Everyone agrees: Our daughters should learn to love their bodies. But how can that happen when moms have such mixed-up feelings about weight?

Fear of Fatness

PETER ARDITO

MY DAUGHTER, DAISY, has a classmate, Ava, who's 5 years old and fat. Ava was a fat infant. She was a fat toddler. It is pretty clear that she'll stay a fat little girl and she'll likely be a fat teenager. Fat—that is to say, having a body-mass index above what is considered medically healthy—is her natural state. She is a big girl with a big appetite. And that, her mother, Holly, knows, could make Ava's life difficult.

Holly, who is tall and slim, worries that her daughter will spend her girlhood locked in a losing battle against her size. She wonders daily how she can help her daughter eat healthfully, be more physically active and feel good about her body. She and her husband work with Ava's pediatrician on portion control, on how to distract their perpetually hungry daughter from reaching for seconds or thirds. Sometimes, Holly admits, she fights the urge just to snatch the food out of the child's mouth. The weight would be an issue

BY PEGGY ORENSTEIN

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if Ava were a boy, but with a girl—one who is already enamored of Hannah Montana and Selena Gomez and all things teenagerly—Holly feels as if "there's a train heading straight for us."

"It must be so nice not having to worry about this," she sighs as we sit in her kitchen while our girls play Calico Critters upstairs in Ava's room. I tell Holly she's mistaken: Rare is the mother—whether her daughter is thin, fat or in between—who does not worry about her girl's body image. The standards of female beauty are so punishing that even should a girl miraculously fit them, she may still believe she falls short. As mothers, we may not want our daughters to feel the pressure to conform to that ideal, but what to do with a child who, either physically or temperamentally, cannot?

Ava happens to be a little ray of sunshine, one of the most delightful, happy, intuitive children I have ever met. But lately the occasional cloud has skittered across her bright eyes. She is beginning to recognize that there is something about her that is different from other children, and whatever that something is, it matters. Take the boy on the school playground who taunted her for being "fat." Ava marched home, wrote him a note saying (in 5-year-old-speak) that she didn't appreciate the comment and presented him with it the next morning. "I was so impressed," Holly says. "I thought, 'Oh, please, hold on to that ability for your whole life. Because you probably will need it.'"

There have been other incidents, too, and so far Ava has stood her ground. I marvel that these kindergartners already know that being fat is shameful, not a characteristic so much as a matter of character. I mean, of course they do, right? I've read the studies that say nearly half of girls in first through third grade want to be thinner; that 81 percent of 10-year-old girls are afraid of getting fat; that half of 9-year-old girls are already dieting; and that by 7 Canadian girls of normal weight believe they are too heavy. I have even heard glimmers of fatphobia from my own daughter: While playing Old Maid (a politically incorrect game in any event), Daisy did not so much as twitch an eyebrow when she picked the twinkling-eyed spinster with the blue sunbonnet—my girl has a poker face that would rival the gambler Annie Duke's—but she groaned whenever she drew the Fat Lady. When I asked why, she rolled her eyes and whispered, sotto voce, "Mom, she's *fat*."

Where does that come from? I never comment on my own body size in front of her and certainly don't mention hers. Did she learn it from classmates? Absorb it from the movies and books that routinely portray fat people as stupid, greedy or sinister (when was the last time you saw a chubby Disney princess, animated or human)?

THIS IS WHERE I SHOULD offer advice about how to combat the outrageous expectations foisted on our daughters and ensure that they grow up with a healthy body image, steering clear of not just eating disorders but garden-variety hatred of their butts. Believe me, after 20 years of writing and talking about girls, I have delivered the script hundreds of times. For the record, here is what you are Officially Supposed To Do: Stress what your daughter's body can do over how it is decorated. Praise her accomplishments over her looks. Make sure Dad is on board—a father's loving regard and interest in a girl, as the first man in her life, is crucial. Involve her in team sports: A flotilla of research shows that participation lowers teen pregnancy rates, raises self-esteem, improves grades, probably cures the common cold. Volunteerism can give girls greater perspective and purpose, reducing body obsession. Media literacy can raise consciousness about marketers' manipulations.

