

## *Mothers and Daughters and Body Images: It's not 1960 anymore.*

### **IT'S NOT 1960 ANYMORE.**

In *Altogether Lovely: A Book for Teen-age Girls* published in 1960, the inscription reads, *To my dear sister, Rita Lynn, who has just entered those "Sparkling" teen years.*<sup>1</sup> The next 112 pages of this little book are dedicated to helping Christian teenaged girls present themselves beautiful to the world – how to be popular; how to take care of their hair, makeup, wardrobe; how to sit, stand, and walk; some mysterious thing called “teen etiquette,” mostly having to do with proper manners at parties, luncheons, and teas; dating and preparation for marriage (“Do everything in the world to make him happy, and you can be sure he’ll do the same for you in return. It just works that way.”<sup>2</sup>); and more. The preface states outright, “... [W]e are going to talk about all of your life; we are going to discuss you from top to toe – outside and inside.”<sup>3</sup> Yet the bulk of the book focuses on helping teenagers present a “proper” appearance to the world in order to be attractive and “become a more winsome witness for her Lord.”<sup>4</sup>

It’s no longer 1960. Even though I strongly suspect the tenets in this book weren’t the panacea for the angst of teenage girls in 1960, it’s clear that now they are hopelessly, tragically out of date.

*THEN: If you have a terrific appetite, a doctor-recommended pill to calm that fierce appetite might be a help.<sup>i</sup>*

*TODAY: Research has found that mothers of eating disordered girls and girls engaging dieting behaviors score significantly higher on measures of dieting, body dissatisfaction, and bulimic symptomatology than mothers of girls without disordered eating.<sup>ii</sup>*

*THEN: Maybe you would like to redistribute your weight, move the pounds around; or, if you are really lucky, you are just right and want to know how to stay that way. ... The basis of beauty is eating right. You'll look better, if you eat better!<sup>iii</sup>*

*TODAY: Eating is an act of personal expression. Overeating may be your daughter's expression of trying to make something – namely, food – about her, and all about her. Not eating at all may be a subconscious validation of your making everything in your daughter's life about you.<sup>iv</sup>*

*THEN: "Miss Popular Teen"...has learned one of the fundamental lessons of human relationship, "If you can't say something nice – don't say anything at all."<sup>v</sup>*

*TODAY: In early adolescence, studies show that girls...lose their assertive, energetic and "tomboyish" personalities and become more deferential, self-critical and depressed. They report great unhappiness with their own bodies.<sup>vi</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Charlene Johnson, *Altogether Lovely: A Book for Teen-age Girls* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Press, 1960), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, 90.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, 5.

Nowhere in the book are the difficult subjects of eating disorders, abortion, sexual abuse, divorce, drugs and alcohol, etc. addressed. The influence of the culture and media is accepted rather than challenged. Sexism is blatantly endorsed. The unspoken premise of the book is “Look and act right. Your purpose in life is to attract a man and be happy; do this, and people will see that you love Jesus.”

*Altogether Lovely* is a book from a mother to a daughter about how to “be” in this world. The motivation to help teenagers be healthy is admirable and the belief that a mother’s relationship with her daughter is of primary importance is accurate. However, the book tragically misses the mark, especially in light of what it’s like for a pre-adolescent or adolescent girl to be growing up today. **Negative body image and eating disorders are rampant among girls today, and while there are a wide variety of significant influences, including adolescence and change, culture, and family relationships, one of the most noteworthy – both negatively and positively – is the mother-daughter relationship. Establishing and maintaining a healthy relationship between mother and daughter can be one of the most effective tools to combat negative body image and eating disorders.**

#### **GIRLS ARE AT RISK MORE THAN EVER BEFORE.**

Pre-adolescent and teenage girls are at risk today more than ever for unhealthy body images, eating disorders, and obesity. Mary Pipher’s eye-opening 1994 work *Reviving Opheelia* chronicles her experiences with various female adolescent issues, eating disorders among them. “Beauty is the defining characteristic for American women,” she writes. “Girls compare their own bodies to our cultural ideals and find them wanting. Dieting and dissatisfaction with bodies have become normal reactions to puberty.”<sup>5</sup>

In a 1996 study of 2,379 9- and 10-year olds, 37% of white girls and 42% of black girls said that they were trying to lose weight. In another study in 1999, 20% of the 9-year-old girls and 44% of the 14-year-old girls wanted to lose weight. A study in 1996 found that 55% of 8- to 10-year olds girls were dissatisfied with their size.<sup>6</sup> Other studies report that 40% of all adolescent girls struggle in some way with eating disorders<sup>7</sup>.

