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INTRODUCTION

HELPING HER RESIST THE PRESSURE FOR PERFECTION

For most women, not a day goes by when we are spared from messages that focus on what we currently look like or what we should look like. Whether these messages take the form of comments about our bodies from a family member or a friend, hearing about the latest celebrity fad diet on television, or seeing an ad for waist trainers as we scroll through our social media feeds, the input is widespread. This kind of messaging begins very early in life, is difficult to avoid, and can have a strong and long-lasting effect on how we see ourselves.

When you look at yourself in the mirror, what sorts of things do you think? And when your daughter or loved one looks in the mirror, what do you hope she thinks? How women and girls think and feel about their bodies is an important issue—for themselves and the people close to them. Odds are that you, having picked up this book, are thinking about the importance of a healthy body image. If you have ever struggled with your own body image, you are in good company. Body dissatisfaction, preoccupation with imperfections, feelings of inadequacy, desires to change the body—most adult women in the United States admit to these body image concerns, and as women ourselves, we can relate. The numbers are telling: 90% of young women in their 20s are dissatisfied with

their bodies (Runfola et al., 2013)! Unfortunately, statistics indicate that the dissatisfaction continues for women as they age, hovering around 90% in young and middle adulthood and finally lessening somewhat in late adulthood: At ages 75 and older, “only” 72% of women are dissatisfied with their bodies.

Your decision to choose this book—among hundreds of other titles—reveals that you are focusing now on the body image of a girl you love: your daughter or another special girl in your life. Your concern for her is well founded. Psychological research shows that like adult women, girls as young as 5 years of age express body dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction with our bodies has become so routine that it may even seem unusual for women and girls not to be critical about some feature of their physical appearance. This routine dissatisfaction is called *normative discontent*—so routine it has become the norm! The consequences of this dissatisfaction include everything from temporary discomforts of feeling self-conscious and experiencing dissatisfaction or other negative emotions to deep patterns of low self-esteem, dysfunction in relationships, and even physical and mental illnesses.

Think about the first time you discussed body image with an adult; for most girls, this conversation is likely to happen in health or sexual education classes in preadolescence. For some girls, it happens only informally, in conversations with friends. Although some great resources are out there, most available books about girls’ body image are marketed largely as tools for preteens or teens. Unfortunately, science indicates that by the time girls have reached adolescence, ideas about body image are already largely entrenched, and unhealthy thought patterns are well in place. A more effective approach is to begin an ongoing dialogue with girls early, as they develop, and to “inoculate” them against the harmful messages that society sends about body image with information that is tailored to their developmental level.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

In recent years, body image has become a popular topic of discussion, and we encounter many opinions and ideas about how to “do” body image everywhere we turn. Celebrities, social media influencers, and advertisement campaigns give plenty of advice on how we should feel about our bodies. Among the many messages we hear, however, some are confusing, contradictory, or even downright false. How can we filter out truth from all the noise? This is exactly where science-based guidance can help.

Body image has been an important focus of scientific study for at least 40 years, but the first studies date back even earlier, to the first half of the 20th century. In that time, a lot of scientific evidence has accumulated on how and why women view their bodies the way they do. Throughout this book, we bring you the most relevant findings for your daughter’s body image development because the scientific method is our best tool for uncovering the truth about these issues. Unlike other sources on this topic, science is not merely opinion, common sense, or good advice; it is not anchored in personal anecdotes or persuasive messaging. The process of science is time consuming and complex, but it yields the clarity and confidence necessary for making wise and well-informed decisions. And let’s face it: When it comes to our daughters’ body image, we want to get it right!

As a developmental psychologist (Janet) and a social psychologist (Ashleigh), we are eager to share with you research from our fields. We have spent a lot of time with children, both as researchers in the laboratory and in the real world. You can count on the recommendations in this book because they are drawn from thousands of research studies, and they are tailored to girls at specific developmental levels. Of course, personal experience is important too, so in addition to our own experiences in mother–daughter relationships, we have worked with moms of daughters in our community in focus group settings to

bring you practical and useful recommendations. Applying science to this topic is also personal for us. We are women too: graduates of girlhood and working our way through the milestones of adulthood.

Science indicates that childhood is an ideal time to begin building a healthy body image. Unfortunately, not many resources out there are based in developmental science. For this reason, we have written this book specifically for mothers of 3- to 10-year-old girls. You may have noticed that other guidebooks on this topic focus solely on what moms can say to their girls (e.g., “How to teach your child to love her body”) or are written for preteens or teens to read independently (“Why you should love your body!”). Those books make some good points. But research suggests that the formation of body image is relational at its core—that is, it is forged in the daily interactions, example setting, and imitations that go on between moms and daughters. From this perspective, an important relational aspect is missing from these other resources. The findings from child development, social, and body image research all suggest that building healthy body image effectively takes the form of a partnership between mother and daughter starting early in life.

