

Wake Up Sleeping Beauty

- A study involving 869 school girls aged 14-16 found that more than one third (36%) of the girls reported using at least one extreme dieting method in the past month, including crash dieting, fasting, slimming tablets, diuretics, laxatives or cigarettes. In addition, 77% of the girls said they wanted to lose weight.¹
- The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report on the health of young people aged 12-24 years shows that eating disorders and mental health problems are some of the leading causes of burden of disease in young women.²
- As many as one in ten teenage girls self-harm³ There is evidence to suggest that women, particularly those under 25, attempt suicide and self-harm at a higher rate than men, although male suicide rates remain considerably higher than female suicide rates. Estimates of self-harm rates suggest there are between 150 and 300 acts of self-harm for every female suicide.⁴
- Sexually transmitted diseases are on the increase amongst young people, it has been estimated that as many as 28% of teenagers may have Chlamydia.⁵ In Australia, pregnancy termination (abortion) is the second most common hospital procedure for girls aged 12 to 24 years.⁶

Whilst I am well aware that statistics can be misleading, I don't think we can afford to dismiss such findings as alarmist. Certainly my own experiences working closely with young women confirm that much of this is real. I also don't assert that there are necessarily any direct links between negative body image, incidents of self-harm and risky sexual practices – yet surely all are indicators that teenage girls are stressed, unhappy and looking for love? And surely there are implications for those of us raising young girls?

And let me just say right up front that this is turning me in to one very angry woman. I have moved on from sadness, sad people can't make changes. I am now ready to rant, rave and take real action. And whilst I know boys have it tough too, and are battling their own demons, I also know that for me – right now – this is the fight I feel compelled to take on.

¹ Grigg, M. et al. "Disordered eating and unhealthy weight reduction practices among adolescent females", Preventative Medicine Vol 25 No 6, 1996

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, "Australia's young people – their health and wellbeing", Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1999, as cited in Looking Risky: Body Image and Risk Taking Behaviours", Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women, 2003

³ James Harrison, Jerry Moller, Stan Bordeaux, "Youth Suicide and Self-Injury Australia", Flinders University, 1995

⁴ "Looking Risky: Body Image and Risk Taking Behaviours", Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women, 2003

⁵ National Survey of Australian Secondary Students, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health, carried out by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, 2002

⁶ Ibid.

My own daughter Teyah, at seven years of age, is yet to navigate the tumultuous road to adolescence. But, in my role as a teacher, I have hugged too many beautiful girls who cry as they tell me that they feel fat and ugly, heard too many horror stories about my friend's daughter slashing herself; have had too many distressing conversations with parents who just can't get their daughters to eat. Enough! This Queen is mad.

Poisoned Apples

The sexualisation of young woman and the pressure on them to conform to a particular look starts young. While Barbie may have been considered too "grown up" for little girls to play with by mothers in the 1950's, little girls today will tell you she is "babyish". Enter Bratz – the girls with a "Passion for Fashion". While these dolls may not suffer from Barbie's eating disorder (Bab's has always been dangerously thin) they have certainly had work on their plumped-up lips; they feature very heavy makeup, fishnets, stiletto thigh-high boots, tiny skirts, g-strings and come with slogans like "Don't theorize, accessorize" and "It's not just about how you play the game... it's about how good you look when you are winning." I kid you not.

And when these little girls get older, and start asking questions as they search for an identity, what information will they be given? Whether we like it or not, teen magazines are one of their primary sources of information regarding diet and health. What then are the magazines they read telling our girls?

Don't be misled into thinking just because teen girl magazines have credible writers like Michael Carr Gregg on the payroll that they care about young women. One of the more popular magazines, *Girlfriend*, has a 14 to 17 year old "core readership target" although 40% of actual readers are known to be younger than this. The *Girlfriend* web site's home page has the obligatory advertisements and why wouldn't it? Teenagers are big bucks - Australia's 1.9 million children aged seven to fourteen account for \$1.3 billion in spending annually. The site also features shots of the Hilton sisters and other dangerously thin celebrities, a link entitled "Boyfriend" ("Inside his Head and Underneath His Clothes" complete with "Flirting tips"), and a "Love To Shop Link" that offers this sage advice, "Shopping should be considered an official sport. You need stamina, skill and a lot of talent to turn a day's shopping into success. The only issue for most of us is having enough cash in your wallet!" Brands profiled include Sass and Bide, a designer label that features t-shirts from \$80 and jeans that start at \$200. Clearly, the right look costs.

