

A Holistic Approach to Promoting Healthy Body Image, Eating, Nutrition, Fitness and Weight in Children Today Helping Without Harming, in Schools and at Home

Kathy J. Kater, LICSW

Reprinted from Absolute Advantage, Wellness Council of America

At a time when they should feel secure about their body's growth, too many children today learn to feel anxious about size and to make choices that cause the very problems they hope to avoid. By the time they are in sixth grade, over half of America's girls personally relate to the words of this older teen:

Actually I felt pretty good about my body until about 6th grade.

But then everyone else hated theirs so I thought I should too.

Roughly 75% of today's adolescent girls of every size say they are unhappy with their weight. "Feeling fat" is by far the most common reason for this dissatisfaction. In turn, the vast majority of girls today—up to 70%—learn from the media, their peers, their families, and their communities that they should engage in "dieting" (restrictive eating for the purpose of weight loss) to try to achieve the slender figure that will be deemed acceptable. Once prevalent only among college age females, "feeling fat" (always with a negative connotation) and the belief that they should restrict eating to lose weight now affects a significant number of grade school children. In a recent study, 78% of girls in grades three through five said they were "very afraid of gaining weight" and 35% (still in their prime growth years) had already tried dieting to shrink their size.

The compelling wish to be thin or lean at all costs provides the seeds for a host of body esteem, eating, fitness and weight problems that are extremely difficult to reverse once established. Children who worry about being (or becoming) fat are self-conscious, anxious, distracted and preoccupied by food, and sometimes depressed. Precisely at a time when their primary developmental task is to discover *who they are*, they feel they should worry more about *how they look*. In response, unhealthy eating is virtually guaranteed as eating with the goal of forcing their bodies to conform to a prescribed size takes precedence. Dieting for weight loss requires that the dieter disconnect from internal hunger cues to eat according a prescribed plan. In response, children who are put on diets learn not only to feel that their innate appetites are bad (too big), but that in order to be acceptable, they must hide what they want—adequate food of course, but other unique drives as well. This disconnect has long ranging and destructive repercussions both physical health and emotional well being.

The negative effects of anxiety about weight are easily seen when we step back from mainstream pressures that urge this worry. Even parents who themselves are still hooked by the thin ideal and diet mentality do not want their children to suffer the consequences of body dissatisfaction and poorly balanced or inadequate nutrition. Yet—especially under the influence of headlines announcing a "war on obesity"—parents worry, "Doesn't my child *need* to worry about fatness to avoid becoming unhealthily fat?" This question is best answered by asking another: since the drive to be thin, dieting for weight loss, and exercise for the purpose of burning calories have become a normative quest in the past forty years, have people succeeded in their goal? Given the number of participants and America's "can do" spirit of America, one could surely expect to find a slim and trim nation by now. The fact is, as unprecedented weight loss efforts have consumed our population, America has simultaneously become the fattest nation on earth. Yet, despite clear evidence that this is not coincidental, virtually all "solutions" continue to ignore the big picture: the thinner we have tried to be, the fatter we have become.

Fortunately, enough is now understood about the causes of body image, eating, nutrition, fitness, and weight concerns to turn this around. The Model for Healthy Body Image (MHBI) provides a new, holistic approach to help individuals, families and school communities to value health and resist pressures that promote negative body images and counterproductive lifestyle habits. The concepts in this model have been tested clinically, and in a popular and successful curriculum called *Healthy Body Image: Teaching Kids to Eat and Love Their Bodies Too!* This curriculum demonstrated very positive results in outcome studies with students in grades four through six, and it is endorsed by the U.S. Department of Health Office of Women's Health in their *Bodywise* information packet for educators. A companion book for parents, entitled *Real Kids Come in All Sizes: Ten Essential Lessons to Build Your Child's Body Esteem* is now available to help parents to reinforce the same health principles at home. With this holistic model, children—as well as their parents and teachers—can avoid problems of prior approaches and embrace a more successful way.

