



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 3-7

About the Author: Adapted from the *Teacher's Resource Kit: A Teacher's Lesson Plan Kit for the Prevention of Eating Disorders*. National Eating Disorder Information Centre, © 1989.

Prejudice and Body Image

Overview

This lesson lets students take a good look at our society's pressures to conform to standards of beauty – particularly to be thin – and the related prejudice against being “overweight.” Through class discussion and activities, students begin to recognize how the media pressure us to achieve a certain looks and how media images may lead to prejudice against those who don't conform to their standards of attractiveness.

Outcomes

Students demonstrate:

- an awareness of the media's role in dictating standards of attractiveness to society.
- an understanding of how media images can affect their own feelings towards their own bodies and towards others.
- an understanding of how unattainable these standards can be for much of the population.

Materials & Preparation

- Review the teaching backgrounders *Body Size Introduction* and *Some Myths About Obesity*
- Prior to class, have students bring in magazines
- Photocopy *Story Starter*

The Lesson

Discussion

Begin the class by explaining that there are billions of people living on the earth, each one unique in their colour, size, features and personality. Each one of us has traits that make us unique. Some of us are small, some of us are big; some are fair, some are dark; some are girls, some are boys. Tell students to look around the room at their classmates – look at all the differences between just the people in this one room!

The people that we see in the media represent only a small percentage of the different types of people that live in the real world, and this is a problem. When we see the same type of people each time we turn on our TVs or open a magazine or when we are told in advertisements that it is better to look like one type of person than another, it can make us dissatisfied with the way that we look – with our **body image**.



- What makes a body healthy? (*Balanced diet, exercise, lots of sleep etc.*)
- Do you have to be thin to be healthy?
- How might wanting to look like the people we see on television and in magazines be a negative thing? (*People who desperately want to be thin may develop eating disorders, exercise obsessively, or turn to smoking or drugs as a way to control appetite. They may develop low self esteem and become depressed if they can't change the way they look.*)

Think about the people that you see on TV and in advertisements in North America.

- What are some words that you would use to describe the women?
- What are some words that you would use to describe the men?
- What is the message that these images tell us about how people should look?
- Think of your own family and friends – do they look like the people you see in the media?

The truth is that very few of us look like the people you see in the media. In fact, if you met a celebrity in real life, he or she probably wouldn't look anything like their media image. This is because the images of people that we see in ads or on TV are carefully constructed – photographs are touched up to make them look more attractive, or they are filmed using lots of make-up and special lighting. They even have special software that can alter a picture of someone and give them longer legs, or make even make them thinner. But despite this, many of us are influenced by these images, both in our feelings towards others and in our feelings about ourselves.

Activities

Activity One

Pretend that you are an alien travelling through space. One day you come across a deserted space station from earth. In the space station you find all sorts of magazines (those astronauts got pretty bored just floating through space!). As you've never seen a human before, this is very exciting – so you put together a report on humans based on the magazines that you've found.

In small groups, go through the magazines that you've brought to class. From the images that you see in those magazines, create a description of what a "typical" earthling looks like based on what you've found. (Students might like to create a composite man and a composite woman using bits and pieces of the people they've found in various ads and photos.) As well as physically describing earthlings, what would our aliens say about people based on these magazines (*i.e. humans are always smiling and happy, humans live on beaches, humans wear cool clothes, etc.*). Present your reports to the class.

Activity Two

- Review the *Story Starter* with students. (Teachers can distribute this directly to students or provide verbal prompts and work through the story section by section.)
- After students have finished their stories, discuss how they felt in their "alien worlds." Try to transfer their alien experience to the pressures within our own world to conform to a certain look.



Evaluation

- Alien reports
- Completed stories



Body Size Introduction

Introduction

This lesson lets students take a good look at pressures to conform to standards of beauty – particularly current pressures to be thin – and the related prejudice against being "over" weight. Through class discussion and activities, students begin to recognize how the media pressures us to achieve a certain look and how media images may lead to prejudice against those who don't conform to their standards of attractiveness.

Background

It is important for students to realize that over time, different societies have had diverse notions about beauty. Prior to the 20th century, Europeans and North Americans admired larger women because they seemed stronger and healthier.

Being larger, smaller, taller, shorter, darker, lighter, older or younger has been admired in various societies, for reasons particular to that culture.

Today, we live in a society where thinness is among the more admired traits, where most of us want to be thin (including 80 per cent of 11 year olds) and where fat and fat people are often stigmatized. It has been noted by some that obesity is one of the last socially condoned prejudices in North American culture. In fact, by the age of six, most children have already learned to regard the obese as ugly, lazy, stupid, unworthy, etc.

Pictures portraying images of beauty in other cultures and in other historical periods are useful in demonstrating how ideals are socially constructed. For example, pictures of Victorian women can be used to demonstrate the popularity of the curved figure, achieved through wearing a corset. Pictures of Chinese foot binding can also be used to show how small feet, a sign of beauty in Imperial China, were achieved.

Pressures to Be Thin

A study of women who were Playboy centrefolds and Miss America pageant contestants has shown their body weights and shapes progressively diminished between 1959 and 1979. Over these same twenty years, however, there has been an increase in the average weight for women in the general population, particularly those in young adulthood. Thus, there is a growing disparity between the ideal and reality. One good way of demonstrating this is by collecting and discussing images of women in fashion magazines.

Women respond to pressures to be thin by dieting. A 1978 Neilson survey reported that 56 per cent of females aged 24 to 54 dieted periodically, 76 per cent of whom dieted for appearance, rather than health reasons. The Canadian Weight Gallop Poll conducted in 1984 showed only 17 per cent of women in Canada "eat what they want." More than 80 per cent of women dislike their bodies, and dieting is becoming a concern of women of all ages, from nine year-olds to the very old.