And surely there is an even higher price being paid when teen girl fashion includes padded bras for ten-year-olds, "Playgirl" clothing and t-shirts with slogans like "Your Boyfriend So Wants Me" and "Smoke To Be Thin". The latter was sold at Supre, one of the most popular chain stores that specifically targets teenage girls - it was only withdrawn from sale after Quit Victoria pointed out it

breached the Tobacco Advertising Prohibition Act. Supre's general manager, Stephen Patrick publicly declared he "didn't understand the drama."⁷

I am even finding song lyrics are feeding my rage...I am no prude but really, can it be good to have lyrics like this, featured in a current top 40 chart song, pumping through our girls' brains whilst they are zoning out with their iPods *"I need you to dance I need you to strip, I need you to shake your little ass and hips, I need you to grind like you're working for tips."*⁸ I find myself having to explain to my daughter Teyah why it is not ok for her to walk around singing the popular, *"I might like you better if we slept together."*⁹

Thank God for singer Pink who dares to challenge: *"What happened to the dreams of a girl president? She's dancing in the video next to 50 Cent. They travel in packs of two or three, with their itsy bitsy doggies and their teeny-weeny tees, where, oh where, have the smart people gone? Oh where, oh where could they be?...Maybe if I act like that, that guy will call me back, Porno Paparazzi girl, I don't wanna be a stupid girl."*¹⁰

Dragon Slayers

I have decided to make a stand. I have actually made a decision to give up my successful career as a teacher and education consultant to peruse working with young women (I now run workshops for teenage girls in schools, these encourage the Princesses to awaken¹¹). On the home front (where, let's face it the battle lines can be harder to draw), I have also made some simple changes. I do not buy Bratz dolls or merchandise, I tune in to another radio station when songs come on that are misogynistic and I have encouraged my daughter to be interested in Tae Kwon Do, a sport that encourages awareness of the body and assumes women are powerful. I love that her Tae Kwon Do teacher is young woman, a Commonwealth gold medalist who is caring and funny. A real-life Princess Fiona.

We have also started to have some very interesting conversations about beauty. When I first saw one of her teachers, I commented that she looked really pretty (she is blonde, slim, well dressed). Teyah replied, "She is pretty on the outside but not on the inside Mummy, she yells all the time. " I stand corrected.

There are a number of things we can all do to make our girls more resilient. Professor Susan Paxton, an expert on body image who runs the excellent *My Body My Life* (a free on-line series of workshops for young women¹²), believes parents have a huge impact on their daughters. She believes that if we complain about how we look and how we feel when we get on the scales in the morning, we are teaching our daughters to judge ourselves based on our looks; we are teaching them that our bodies are our enemies.

⁷ As reported in The Age, April 3rd, 2004

⁸ Notorious Big "Nasty Girl."

⁹ Queens of the Stone Age, "Never Say Never."

¹⁰ Pink, "Stupid Girl."

¹¹ www.enlightenededucation.com

¹² <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/psy/projects/bodylife/>

We need to model respect for our bodies and show our daughters how to treat themselves. For my daughter and me, giving each other pedicures and relaxing in a bubble bath together is not seen as indulgent – it is a recognition of how much we value our bodies and each other. My husband takes her with him when he exercises in our garage; it is their special time to focus on their health and strength. Despite what the diet industry would have us believe, our bodies are not “toxic”, although our thoughts can be.

Our daughters also need to be introduced to the power of positive self-talk; learning how to use affirmations, and focusing on their strengths rather than their perceived weaknesses and flaws. These strategies can have a huge impact on how we all see and respond to the world.

Happy Ever After?

There really is no magic wand that can be waved to make things right. But we must not allow that to be an excuse to do nothing.

Maria Tatar, Harvard folklorist and editor of *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* discusses the role of traditional Princess tales: "Culturally, these stories impress upon girls the importance of beautiful dress and gorgeous good looks, but in many of the original versions of these classic fairy tales, the girls are feisty and cunning; they use their intelligence and work very hard to liberate themselves...transformation is at the core of all the princess fairy tales. Young women, often poor, sometimes even almost animal-like, end up with all the power in the end. Little kids, even very young ones, can understand who has the power, and that has always been part of the attraction."

Bring on the feisty, liberated Princesses.

About the writer –

Dannielle Miller is an experienced educator who has worked in schools on various programs designed to improve self-esteem and resilience in young people. She is one of the founders and a National Director of **enlighten education**, a company that runs self esteem and body image workshops for girls in schools, and thoroughly enjoys the work she does with thousands of teenage girls each year.

Dannielle is also frequently invited to speak at national and international conferences on education and self esteem, and is used by the media as an expert on adolescent girls. In June 2007 Dannielle will present a workshop at the international conference on the media's impact on body image, "Turn Beauty Inside Out", in New York.

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