Problems with Non-Holistic Body Image, Eating, Fitness and Weight Models

Various perspectives and programs targeting one or another type of body image, eating, fitness or weight problem are currently promoted to lay and professional audiences. For example, approaches initiated primarily by eating disorder prevention advocates battle the unrealistic *thin-ideal* and the all-pervasive diet mentality (and diet industry) it has spawned. Other “camps” have declared a “war on fatness” and urge weight loss plans as essential to the health of the American public. A growing number of activists urge a return to intuitive eating and size acceptance, angry about the oppressive and pervasive power of weightism and the shame about hunger this encourages. For the most part, proponents of each of these perspectives are driven by valid concerns. Unfortunately, the recommendations provided by these diverse models routinely conflict or discount serious deficiencies. With a blind eye to the legitimate arguments of alternative perspectives, solutions are proposed that are too often short-sighted, blatantly flawed, and ultimately perpetuate problems. In this light, how can we be surprised when the public is confused, frustrated, and in many cases, complacent about healthy lifestyle choices?

It is clear that a broader, more holistic perspective is needed that simultaneously targets the seedbed for the unrealistic drive to be thin, the rising rate of fatness, and weightist attitudes that deny the integrity of size diversity *without contradiction*. The MHBI was designed for this purpose. The model is based on the supposition that any viable solution must recognize that unhealthy weight (over- or underweight), values and choices about eating and physical activity, the pervasive thin “ideal,” negative body image, the diet mentality, and weightism are not separate concerns, but are all part of one dynamic, interrelated problem.

Development of a Comprehensive Model: The MHBI is a pro-active, comprehensive health promotion model, built on the principle that positive body esteem and internal hunger and weight regulation are fully functional in healthy infants at birth. Ideally, all that is needed is a supportive environment for these to be maintained. Therefore, if problems occur among large numbers of people in a population, it is assumed that these are culturally mediated, not due to individual weakness or circumstance.

Concepts contained in the MHBI are a response to a set of pervasive, distorted, culturally transmitted beliefs that together have proven to promote unhealthy body image, eating, fitness, and weight problems in modern Western environments. This set of *toxic myths* serves as the seed-bed out of which problems take root and grow. The model provides ten irrefutable prevention principles or *antidotes* to directly challenge the premises of these myths, and empower resistance to their

negative influence. In turn, healthier attitudes and behaviors are maintained or reinstated. The antidotes teach a) the biological limits to manipulation of body size and shape through healthy means, b) choices that enhance healthy weight, body image, and self esteem, and c) actions for resiliency in the face of conflicting messages. Figure 1 illustrates this organization.

The MHBI vigorously avoids short-term-only solutions. It rejects methods that appear to solve one problem, but at the expense of another. The goals and the means to reach them—healthy body image attitudes, healthy lifestyle choices, and healthy weights—are equally attainable for *all*, regardless of size, shape, weight, age, gender, socio-economic status or cultural milieu. As such, the model is non-discriminatory, simple enough to be taught to children as well as adults, and equally useful for prevention or reversal of problems.

Interdependent Toxic Myths are Challenged by the MHBI Antidotes: As with any holistic model, it is essential to keep all four toxic myths or contributors to body image, eating and weight problems in mind in order to avoid solutions that conflict (see Figure 2). The myths are summarized here, followed by the prevention principles or antidotes that challenge their unreliability.

Myth 1: Image is valued over substance: “How I look” is more important than “who I am.” An essential criterion for the “right look” is a thin or lean body: Given the human need for inclusion, that which is perceived as normal carries tremendous value. Insecurity about meeting the current accepted standard is a desired outcome for advertisers who can then offer products that promise to correct the perceived deficiency. In this way, intensive, systematic marketing that presents ultra thin females and highly sculpted males *as if they were normal* has been very effective in creating tremendous appearance anxiety in general and fear of fatness in particular in individuals who naturally want to be normal and fit in.

