



# I HATE MY BODY!

Children, like adults, come in a variety of shapes and sizes. But when a child doesn't accept her body shape as normal, eating and emotional disorders can occur. In Singapore, the youngest known patient with an eating disorder is only eight.



**Does your child** come home crying because the kids in school call him "Fatty"? Don't be too quick to brush it off as harmless teasing because a poor body image can spark eating disorders in young children. At the Child Guidance Clinic, the youngest patient with an eating disorder is at the ripe old age of eight.

"Actually, this is a new development," says Ms Carolyn Kee, a psychologist at the Child Guidance Clinic. "Eight years old is very young. The majority of patients with eating disorders tend to be between 14 and 16 years."

Janet Phang, a clinical psychologist at the Centre for Effective Living, believes kids who develop eating disorders are getting younger. "Research has shown that worldwide, younger and younger children are feeling more dissatisfied with their bodies."

While the majority of clients are female, that doesn't mean boys are not susceptible. Says Miss Phang: "It could mean that females are more ready to accept help, while males find it a little more difficult to ask for help."

### WEB OF INFLUENCE

The media, friends and parents can contribute to a child's desire to look perfect. "It's a whole web of influence, where the media plays a part, and also social and cultural attitudes," says Ms Kee.

"It doesn't help to have all those gorgeous, slim looking women on TV exuding glamour, success and popularity. Our celebrities all tend to be slim, and young people look up to them. Of course, there are all those slimming ads and promotions that suggest it's a good thing to lose weight."

With affluence, attractiveness has also become associated with slimness, as opposed to rural countries, where a plump person can be considered attractive, adds Ms Kee.

"It might be a social, cultural attitude where, because it's harder to be thin, thinness becomes valued," she says. "And these perceptions and values are passed down. Mothers try to lose weight and when their daughters see them doing that, they also want to lose weight."

Finally, peer influence is another huge factor, says Ms Kee. "When their friends are thin, they also want to be thin."



### BUILDING A POSITIVE BODY IMAGE

So how can you help your child develop a healthy body image? According to Miss Phang and Ms Kee, building your child's self-esteem is vital.

Says Miss Phang: "A child with low self-esteem is going to be more susceptible to external messages from the media, fashion magazines, about how they should look. She may think that she will be successful or popular if she was thin because people with these sort of bodies are portrayed as successful and popular. She will strive to be like them."

"For young people, identity is pretty much tied up with their looks and achievements," says Ms Kee. "If they have a negative body image, they worry that people won't like them, look down on them, call them names. And it does happen, of course. People are taunted. 'Fatty, you better lose weight', and so on. These affect a person's comfort with himself and his ability to value himself as somebody apart from his looks."

It can also affect their social interaction. "It's a two-way process," explains Ms Kee. "I think people are naturally drawn more to attractive looking people, so the

one who is perceived as less attractive would perhaps feel less popular, less liked.

"But because they are self-conscious about the way they look, they may become overly sensitive to other people's remarks or avoid social interaction."

### THE FAT CLUB

"Getting kids together into a group like the TAF club, where other kids can identify them as a fat group, I think, is part of the problem. It just makes them an easier target for teasing and bullying," says Miss Phang. "Children are sensitive and what their peers say mean a lot, so it is really important that teachers educate children not to target fat kids."

It's important to validate your child's fears and concerns, says Ms Kee. Empathise with your child ("It must really hurt to have people call you Fatty") and get a clearer picture of what he or she is going through, rather than brushing it off by saying, "Aiyah! So what if people call you Fatty?"

Find out if she feels lonely. Does she feel that people dislike her because of the way she looks?

Help them gain perspective on the situation. The other kids are just zooming in on one aspect of their lives. "To counter balance that, parents need to talk to their child and become aware of their other strengths and abilities. If your child knows her self-worth is derived from abilities apart from her appearance, it will help boost healthy self-esteem," says Miss Phang.

For instance, draw his attention to the fact that his friend, Jack, likes him for his sense of humour ("Well, mummy likes that about you too"), suggests Ms Kee.



### DISCUSS THE SLIM 10 AFFAIR

The buzz surrounding the weight-loss pill, Slim 10, clearly shows the dangers that can result in a culture that glorifies thinness. You can use these media reports as a way to broach the topic with your child.