Today, six-and seven-year-old girls are concerned about their weight. Standing on the cusp of puberty, nine-year-old girls talk about feeling fat before their bodies have even begun to change. At

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Pipher, *Reviving Opheelia* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 183.

<sup>6</sup> References for each of these three studies can be found in: Thompson, J. Kevin & Smolak, Linda, *Body Image, Eating Disorders, and Obesity in Youth: Assessment, Prevention, and Treatment* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001) 3.

<sup>7</sup> Sharon Hersh, “Mom, I Feel Fat!”: Becoming Your Daughter’s Ally in Developing a Healthy Body Image (Colorado Springs, CO: Shaw Books, 2001), 2.

*ten and eleven, feeling fat has been incorporated into their everyday language. It influences how they see themselves and the way they interact with the world.*<sup>8</sup>

Struggles with body image, dieting, feeling fat, and eating disorders continue to escalate. No longer relegated to older adolescents or college-aged girls, girls of all ages are highly aware of their appearance and their bodies. They begin at young ages to believe that their bodily appearance significantly defines something deeply true about their identity and worthiness as a human being. More and more, these beliefs play out to their extremes, resulting in negative body images and eating disorders.

## WHERE DID THIS COME FROM?

There are a wide variety of influences on the present-day crisis in adolescent girls. In *Reviving Opbelia*, Mary Pipher states three reasons that adolescent girls are especially vulnerable. First, their developmental level is one of physical, emotional, and hormonal change. Second, she says that American culture “has always smacked girls on the head.” Third, she speaks about how American culture tells girls to move away from their parents and listen more closely to their peers at a time when they need parental support the most.<sup>9</sup>

## --adolescence and change--

Adolescence has always been a difficult whirlwind of change. The world seems to change overnight. Relationships that used to seem simple and uncomplicated are now fraught with confusing nuances and danger; physical activities that were easy yesterday seem insurmountable today; behaviors that were acceptable yesterday are “unladylike” today. In addition, because puberty is occurring earlier and earlier in girls today, they are forced to deal with issues of menstruation and sexuality at ridiculously young ages. Their bodies are ready for – and calling out for – experiences their hearts and souls are in no way prepared for. In her book “*Mom, I feel fat!*”, Sharon Hersh quotes Dr. Michael Freemark, Chief of Pediatric Endocrinology at Duke Medical University: “It’s as if an entire generation of girls has been put on hormonal fast forward: shooting up, filling out, growing like Alice munching on the wrong side of the

*I was a kid that you would like,  
just a small boy on her bike  
riding topless, yeah, I never cared who saw.  
my neighbor came outside to say, "Get your shirt,"  
I said "No way, it's the last time.  
I'm not breaking any law."  
and now I'm in a clothing store,  
and the sign says less is more.  
more that's tight means more to see,  
more for them, not more for me.  
that can't help me climb a tree in ten seconds flat.*

*Dar Williams. "When I Was A Boy," The Honesty Room.  
1993. Razor & Tie Entertainment.*

<sup>8</sup> Sandra Susan Friedman, *When Girls Feel Fat*, quoted in Hersh, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Pipher, 22-23.

mushroom...”<sup>10</sup> This time of vast, confusing change is often a terrifying time for young girls. Everything, including their own bodies and emotions, is a whirlwind of baffling transformation. It’s no wonder they react in volatile, often self-destructive ways.

## --culture--

The most often-blamed culprit for negative body image and eating disorder problems in young girls is mainstream culture.

... [B]ody image continues to be associated with adolescent girl’s self-esteem. And in this study, body image acted as a “filter” between media influence and self-esteem for girls. This suggests that the relationship between self-esteem and media may be more embedded in physical appearance for adolescent girls than for boys. This comes as no surprise since women’s bodies have been used to sell everything – from automobiles to perfume – for decades.<sup>11</sup>

The most celebrated guilty proponent of an unhealthy body image is, of course, the Barbie<sup>®</sup> doll. About 90% of three- to eleven-year-old girls own a Barbie<sup>®</sup>, yet “fewer than 1 in 100,000 women are likely to have body proportions similar to Barbie’s<sup>®</sup>.”<sup>12</sup> In addition, movies, music, the fashion industry, commercials, television programs, and just about all other forms of media in our culture today repeatedly bash girls over their heads with, “You *must* be beautiful to be worthy, and the only way to be beautiful is to be thin.” Physical beauty is lauded over all else; simply walking into Abercrombie and Fitch in the shopping mall means being bombarded with larger-than-life posters of mostly naked men and women, beautiful and sultry and sexy. The implicit message is, “Spend your money on our wrinkled clothing and you, too, shall be desirable and beautiful and happy.” Young girls repeatedly receive this message, and they are deeply affected by it.