The MHBI antidotes teach children to resist to objectification:

- Acquire historical perspective on today’s body image attitudes. Understand that an emphasis on an “ideal look” is a set-up for unhappiness.
- Develop a strong sense of identity based on a balance of *inner* qualities rather than on appearance.
- Become media literate and recognize advertising strategies. Think critically about media messages that encourage unrealistic, unhealthy body image attitudes and low nutrient, sedentary lifestyle choices.

Myth 2: Denial of biological diversity: Anyone can be slim if he or she works at it. Fatter people inevitably eat too much and/or are inactive. Fat is bad/wrong.

For the drive to be thin to be widely embraced, biological diversity of size and shape must be generally denied. The current norm is to mistrust the body’s ability to regulate weight if/when the end result is or might be visible fat. Instead of accepting that wholesome eating and fitness result in diverse but healthy fat to lean body compositions for each individual, external standards are trusted to determine the “right” weight. Since any degree of fatness is assumed to be bad, prejudicial attitudes regarding it have become rampant.

The MHBI antidotes teach children the biological principals of size diversity:

- Understand the normal, expected addition of body fat that is common during puberty and other developmental stages of life.
- Respect and appreciate the genetic diversity of body shapes and sizes.
- Understand how the internal weight regulatory system *limits* the extent of long-term control that is possible over weight.

Myth 3: Denial of the universal effects of externally prescribed hunger regulation: Dieting is an effective weight-loss strategy: Given the drive to be thin and denial of size diversity, a means of achieving weight loss is needed. Since restrictive eating results in short term weight loss for most people, this is routinely presented as evidence that anyone can be slim(mer) if they work at it. Denial of the long term, counterproductive effects of dieting for weight loss is essential to support the drive to be thin. Most people (including many medical providers) continue to blame a dieter's lack of willpower, rather than accept that the method is intrinsically flawed. Beliefs about the efficacy of dieting are boldly transmitted without qualifiers side by side with the thinness schema, creating dual pressures for an unsuspecting public who are not well educated about the expected and predictable outcomes: Preoccupation with food, ravenous hunger, disconnection from internal hunger cues, moodiness, compulsive rebound eating, and regained weight (often with added pounds.)

The MHBI antidote teaches children the facts about dieting for weight loss:

- Recognize that there are predictable, counterproductive results when hunger is restricted according to an external plan. At least 90% percent of weight lost through dieting is predictably regained, usually with added pounds.

Myth 4: Discounting health; complacency about lifestyle choices that do not result in the desired look: "Eat, drink, and be merry." Healthy choices (for health's sake) are too much work. In a context in which appearance, the drive to be thin, denial of biological size diversity, and the diet mentality dominate, the primary purpose of eating and fitness as a valued part of life are lost. Frustrated that dieting and exercise do not provide them with the promised lean look, many become complacent or defiant about choices for the sake of health: "Why should I eat healthy (or be active) if it won't make me thin?" Unregulated marketers capitalize upon this, promoting an expanding array of cheap, readily available, highly flavored, seductively packaged, high energy/low nutrient treats as if these were the basis for a healthy diet, along with an expanding array of sedentary entertainment options. Awash in this environment, the number of people who routinely override their internal hunger and weight regulatory system, are poorly nourished, and lack basic fitness has increased exponentially. Since the ensuing recommendations generally urge restrictive eating for weight loss as the solution, problems are thus perpetuated.

The MHBI antidotes teach children to value health, not size:

- Value balanced nutrition in its own right. Satisfy internal hunger cues with enough wholesome foods to provide the nutrients and energy needed. Enjoy entertainment eating that does not crowd out hunger needed for balanced nutrition or ignore hunger satiation.
- Value movement in its own right. Spend enough time and energy in physical activity to maintain fitness level throughout the life cycle. Enjoy sedentary entertainment that does not interfere with activities that maintain physical strength, agility, and endurance.
- Accept that diverse sizes result from healthy choices. Seek realistic role models that enhance self esteem. Resist pressures about prescribed weight standards, dieting, and an imbalance of sedentary entertainment

In practice, the MHBI concepts are best conveyed through simple language using examples, stories, and experiential activities. Interested readers may find it helpful to obtain the *Healthy Body Image* curriculum or *Real Kids Come in All Sizes* for engaging methods of effectively teaching these concepts. These publications may be ordered from www.nationaleatingdisorders.org (click on NEDA Store). The Body Image Building Blocks (Figure 3) and Ten Essential Lessons to Build Body Esteem in Children and Adults (Figure 4) demonstrate how the same MHBI messages may be

presented in diverse written formats. These and other educational handouts may be downloaded from www.bodyimagehealth.org and copied for educational purposes or home use.