TAKING A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

As social and developmental scientists, we are calling for a different approach to healthy body image construction. In this framework, the mother–daughter relationship is the cornerstone for the mutual construction of healthy body image—in both you and her. As we discuss throughout the book, research clearly indicates that your body image is linked with hers. A girl’s body image is built through her experience of social interactions. It may be natural to think of her body image as only a personal, internal characteristic she possesses, but it is better understood as the product of an ongoing collaboration between your daughter and her social world. You are her first and most enduring

partner in this social world; and, in her childhood years, you will be her primary reference or **attachment figure**. According to attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991), children's ideas about themselves and others, and what they can expect from the world around them, are heavily influenced by their attachment figures. But as your daughter grows into her own independent person, her social world will increasingly fill with other influences. The time to lay the groundwork of mother–daughter partnership is now.

| **Attachment figure:** a person with whom a child has a close bond, usually a caregiver.

Throughout this book, the science we share will give you the tools for building developmentally appropriate, collaborative dialogue with your daughter about body image, beginning in early childhood. It is important to note that your own body image development and hers are evolving continuously. For example, the way you feel about your body prepartum, postpartum, midlife, and in menopause can be very different, and your feelings at a given time can, in turn, affect how you think about and engage in discussions with your daughter about body image. When it comes to women's body image, this is truly the partnership of a lifetime.

How can you be successful in this role, partnering with your daughter? Although there is no single way to raise your daughter successfully, most scientists agree that aiming to set clear rules and boundaries, showing warmth and compassion, and allowing for open communication and collaborative problem solving are fruitful approaches. This combination of behaviors is called *authoritative parenting*, and we refer to it in various sections of the book. But as you read, keep in mind that parenting is dynamic and that parents use different types of strategies depending on their goals, their child's needs, and the context. These strategies can also vary by culture,

socioeconomic status, and ethnic/racial identity. Overall, however, components of authoritative parenting are typically linked with positive outcomes (Lansford, 2022).

One theme that we emphasize throughout this book is that although you play a vital role in helping your daughter construct a healthy body image, the full responsibility for her body image does not rest on your efforts alone. Our perspective is rooted in **developmental systems theory** (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), particularly the idea that you are one of many influences on your daughter's body image and the strength of your influence will vary over time and across situations. She will also rely on other sources of information, and it is developmentally appropriate for her to do so. Yet anyone who has experienced the mother–daughter relationship (as a daughter, or as a daughter and a mother) understands that it can be complex and unpredictable. Some interactions between you and your daughter are harmonious, and some are disastrous, especially in the years approaching adolescence. For some moms, it may be daunting to think of the large role you play in your daughter's body image development. After all, it is a difficult task all the time to model a healthy body image for your daughter—especially when you have your own feelings about your body and its changes and fluctuations. Although this book provides a lot of guidance specifically for you, just remember that her body image isn't solely influenced by you.

Developmental systems theory: the view that development occurs not just within the individual but as a result of our experiences in a large set of systems—from the immediate environment that we share with parents and peers to indirect influences at the cultural level. These influences can interact with each other, and their impact varies over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).

Science reveals the three most important social influences in body image development: family, peers, and media exposure. Indeed,

Dr. Susan Paxton, a leader in the study of body image, has suggested that body dissatisfaction prevention efforts in young children should consider an ecological approach that includes multiple influences (Paxton & Damiano, 2017). This recommendation is consistent with the developmental systems approach that we described. Among these other sources of information are a girl's social experiences, feedback from and comparisons with her peers, and media participation. A girl's actual biological or anatomical characteristics—body weight, stature, symmetry, and how these characteristics measure up against the norms set by our culture—also matter for body image. So does the timing of puberty, such as whether it happens at the same time as her peers or at a different time. Personality characteristics and individual differences are important as well (e.g., she might be anxious relative to her peers, or, relatively laid-back or optimistic). Our approach considers all these pieces and brings helpful insight from science to enable you and your daughter to handle them successfully.

BEYOND BODY POSITIVITY

Our perspective goes beyond body positivity. In recent years, body positivity has been strongly emphasized as a central feature of healthy body image. A positive body image involves holding favorable opinions of the body, acceptance of the body regardless of imperfections, respect of the body in the ways we treat it, and rejection of unrealistic standards promoted by media. Because positive body image is associated with such powerful outcomes, our book incorporates what is known from positive psychology research along with what is known about the destructive effects of negative body image.

That said, we choose to take a balanced, body-healthy perspective that goes beyond body positivity. It seems to us that many popular sources (e.g., celebrities, social media influencers) advocating for

body positivity have placed less emphasis on the part of the positive body image definition that involves respect for the body (Tylka, 2011; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). Many of the currently available guides for girls who are beginning to think about their bodies place a heavy emphasis on positive regard for the body and neglect other components of body respect. Although it is true that all women and girls should enforce kind and respectful evaluations of their bodies, it is our impression that the health-focused component of respect has not been fully appreciated and has become lost in the shuffle. Excess negativity about the body is unquestionably damaging, but exclusive positivity about the body may not be making the most of what the positive body image research suggests either.