*If Barbie<sup>®</sup> were human-sized, she would stand five feet six inches tall, weigh 110 pounds, and have a thirty-nine inch bust, eighteen inch waist, and thirty-three inch hips.<sup>vi</sup>*

*Every second, three Barbie<sup>®</sup> dolls are sold somewhere in the world.<sup>viii</sup>*

*Barbie<sup>®</sup> doll is currently a \$2.5 billion dollar-per-year industry.<sup>ix</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> Hersh, 41.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Polce-Lynch, Barbara J. Myers, Wendy Kliwer, & Christopher Kilmartin, “Adolescent Self-Esteem and Gender: Exploring Relations to Sexual Harassment, Body Image, Media Influence, and Emotional Expression.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 30 (2001): 244.

<sup>12</sup> Thompson, 51.

## --relationships--

A third guilty party can be found within the family and peer relationships of pre-adolescent and adolescent girls. Girls at this age begin to fight even more to differentiate from their parents and move towards their peers, who are also being influenced by the culture and their own families. How families respond at this critical point is crucial. "... [F]amilies characterized as enmeshed, rigid, overprotective, and limited in conflict resolution put adolescents at risk for an eating disorder."<sup>13</sup> In addition, a family preoccupied with eating and body shape directly affects the degree of body dissatisfaction in young girls.<sup>14</sup> Teasing and criticism in families has been found to predict body image and eating disorders.<sup>15</sup> How a family deals with and communicates about body image issues directly influences how young girls perceive themselves. In addition, the more dysfunctional family relationships are, the greater the risk for eating disorders and obesity. How a family functions plays a huge role in these issues for pre-adolescent and adolescent girls.

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MOTHER AND DAUGHTER IS CRUCIAL.**

One of the most significant factors in a girl's propensity towards negative body image and eating disorders lies in her relationship with her mother. There is considerable research about the influence a mother has toward her daughter in these areas. How the mother deals with her own body image and weight issues, her beliefs about her own beauty, her responses to cultural influences, and her methods of directly and indirectly communicating these things to her daughter are all ways in which she extensively affects her daughter:

- "... [M]others were found to play a significant role in the prediction of weight loss behaviors in adolescent girls."<sup>16</sup>
- "... [D]iscussion about weight loss was one of the consistent predictors of eating problems in adolescent girls, [and]...girls regularly engage in discussions about weight loss with their mothers and friends."<sup>17</sup>
- "Mothers who engaged in unhealthy dieting behaviors had five-year-old daughters who reported higher weight concerns and were twice as likely to possess awareness of and knowledge about dieting."<sup>18</sup>
- Clinical studies have consistently highlighted the role of the family in the development of eating disorders among girls, with dysfunctional familial patterns being characteristic of eating disordered families parents.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Thompson, 130.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson, 135.

<sup>15</sup> Maureen A. Vincent & Marita P. McCabe, "Gender Differences Among Adolescents in Family, and Peer Influences on Body Dissatisfaction, Weight Loss, and Binge Eating Behaviors." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 29 (2000): 207.

<sup>16</sup> Vincent, 217.

<sup>17</sup> Vincent 218.

<sup>18</sup> Thompson, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Vincent, 206.

It cannot be stated more simply than this: The state of a mother's own body image predicts a daughter's problem eating.<sup>20</sup> Direct and indirect communication from a mother to her daughter carries a great amount of influence towards her own daughter's views on eating and weight and body image. The mother-daughter connection can be one of the most intimate, intuitive relationships that exists; it can be and often is a powerful factor in shaping a girl's life and self-esteem. This truth becomes especially crucial in light of how a woman's body image and beliefs about her own beauty directly influence her daughter.

## WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

In *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher describes a daughter's struggle to individuate as essential to the mother-daughter relationship.<sup>21</sup> A healthy family is one in which children are allowed and encouraged to differentiate without being enmeshed. Sharon Hersh describes it as hand-in-hand mothering, and says that it is "simply a willingness to learn as many ways as you can of responding to your daughter out of a heart filled with limitless love for her."<sup>22</sup> A healthy mother encourages her daughter to explore herself and her world and culture in thoughtful ways; she encourages creativity and independence in her daughter; she sets healthy boundaries without being overprotective; she engages with her daughter in considerate and open ways, pursuing her heart and world.

