. With the creation of Photoshop it is easy to enhance features these models may not have. For example, a YouTube video shows how someone is able to make a model have a longer neck, look tanner, and fix her make-up. The media is using technology to create perfection: something that does not exist. It is no wonder why so many women have a negative body image.

Body image is the way someone feels about the way they look. In today’s society image is everything and our culture is obsessed with the style, the power, and the image beauty itself creates. The media constantly uses fashion and beauty to depict the perfect woman. Although styles come and go, an increasing amount of emphasis has been placed on body image and standards for how a woman is supposed to look. Women are doing anything possible to imitate these unattainable standards: from eating disorders, to dieting, to over-exercising, to plastic surgery, resulting in problems far worse than any caused by nineteenth century corsets.

Girls as young as five are concerned about the way they look and are body image conscience. Therefore, it is important to teach young girls to develop a good body image and positive self-esteem to prevent the development of eating disorders as they get older. Girls as young as five need to know that everyone is different from each other, which is what makes us all beautiful. The media and fashion industries are not going to change their marketing strategies. It is our job as women to teach young girls about the negative health issues associated with the development of negative body image and self-esteem. Parents should be more careful about the comments they make to their children about the way they look. Children look up to their parents and if they see their parents always talking about their image and how unhappy they are it is likely that their child will also begin looking at his or her body and begin making judgments. In addition, parents need to watch what they say to their children whether it be a comment about how much their eating their shape, or joking around. Young girls should be learning about these issues during their health class in school because providing exposure and awareness of the media and fashion industries’ tricks of the trade through their marketing will decrease negative body
image among adolescents. Eventually this will also lead to a decrease in women that have eating disorders.

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**Our Effort to Stop a Growing Problem among Teenagers**

*By: Stella Chu*

While researching on the relationships between self-esteem and mental illnesses, we came across an increasing number of teenagers suffering from different mental illnesses, including eating disorders, depression, etc. As students at Rutgers University, Jacklin Barreira, Virginia Dos Santo, and myself scould not help but noticed the lack of knowledge among kids about the seriousness of body image and its linkage to different mental illnesses.

We, then, further looked into the health curriculum and standards for high school students set by the New Jersey Board of Education. We found out that the NJ Board of Education fails to incorporate a specific section to educate its students about eating disorders or self esteem issues.

Knowing the importance of educating teenagers early about the relationship between self-esteem, body image, and mental health, we decided to write a proposal to New Jersey Board of Education to suggest a possible workshop to be included into the health curriculum. This workshop is not only to educate students about the seriousness of different mental disorders, but also to teach these students how to boost their self-esteem. We hoped to gradually boost self-esteem in students throughout the workshop.

Our proposal includes important statistics that proves that self-esteem and mental illnesses is a growing problem among teenagers. We suggested in our proposal a weeklong workshop to be adapted into part of the health curriculum. It is a workshop that raises awareness of different health problems caused by low self-esteem and body image issues. We also hoped students will learn how to boost self-esteem in them throughout the workshop, and hopefully will have a higher self-esteem and a better knowledge about self-esteem, body image and mental disorders by the end of the weeklong workshop.

Although we do not know if the New Jersey Board of Education will actually adapt our suggested workshop into its high school health curriculum program, the time and effort we put in the attempt to stop such a serious, growing problem among teenagers on our society are still worthwhile.