Says Ms Kee: "As a preventive measure, it's always good to give a child more information before weight even becomes an issue. With this Slim 10 affair, parents can point out to the child 'Oh, see what an effect a slimming pill can have on a person's health. A person can even die doing this.' Then follow this with questions like 'Do you know of any friends very interested in losing weight?', or 'What do you think about these concerns about weight?'"

Such an approach lets you give your own views in a general way ("I feel that a person can look attractive if they are a little bit bigger-sized. For instance, your cousin is very attractive, and she's on the roundish side"), rather than get their defenses up with direct questions ("Do you take slimming tablets?"), says Ms Kee.

Parents need to teach their children that people come in all shapes and sizes, says Miss Phang. "Kids need to know that there is not just one body shape for everyone and genetics play a big role in deciding that. If they can accept their bodies the way they come, then they are less susceptible to all these images from the media."

### THINK HEALTH

If your child is overweight, Miss Phang suggests that you focus on the health consequences of being overweight rather than the child's appearance. For example, "If you are fat, you might find that it's harder for you to catch up with your friends when you are playing catching."

Ridiculing your child ("Goodness, you are so fat you better lose weight. Otherwise your friends won't like you") just lowers self-esteem. "Although parents mean well, the message the

child gets is, 'I'm fat, therefore I'm not as lovable'," says Miss Phang. "They will think being thin is the answer to getting more love."

Ms Kee suggests that the whole family makes an effort to exercise, and eat nutritious food. "Focus more on 'Oh, it's important to eat well-balanced meals three times a day', and 'Mummy doesn't like you to eat snacks because it's not good for your health'."

"It should be a family effort so that the child won't feel that she's the

## STARVING ALMOST TO DEATH

**Fifteen-year-old Jane\* didn't have a weight problem. Yet, she has always felt the pressure to remain thin. Her parents were critical of her appearance and always wanted her to look her best so she wouldn't embarrass them in front of relatives.**

**In school, Jane's friends would tell her how much they envied her thinness and often made statements like, "Oh, you're so lucky you're so thin" and "Gosh, you look like the models in magazines". Between her peers' admiration and parents' constant nagging, Jane got the message she was loved only for the way she looked. She thought "If I don't look good, nobody will like me".**

**So she started an excessively aggressive exercise regime, and hardly ate. Almost a year ago, Jane's parents dragged her to see a psychologist. By then, she was literally a bag of bones and had to be sent to a hospital, where she was warded for close to three months. She had already stopped having her period for a while, her nails were fragile and she suffered from hair loss. Ironically, because she lost so much weight, other parts of her body developed more hair to keep her warm. But Jane was lucky as she avoided coming dangerously close to having serious complications. Eating disorders can lead to kidney failure and even death.**

**In the hospital, Jane had to be fed a liquid diet because she could barely eat. She was reluctant to comply with treatment, and had to be put under observation to ensure that she was taking her food. While dealing with her physical problems, Jane was given regular counselling sessions.**

**After she was discharged, Jane was still below her ideal weight and had to work with a nutritionist. She also continued her counselling sessions, where therapists helped her learn to feel good about herself. With advice from her psychologist, Jane explored different activities to find out what she enjoyed doing and what made her feel good.**

**Jane's anxious parents began nagging her to eat, but that again put more pressure on Jane. Harping on food just gave her the idea that what was important was how much she did or didn't eat. Jane's parents also went for counselling sessions, after which, they learnt to back off.**

**It's been more than six months since Jane left the hospital. It's been a difficult journey, but thankfully, she is doing a lot better now. She's managed to catch up with the schoolwork she missed while she was in hospital. She continues seeing the psychologist to make sure she doesn't fall off the bandwagon.**

*\*Not her real name*

one being singled out as the fat one," she stresses.

Says Miss Phang: "Instead of saying food is good or bad, tell them that food is like fuel for their bodies. You need to eat a certain amount of vegetables, proteins or carbohydrates so that your body can work efficiently. That way, you avoid focusing on their weight."

### PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

Parents need to also accept themselves, says Ms Kee. "Parents need to watch what they say when their children are around. You tell your children that appearances are not everything, yet the child watches you engage in behaviour that is unhealthy for your own body, like dieting and skipping meals. The child is going to pick up on this, and the message you are sending out is, 'Appearance is important'."

So mums, if you're constantly whining that your butt is too big, give yourself a break. You'll be doing you and your child a huge favour! ■