In her book, Hersh outlines the importance of courage, commitment, and curiosity to hand-in-hand mothering. Entering into a daughter's world of music, peer pressure, sexuality, body image, and eating disorders requires a great deal of courage from a mother. It calls for a mother to be willing to face her own issues in these areas and to be willing to understand how her daughter's world may be vastly different not only from anything she experienced, but also different from anything she might approve of. Hand-in-hand mothering also requires commitment from a mother; it demands

*The best way to help your child avoid an eating disorder is to stop it before it starts. The younger a child has open communication with her parents, feels loved regardless of her achievements, mistakes or looks, the stronger she will [be].<sup>x</sup>*  
-Dr. Timothy Brewerton

resolve to be in healthy relationship, to be present, to be willing to stick around in spite of rejection. Finally, hand-in-hand mothering entails curiosity from a mother – curiosity about her daughter's world, culture, thoughts, and feelings. It requires a mother willing to enter into her daughter's tastes and thoughtfully consider them. It compels a mother to

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<sup>20</sup> Thompson, 135.

<sup>21</sup> Pipher, 105.

<sup>22</sup> Hersh, 13.

truly be interested in what's going on in her daughter's heart and mind, being protective yet not overprotective – loving, yet not smothering.<sup>23</sup>

## **A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Jesus provides the ultimate example of relationship for us. During his thirty-three years on earth, there were significant demonstrations of his mother-like heart towards his people. One of the most poignant of these moments is in Luke 13:34. He says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"<sup>24</sup> Here Jesus demonstrates his protective and loving heart towards Jerusalem, clearly feminine imagery which connects well to the fierce protectiveness and adamant love a mother should feel for her daughter. Yet note that Jesus is speaking here of his longing; he does not speak of his action. He does not force his will upon Jerusalem; he is not overbearing in his protectiveness and love. He speaks of his longing for relationship. In the same way, a healthy mother names her longing for her relationship with her daughter and moves toward her, yet does not force or insist. She actively waits and pursues relationship with her daughter, allowing her to be herself and find her own identity, yet always connected, always in relationship.

In Matthew 10:37, Jesus says, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me..."<sup>25</sup> This is a difficult passage and not one easily explained. However, it is interesting to note what Jesus does not say here. He does not indicate to not love one's family. He does not indicate to sever relationship. Yet implied within these words are boundaries; the familial relationship is important, yet not more important than loving Jesus. The implication is that there is a structure that puts relationship with God first. The notion of differentiation speaks to this structure: a healthy mother-daughter relationship allows the daughter to separate, to establish boundaries, to put relationships in appropriate priorities, yet remain connected.

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<sup>23</sup> Hersh, 41-48.

<sup>24</sup> Luke 13:34, NIV.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 10:37, NIV.

## CONCLUSION

Negative body image, eating disorders, and obesity are difficult issues facing young girls today. Staggering numbers of girls struggle with feeling fat, dieting, and weight loss, and even more deal with eating disorders. Girls enter puberty earlier and earlier while the culture sends stronger and stronger messages about body image ideals and the necessity of being thin. Family relationships also play a significant role in helping young girls establish healthy body images, especially the mother-daughter relationship. There is considerable evidence pointing to the relationship between how a mother's own issues with body image and weight loss and a daughter's body image and propensity towards dieting, weight loss issues, and eating disorders. A well-differentiated family relationship in which a mother is courageous, committed, and curious about her daughter, willing and wanting to enter into healthy relationship with Jesus Christ at the center, establishes an environment for healthy body image to occur. She loves protectively without force and provides an environment for individuation without enmeshment. A healthy mother-daughter relationship is a powerful tool for helping young girls deal with difficult issues facing them today.



ENDNOTES  
(for inserts)

<sup>i</sup> Johnson, 25.

<sup>ii</sup> Vincent, 208.

<sup>iii</sup> Johnson, 22.

<sup>iv</sup> Hersh, 88.

<sup>v</sup> Johnson, 16.

<sup>vi</sup> Pipher, 19.

<sup>vii</sup> *The Facts of Barbie*. Retrieved March 18, 2003, from <http://detritus.net/projects/barbie/facts.htm>

<sup>viii</sup> Mattel, Inc. *Fun Facts about Barbie*. Retrieved March 18, 2003, from <http://www.shareholder.com/mattel/news/20020428-79160.cfm>

<sup>ix</sup> Mattel, Inc. *Fun Facts about Barbie*. Retrieved March 18, 2003, from <http://www.shareholder.com/mattel/news/20020428-79160.cfm>

<sup>x</sup> quoted in Hersh, 48.

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