This is not surprising, given that women are constantly told to diet and are made to feel guilty for eating. A survey of women's magazines during the period from 1970 to 1978 found the number of diet articles had doubled from the previous decade. And it's important to note that health is not the primary goal of diet and exercise in our culture: beauty is, health only legitimates it.



Men are not immune to these messages. The result of years of being bombarded by images of buff young men with "six pack" stomachs in magazines, film, music videos and television is a generation of teenage boys who are flocking to gyms in record numbers in an attempt to achieve that "ideal look." *Body image disturbance* is the term used to describe the condition where young boys and men go to any lengths, from over exercising to abusing steroids, in order to reach their goal of a perfect body.

Advertisers, movies and television programs use deeper societal pressures to be thin to sell their products. Having thin, attractive women and men model expensive products and play glamorous characters works to link thinness with wealth, success and happiness. Hip, muscular, young men and thin, scantily clad women in music videos link attractiveness and sexuality with being cool. Using fat women or men to demonstrate "before" pictures in diet ads and to play poor or unhealthy characters reinforces the myth that fat people are poor, unsuccessful, lazy, unhappy and unhealthy.

Ironically, at the same time marketers are spreading the gospel of thinness, they have been identified by health practitioners as a significant contributor to what has been termed an "epidemic" in childhood obesity, through their relentless promotion of junk food, soft drinks and fast food. Children need to become aware of these conflicting messages in order to use their own judgement in determining what a healthy body looks like, and to feel more comfortable with their own self image.

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Some Myths About Obesity

Obesity is one of the few remaining socially sanctioned prejudices. There are four widely shared, inaccurate stereotypes about obesity which perpetuate the prejudice against fat people.

The obese eat more than the non-obese.

In 19 out of the 20 studies conducted before 1979, obese people were shown to eat the same or less than the non-obese, disproving the view that obese people are heavy because they eat more.

The obese are more emotionally disturbed than the non-obese.

Several studies have shown obese people have no more or fewer emotional problems than the non-obese. Personality and level of adjustment also appear to be similar for both groups, despite the fact that the obese must deal with tremendous social pressure against them.

Moderate obesity is associated with increased sickness and death.

Some studies have extrapolated the health risks associated with extreme obesity affecting those who are moderately obese as well. But the Framingham study showed that "over" weight women had a lower mortality risk than "under" weight women. The highest mortality (death) rate for women was for those who were "under" weight. The lowest mortality rates were for women 10 per cent and 20 per cent over average weight. While it may be true that increased blood pressure and deaths due to heart disease may be associated with being "over" weight, there is some speculation that it may be the yo-yo effect of dieting and then regaining the weight that accounts for the increase in blood pressure.

Long term treatment through dieting is successful

Several long term follow up studies have shown that the success rate of diets, over time, is dismal at best. In fact, it is estimated that approximately 95 per cent of diets simply do not work over the long term. Dr. Susan Wooley believes the diagnosis of obesity should be eliminated. She believes that you can't treat something you can't diagnose and that obese individuals should instead be helped to improve their sense of self-esteem.

In any given class, there are probably heavier children who are discriminated against because of body size. In light of this, the challenge for educators is to present information on overweight in a highly sensitive and supportive manner.

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Story Starter

Name: _____

This is a story about a strange vacation you took to another planet in a distant solar system. It tells of the day you were discovered by a spacecraft of aliens and taken away to a strange world. These aliens were *really huge*, they weighed about 400 pounds and were seven feet tall. At first you thought they were ugly. Yet when you arrived at their planet you found that all the aliens were huge, and the largest were considered the most beautiful by this society. When you opened a magazine or turned on a television all you saw were enormous aliens. You also saw advertisements and commercials promising to help the aliens become even bigger!!!! Please write an account of this vacation.

(Story Title)

1. Describe exactly where and how the aliens found you. Did you apply for an ad in the newspaper to go to a strange world? Were you at an amusement park and picked up by aliens who thought you were their friends in disguise?

2. What did they look like? What was your reaction to them? What was their reaction to you?



3. What was the inside of their spaceship like? Were you afraid? How long did the trip take you? How far away was their planet from the earth?

4. Did you meet any creatures your own age when you arrived? How big were they? What was your reaction to them? Did they view you as a strange creature? Did they ask you questions?

5. Imagine that the aliens had television, magazines and films like we do, and in their commercials and advertisements, the male and female aliens were all huge. Write about a commercial that you saw featuring a product that promises to make its customers larger. What is the product that they are selling? A green slime bath that will make their bodies expand? A reverse exercise machine that will add on pounds instead of taking them off? And what does the commercial promise will happen when they become bigger? Will they be more popular and get invited to the Galaxy Space Dance? Will they be more successful and become presidents of their own spaceship companies? Will their lives suddenly become more exciting than the lives that they have now?



6. Why were the most famous and admired creatures also the largest? How did the smaller aliens who were short or thin feel about their bodies?

7. Describe the feelings you had after being on this planet for a few months. Did you start liking the way the aliens looked? Did it make you feel worse or better about your own body size?

8. When and how did you leave? What did your experience tell you about social pressures to be a certain size or shape? If you could give one important message to the people on earth about body size and shape, what would it be?

9. Final Instructions

When you have finished, reread your paragraphs. Add details where you think they are missing. Rewrite the paragraphs with connecting sentences so that they make a continuous story. Read what you have written. Change anything that needs changing. Read and change until you are pleased with your story. **Now try drawing a picture to illustrate your story!**