Conclusion: More remains to be learned about challenging the destructive messages that erode body esteem and cause eating and fitness habits to be devalued. However, in today's milieu of conflicting, counterproductive and dangerous "solutions," the maxim, "first, do no harm," was never more relevant. A holistic, comprehensive, fundamentally sound, non-contradictory, non-discriminatory approach is essential to reverse the current trend. The MHBI is a proven, common sense, health promotion alternative that satisfies these criteria.

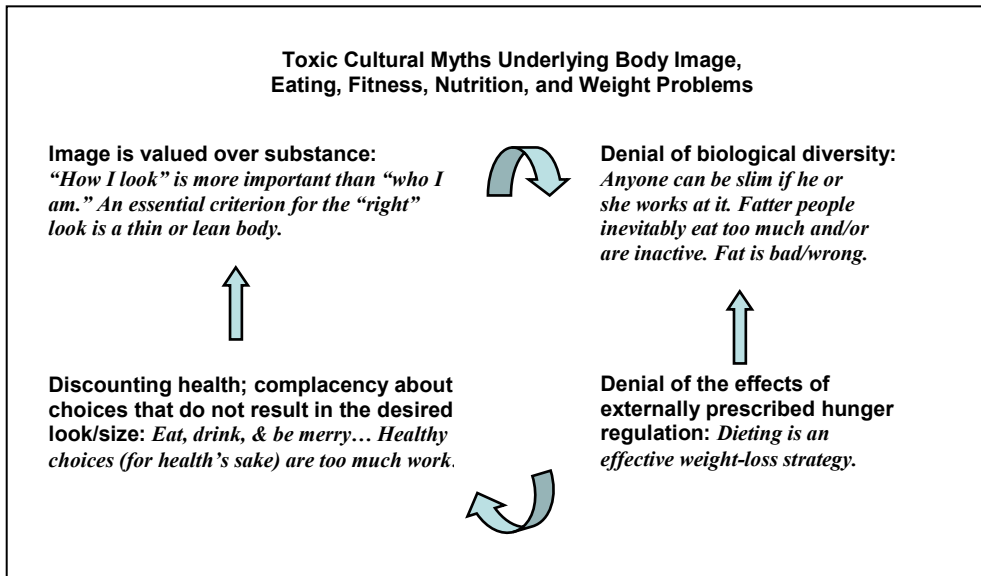
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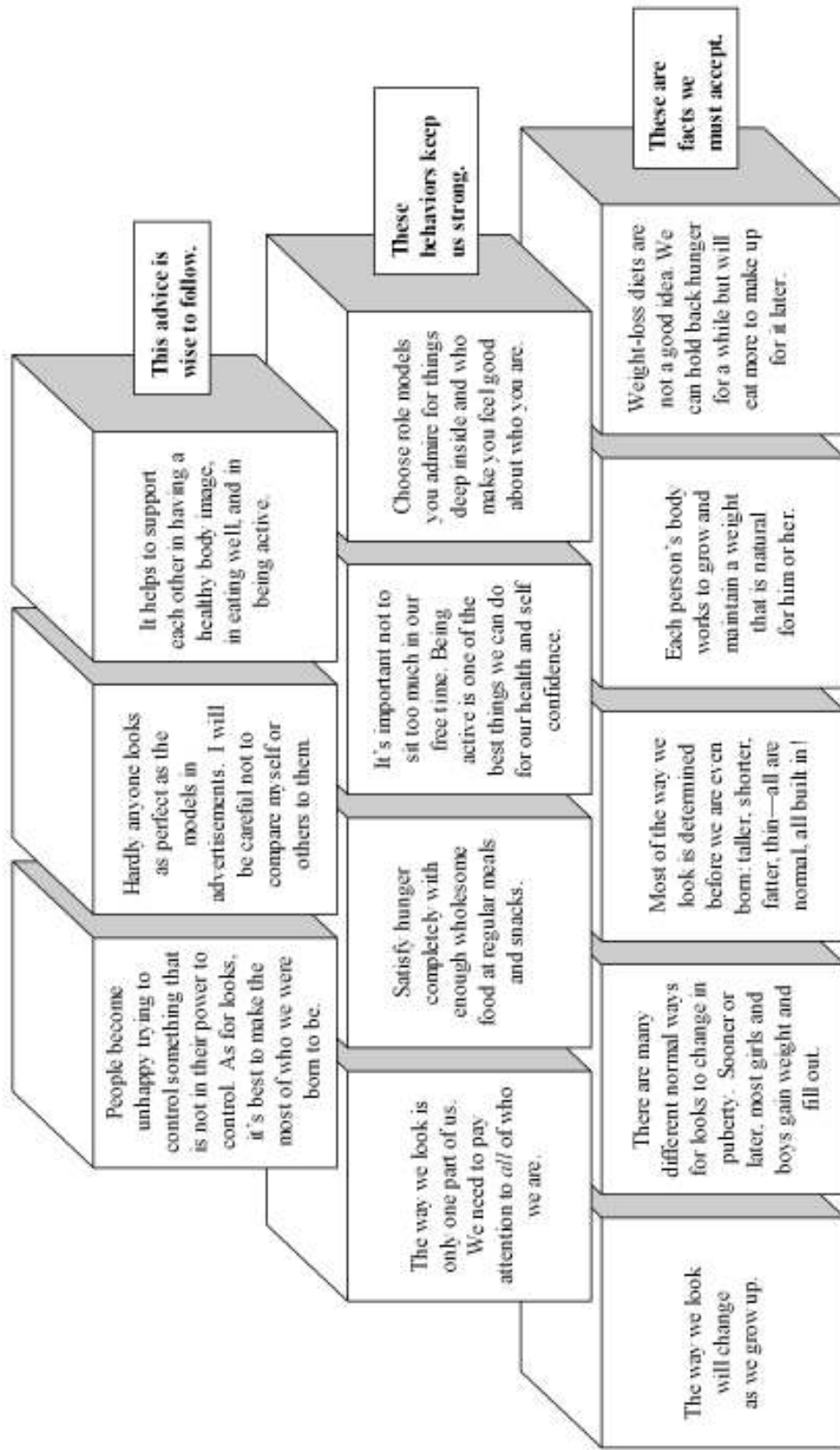
Figure 1

