

An overview of the *Healthy Body Image: Teaching Kids to Eat and Love Their Bodies Too!* curriculum guide for upper elementary school age children.

**Preventing Body Image, Eating
and Weight Concerns Before They Start**

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Body image concerns and disordered eating habits are extremely difficult to change once established. We need to check these problems before they start. This purpose drove the development of *Healthy Body Image: Teaching Kids to Eat and Love Their Bodies Too!* (1) a primary prevention curriculum for upper elementary kids.

Our culture virtually demands a body size and shape that is not realistic for most, especially females. In addition to "ideal" slender images awash in a sea of low nutrient treats, we are surrounded by admonitions directed at no one in particular (and therefore to *everyone*, regardless of size, age or fitness level) to "lose weight." Too often even the medical community still prescribes "dieting" and a goal weight, rather than healthy behaviors and acceptance of the natural weight that results. Captivated by TV and glossy media with chips and sodas in hand, kids are seduced by the irrational message that image and beauty (read *lean*) are "everything," and that people have only have themselves to blame if they don't "get the *right* body." The result? A pubescent girl in 2000 has a *slim chance* of growing up to feel comfortable in her innate body or safe trusting her natural hunger. Boys are affected too, as the media aims to stimulate sales by provoking male appearance insecurity.

The lessons in *Healthy Body Image: Teaching Kids to Eat and Love Their Bodies Too!* are structured as *antidotes* to the prevalent cultural myths that encourage unhealthy body image attitudes and eating habits. Many teachers see the need for prevention in upper elementary school, but don't have time for another "add-on" curriculum. They like *Healthy Body Image* because the lessons fit into existing science, social studies, health, literature, and art classes. The model, adaptable for use with any age student, is a three-part approach, as follows:

First kids learn what is *not* in their control about body size and shape. Body appearance can change rapidly and dramatically with puberty. *Healthy Body Image* teaches kids ahead of time what to expect, including the natural rounding out that is often misinterpreted (and mislabeled by well meaning adults) as "getting fat." Puberty spans several years, and kids learn not to make judgments on their evolving shapes - *especially* while the cards are still out. Three biology lessons demonstrate that the extent of our influence over body size and weight is *limited*. Kids consider their genetic heredity and the internal weight regulatory system, discovering that even if eating and activity were identical for all, we would still be vastly diverse in shape, fat to thin. A fun and experiential look at the role of hunger and the consequences of its restriction reveals the counterproductive results of "dieting" (Example 1) Kids learn that, despite common misconceptions, manipulation of eating and exercise is *not* the whole story when it comes to weight!

Second, kids learn the goal is to *discover* (not achieve) their healthy weight_ by satisfying hunger with plenty of wholesome food and limiting sedentary entertainment choices. Children consider their daily choices to answer "Do You Eat Enough?," and "How Much Are You Active; How Much Do You Sit?" Whether slim or fat, children who routinely spend their hunger on low nutrient foods are startled to discover that while they are satiating their hunger, they are *not eating enough* (of what their body needs.) For a treat-eating fatter child who has heard again and again that s/he eats "too much," this can be revolutionary! Most kids are startled to see how much of their day they are sedentary. The information gleaned is so much more *useful* than the well intentioned but counterproductive measurement of body fat or weighing to which kids are frequently subjected.

Finally kids learn to resist conflicting cultural messages and pressures. Four literature and social studies lessons provide historical perspective on today's body image attitudes, while teaching kids to be wise to the purposes, methods and influence of advertising and mass media. An introspective art project requires students to take a balanced look at *all* the many parts of who they are; stressing that "looks" is only one aspect of identity.

Lastly, kids consider what might have happened if the Ugly Duckling had *stayed* with the ducks. This discussion encourages children to choose friends, role models and heroes with whom they can feel good about themselves.

The initial short term measured outcomes with *Healthy Body Image* were remarkably positive. (2) The data from a second, controlled study is currently under analysis, but results are consistent, showing significant positive change pre to post test on 9 of 14 scales for 472 fourth to sixth graders who had the lessons. In contrast, no change was noted in a control group of 89 students from the same schools.

Preliminary analysis of the first longitudinal data is also promising. In a follow-up study, 52 eighth grade students who had the curriculum lessons 2 years prior (in sixth grade) scored significantly higher than any other group, including a group of 42 eleventh grade students from the same school who had never been exposed to the curriculum lessons. Following brief "booster" lessons, the post-test scores of these 8th graders improved even more, and were far above any others in the total test group of 527 students. While the lack of a control group makes it impossible to say for certain whether the early "inoculation" is what made the difference for these students, clearly the numbers are encouraging.

Conclusion: Much remains to be learned about early intervention to promote healthy body image attitudes and prevent eating concerns. However we know that the alternative (waiting until problems occur - as is the current norm) is unconscionable for most of us. In today's American milieu of conflicting, counterproductive and even dangerous "solutions" to unhealthy body image attitudes, unhealthy lifestyle choices and spiraling weights (too often unwittingly promoted by well meaning medical professionals), an early dose of sanity is essential. A positive, proactive approach opens the door to avoid the words spoken by many *Healthy Body Image* teachers: "*I wish I'd had these lessons when I was in fourth grade!*"

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- 1) Kater, K *Healthy Body Image: Teaching Kids to Eat and Love Their Bodies Too!* Seattle, WA, Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention (EDAP); 1998.
 - 2) Kater K, Rohwer J, Levine MP, An elementary school project for developing healthy body image and reducing risk factors for unhealthy and disordered eating. *Eating Disorders: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention*. 2000; 8 (1): 3 - 16

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