In this book, we emphasize a health-behavior approach to body image. In doing so, we hope to shift the focus from centering on how the body is judged (as positive or negative) to the importance of prioritizing health behaviors and a focus on self-concept development. You may have heard the phrase “form over function.” A body-healthy approach is one in which function is more important than form. When you have a body-healthy image, your thoughts and feelings about your body are determined chiefly by indicators of good health and proper functioning of your body, rather than based on judgments about its appearance. Teaching girls to see the strengths of their body, to accept their bodies despite imperfections, and to ignore harmful cultural messages about their bodies helps to build crucial components of their healthy body image. In this book, we also incorporate ways that girls can attend to their bodies’ needs in healthy, constructive, and balanced ways, using **self-regulation** principles to be responsive to and responsible toward their bodies.

Self-regulation: being aware of and managing your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This skill can be learned and practiced throughout the lifespan (Vohs & Baumeister, 2016).

WHAT THE BOOK DOES NOT COVER

This book speaks to the most frequent or typical developmental experiences of girls, and so we do not cover some topics of special interest here. Because we are not clinicians (that is, physicians, clinical psychologists, or counselors), this book does not speak to clinical populations and cannot be used to diagnose or treat disorders (associated with eating or otherwise). Disorders related to body image are exceptional problems that deserve careful attention from trained professionals. If you think you or your daughter may be at risk for a body image or eating disorder, we suggest you seek personalized support. We have included some recommended resources at the end of this chapter to inform next steps.

We also recognize that fathers, other parents, siblings, grandparents, and any other members of your daughter's family can influence her body image development; further, we realize that not all families are the same. When we say "family," it is with the awareness that families come in different sizes and compositions. The research presented in this book, however, samples what many consider to be "traditional" families, and the reason is twofold. First, nearly all the research specifically focused on children's body image development involves this type of family structure. Second, when other family structures have been studied alongside the traditional structure, few differences are found in children's developmental processes or outcomes. As just one example, a family's specific parent composition is less important to children's developmental outcomes than the quality of parenting (e.g., Farr, 2017). It seems likely, then, that much of the information we present here will apply to all types of families.

Women belong to different social groups and differ in race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Our coverage in this book is limited to what scientists have studied, and they have infrequently focused on

diverse groups of women; most of the research has focused on White women and girls of middle to upper socioeconomic status. Research shows that despite some important differences, the key influences on body image are common among White, Black, Latina and Asian women: family, peers, and media (Burke et al., 2021). These key influences differ in how they affect these groups. In Chapter 2, we discuss some cultural considerations that may be personally relevant to you and your daughter.

Finally, our book does not speak to the experiences of children with gender incongruence. At present, very little research has addressed body image development in these children, and we simply do not have enough knowledge to speak conclusively about their experiences. It would be inappropriate to assume identical developmental trajectories in children who have exceptional gender identity experiences. Nonetheless, the general science-based tips in our book will likely apply to body image development in all young children (such as our health–behavior approach).

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In Chapters 1 and 2, we explore your perceptions of your own body and consider some factors that may have shaped the way you currently feel about your body. Every woman is unique, and although there are certainly different “profiles” of body image concerns (Baker et al., 2023), we hope that this information helps you to clarify your own body image and highlights any body image issues you might want to address for yourself. Throughout these chapters, we highlight how your body image perception and expression affects your daughter. We refer you to several questionnaires and encourage you to complete the sample questions provided. If you are interested in completing any of the questionnaires to obtain maximal personal

insight, which we encourage, please contact us directly via email (Janet: jjboseov@uncg.edu and Ashleigh: adhaire@uncg.edu) to receive a supplementary packet.

In Chapter 3, we explore the body positivity framework and discuss how our body-healthy perspective differs in important ways. From there, in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 we describe body image development in early, middle, and late childhood respectively so you can tailor your discussions with your daughter in a developmentally appropriate way. These divisions by age are simply guidelines; you know your daughter best, so feel free to determine the best starting point based on your knowledge about your daughter's developmental level, regardless of her age. Because each childhood chapter provides valuable insight into child development, we suggest you read all the chapters, even if you're starting when your daughter is older than 3 or 4 years. And note that it's not too late to start, even if your daughter is already in late childhood.

We have aimed to provide you with useful, practical guidance. Throughout the book, we present helpful body image building tools that you can put into practice. In the Appendix, we offer a variety of activities for building healthy body image, some for moms to do on their own and some for moms and daughters to enjoy together. The joint activities have been designed to support the application of various themes, such as healthy thoughts and feelings, body respect, self-concept building, food literacy, and physical literacy. You can choose from these activities according to your and your daughter's needs. Finally, if you want to know more about a particular topic covered in the book, please check out the Recommended Resources section at the end of each chapter. We provide some excellent references that offer an even more in-depth look into the science of girls' and women's body image.

Let's get started!

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- The National Eating Disorders Association: <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org>
- The American Psychological Association information about eating disorders: <https://www.apa.org/topics/eating-disorders>