THE MODEL FOR HEALTHY BODY IMAGE			
Conceptual Building Blocks	Foundation	Desired Outcome	Goal
<p>Developmental change is inevitable. Normal changes may include weight gain and temporary out-of-proportion growth. Fat does not, by itself, define "overweight."</p> <p>Genetics and other internal weight regulators strictly limit the degree to which shape, weight & Body Mass Index can be manipulated through healthy means.</p> <p>Restricted or restrained hunger (dieting) results in predictable consequences that are <i>counterproductive</i> to sustained weight loss and interfere with normal hunger regulation.</p>	<p>Recognize and respect basic biology; understand what <i>cannot</i> be controlled about size, shape and hunger.</p>	<p>Accept the innate body: "This is the body I was born to have."</p>	<p>Healthy Body Image</p>
<p>Balance attention to many aspects of identity. Looks are only one part.</p> <p>Satisfy hunger completely with enough varied, wholesome food in a stable, predictable manner on a regular basis.</p> <p>Limit sedentary choices to promote a physically active lifestyle through all stages of life.</p> <p>Choose role models that reflect a realistic standard and enhance self esteem.</p>	<p>Emphasize what <i>can</i> be influenced or chosen.</p>	<p>Enjoy eating well for health, energy, and hunger satisfaction.</p> <p>Create a physically active lifestyle for fitness, endurance, fun, relaxation and stress relief.</p>	
<p>Promote historical perspective on today's cultural attitudes related to body image.</p> <p>Develop media literacy. Learn to think critically about media messages that influence body image.</p> <p>Support others in resisting unhealthy norms about weight, dieting, low nutrient food choices, excessive eating for entertainment, and sedentary entertainment.</p>	<p>Develop social and cultural resiliency.</p>	<p>Develop autonomy, self esteem, confidence, and the ability for critical thinking.</p>	

