



Girls Now the Sum of their Body Parts

Melinda Tankard Reist, *The Australian*, December 06, 2007 12:00AM

THE girl stood at the edge of the pool, hesitating. Her family encouraged her to join them. What was wrong? She usually loved the water. But this time it was different. She was wearing a dressing-gown over her bathers. She didn't want to take it off.

"Why don't you want to go in, Lily?" her mother asked.

"Because everyone will laugh at my body and say I'm fat," the girl replied.

My friend's daughter Lily is six. A bigger build than girls her age, but fit and healthy, leaving others behind in school races, she was denying herself the pleasures of a swim because she thought her body would be judged.

So do many others.

A Mission Australia national survey of 29,000 young people aged 11 to 24 released this week has found body image is the most important issue for them.

The annual survey, asking young people to rank 14 issues in order of concern, puts body image ahead of family conflict, stress, bullying, alcohol and drugs and suicide.

The results are disturbing but not really surprising.

Many girls feel disgusted by their bodies, engaged in constant self-surveillance and self-criticism. Their bodies have become an all-consuming project. One in 100 Australian girls suffers anorexia nervosa. Some estimates put the rate of bulimia at as high as one in five. Children as young as eight are being hospitalised with eating disorders. Some hospitals report there are not enough beds to cope with the numbers.

A recent report found one in five 12-year-old girls regularly used fasting and vomiting to lose weight. One in four Australian girls want to get plastic surgery.

Women's Forum Australia recently produced a YouTube film clip about our new magazine-style research paper, *Faking It*. In it, a 10-year-old girl says women's magazines make her want to be thin. She plans to go on a raw fish diet.

Too many girls are trying to imitate half-starved celebrities and airbrushed models in a quest to be hot and sexy. We have allowed the objectification and sexualisation of girls in a culture that is becoming increasingly pornographic. The embedding of sexualised images of women in society has become so mainstream, it is hardly noticed.

Everywhere a girl looks, she sees sexualised images of her gender. She's expected to be a walking billboard for the brands of the global sex industry. Playboy make-up, porn star T-shirts, padded bras and pole dancing for little girls: they're being groomed to turn tricks in their stripper chic.

The nerve-paralysing poison Botox is being pitched to teenagers as a preventative against wrinkles. Growing numbers are having breast implants. Younger women seek Brazilian waxes because their boyfriends complain they are too hairy and don't match up to how women look in porn. Girls have been reduced to the sum of their body parts.

Research links sexualisation with three of the most common mental health problems of girls and women: eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression. The messages delivered by a culture obsessed with body image and sex limit the freedom of girls to explore other facets of their lives. They need to be encouraged to think for themselves, to be creative and imaginative, find meaning in life and make a mark in the world.

So why aren't we doing more about it?

An urgent whole-of-government and community approach is required, recognising what the research says and taking action. Positive body image programs in schools should be mandatory, teaching media literacy skills that help young people recognise damaging messages from popular culture.

There should also be a crackdown on degrading and objectified images of women in the public domain, including outdoor advertising, and an overhaul of the Advertising Standards Bureau and other regulatory bodies that have failed us so badly.

Catherine, a young Melbourne artist and writer who struggles with an eating disorder, wrote to me: "I feel it's essential that not only girls but women are able to identify the real values we should nurture and the deeply dishonest images and ideas we are fed."

That's where a new campaign has to begin, so that Lily and her friends can go swimming without fearing judgment and shame.

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