I would have rattled off those solutions with confidence and authority—before I had a daughter of my own. Because even as I wish it were otherwise, I know in my heart that how girls

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look makes a difference in how the world perceives them. From the get-go everything in our culture tells girls that their looks matter—a lot. Talent? Effort? Intelligence? All are wonderful, yet by middle school how a girl feels about her appearance (especially if she is thin enough, pretty enough and hot enough) has become the single most important determinant of her self-esteem. And the more progress girls and women make in other areas, the more that seems to be true.

THE PHASES OF OUR lives have become strangely blurred, as girls try to look like adult women and adult women primp and preen and work out like crazy to look like girls. A century ago female self-improvement did not presume a stint under the scalpel, hours at the gym or a trip to the cosmetics counter. In her invaluable book *The Body Project*, historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg writes that for girls growing up before the First World War, becoming a better person meant being less self-involved: helping others, focusing on schoolwork, reading good books, cultivating empathy. To bring home the point, she compares the New Year's resolutions of girls at the end of the 19th century with those at the end of the 20th.

Here's what a 19th-century girl resolved: "To think before speaking. To work seriously. To be self-restrained in conversations and actions. Not to let my thoughts wander. To be dignified. Interest myself more in others."

Her modern counterpart? "I will lose weight, get new lenses, already got new haircut, good makeup, new clothes and accessories."

That 19th-century girl may have lived in a more repressive era—before women could vote, when girls' sights were set solely on marriage and motherhood—but her sense of self-worth was enviably internal, a matter of deed over dress. Whatever other constraints she felt, her femininity was not defined by the pursuit of physical perfection; it was about character. How, I wonder, have we 21st-century mothers, with all our economic, political and personal freedom, let this happen to our daughters?

Certainly, I try my best to raise a girl who has a healthy perspective on her body regardless of its shape, who does not plunge into a shame spiral whenever she looks at herself sideways in a mirror. I follow all the expert advice mentioned above, but I don't have an intuitive feeling for whether I am on the right track. Overemphasizing a girl's looks is clearly hazardous but so is never telling her she's pretty. How to find the sweet spot?

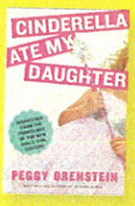
I took the quandary to Catherine Steiner-Adair, the director of eating disorders education and prevention at the Klarman Eating Disorders Center at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts. "'You're beautiful' is not something you want to say over and over to your daughter, because it's not something you want her to think is so important," she said. "Still, there are times when it is important to tell her that: when she's messy or sweaty, when she's not dressed up, so that she gets a sense that there is something naturally beautiful about her as a person." It's also important, Steiner-Adair says, "to connect beauty and love, to say, 'I love you so much. Everything about you is beautiful to me.' That way you're not just objectifying her body."

I appreciated that advice, the way it redefined beauty as something both internal and eternal. Holly, however, was less impressed. "What's important to me is to unhook looks from size," she said. "Pretty to me is not the point. I think Ava is pretty. And I hope she'll think so, too. But she's always going to be a big girl—unless she starts dieting in an unhealthy way."

I ache for Holly and her daughter, for the complicated position they're in. Yet I realize that along with concern and love I feel a certain . . . relief. Because, as Holly points out, my own daughter is thin. True, she may struggle someday, but I don't have to worry that she'll be teased about her size on the first day of summer camp. I wish appearance did not matter so much, that it did not confer so much power. But given that it does, I find that I am grateful for hers.

Does that make me a hypocrite? ■

I wish it were otherwise, but a girl's looks make a difference in how the world perceives her.



Excerpted from *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches From the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture*, by Peggy Orenstein, published by Harper Collins Publishers, New York, New York.