Figure 2



The Body Image Building Blocks



Ten Essential Lessons to Build Body Esteem In Children and Adults

To begin, accept what is *not in your control*:

- 1) Accept your body's genetic predisposition. All bodies are wired to be fatter, thinner, or in between. This includes fatter in some places and thinner in others. Regardless of efforts to change it, over time your body will fight to maintain or resume the shape it was born to be. You may force your body into sizes and shapes that you prefer, but you can't beat Mother Nature without a tremendous cost.
- 2) Understand that all bodies change developmentally in ways that are simply not in your control through healthy means. You may positively influence changes of puberty, pregnancy and lactation, menopause, and aging by making healthy lifestyle choices, but you will not "control" these changes, no matter how much you try.
- 3) Never "diet." Hunger is an internally regulated drive and demands to be satisfied. If you limit the food needed to satiate hunger completely, it will backfire, triggering preoccupation with food and ultimately an overeating or compulsive eating response. You may lose weight in the short run, but 95% of weight that is lost through dieting is regained, plus added pounds. Dieters who go off their diets only to binge are not "weak willed." They are mammals whose built-in starvation response has kicked in - both physically and psychologically, going after what has been restricted. Scientific evidence has been available on this since the early 1950's, but most people are not aware of the biologically predictable, counterproductive results of "dieting."

Then focus your attention and energy on what is *within your power to achieve*:

- 4) Satisfy hunger completely with plenty of wholesome, nutrient rich foods chosen from the core of the food pyramid - *eat well!* In today's world, surrounded by taste stimulating, cheap, cleverly advertised, readily available, low-nutrient entertainment foods, learning to *feed* your body versus merely "eat" is an essential difference.
- 5) Limit sedentary entertainment. Move aerobically, if possible, on a regular basis. Everyone who is not medically inhibited, regardless of size, can and should develop a reasonable level of fitness and maintain it throughout the life cycle.
- 6) Understand that if you eat well and maintain an active lifestyle over time, your best, natural weight will be revealed. Set a goal to eat well and be active. Don't be swayed by whether or not this makes you thin. Healthy, well fed, active bodies are diverse in size and shape, from fat to thin and everything in between. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise, not even your doctor, who may be caught in unhealthy cultural myths about weight.
- 7) Choose role models that reflect a realistic standard against which you can feel good about yourself. If the "Ugly Duckling" had continued to compare herself to the ducks she'd *still* be miserable, no matter how beautifully she developed.
- 8) Maintain your integrity as a human being. In spite of advertisements seducing you to believe that "image is everything," *Never* forget that how you look is only one part of who you are. Develop a sense of identity based on all the many things you can do, the values you believe in, and the person that you are deep inside.
- 9) Become media savvy. Educate yourself about the hidden power of advertisements. Advertisers spend tons of money on strategies specifically designed to make you feel there is something wrong with you. Why? If they *first* advertise an unrealistic standard of beauty that leaves you feeling deficient by comparison, a product that promises to improve your condition is an easy sale. Don't be "sold" this bill of goods.
- 10) Encourage your friends and co-workers to join you in developing a healthy, realistic body image. Use the collective energy your group would have spent on hating your bodies to make the world a better place. Help the next generation to develop healthy body image attitudes and learn positive lifestyle habits too.