

SELF- ESTEEM? IT'S KIDS' STUFF



Photographs by **Matthew Eades**

What's to blame for the epidemic of low self-esteem among young women? Let's move the debate on from skinny celebs – the roots go far deeper than that, says **Dawn Porter**

As a kid, I was always chubby. Compared to my sister, anyway, who was lovingly nicknamed Skinny Malinky Longlegs by the family. I was simply referred to as The Round One. This wasn't meant to be dismissive or cruel in any way, and it certainly didn't bother me – at that age, I wasn't aware I was supposed to be any different. It was my own fault: I wasn't force fed, I just loved pies. In my childhood album, there is barely a photo of me where I'm not wedging some kind of foodstuff into my mouth, as Skinny Malinky looked on in disbelief at my stomach's capacity. Up until around the age of 13, I was comfortable with my roundness, it didn't bother me at all. It's when I was in secondary school that it all went apple-shaped.

At 14, I didn't look in the mirror and feel guilty for eating seven packets of Wotsits because some famous singer had a six-pack; I felt bad because Melissa Hewlett told me I didn't have a waist – “Like a man, y'know?” And because Laura Toogood told me I had black hairs growing out of the end of my nose – something that, to this day, makes me so paranoid that the mere anticipation of any one-to-one daylight conversation has me reaching for my epilator. It's hard to say what the intentions were with these comments. These girls were not my enemies, there was just a distinct lack of moral editing



going on. Still, their casual jibes were what set me up with my insecurities for life.

I've recently been trawling through my teenage diaries and what really struck me is how little, if any, mention there is of media influences. For some time now, much of the discussion around the reasons so many young women feel bad about the way they look has centred on the media: the duality of celebrities being either held up as role models whose plastic surgery-honed bodies we should aspire to, or having their wobbly bits circled and ridiculed in certain magazines. I imagine it would be quite different if I were to read a teenager's diary today – I did try, but couldn't find one willing to show me.

From my diaries, I see that along with my hairy nose and my lack of a waist, I was also riddled with stretchmarks, had a stupid nose, a double chin and wobbly calves – all of which I was continuously reminded of by the girls at school. In a funny way, of course. I probably gave as good as I got, but still – when it's *your* nose, it isn't so funny, is it?

I lost my mum at six. Most of my memories of her are quite distant now, but there is one where she was in the kitchen with a load of her friends, all weighing themselves. They talked about following WeightWatchers like it was the Bible. I was fascinated, but didn't really understand what they were doing as they each took turns to step on and off the scales. Still, it obviously had enough of an impact on me to be one of the very few memories I have of her. I imagine if I had continued to see this throughout my teens, the impact would have been a lot stronger. As it happens, I was raised by my auntie from the age of ten, and for this I am lucky. She was one of those earthy types who would strip naked at the sight of seawater and dive in, no matter who was around. As a teenager, I was in awe of her confidence, but wouldn't even brave a bikini in the garden, let alone on a public ▶

◀ beach. However, something of her 'it's just a body' attitude was lodged in me somewhere, because as an adult I am much more like her than I ever imagined I would be.

At 33, I'm the healthiest I have ever been, off the back of a more relaxed attitude to my body. This epiphany came after years of hiding under baggy clothes and one day realising that the most boring and exhausting aspect of my life was the fact I hated my body. It restricted me in so many ways, so I got brave and stripped off, and realised no one else cared about my body like I did. I was putting the whole thing on myself. That isn't to say I wouldn't change things about myself, it just means I don't let fat days last a month any more. But for many women, their mother's attitude to food and dieting has had a much less positive effect in the long term. In many cases, it is the cause of a lifetime of self-loathing.

On Twitter I asked a simple question: did any of your mothers' attitudes towards food and diets have an impact on your own? Whenever I ask anything about body image, it sparks a debate, but never so much as with this one. For hundreds, thousands, and what I imagine is actually millions of women, the answer is unequivocally 'Yes'. "Mum would only ever talk positively about her body when she had lost weight," Stacey, 23, from Edinburgh told me. And Marcey, 33, from Portland, Oregon, has spent a lifetime feeling ashamed of the way she looks, owing to how her mother and father viewed food: "I was raised by parents ▶



“I realised that the most exhausting aspect of my life was the fact I hated my body”



STICKS & STONES...

GLAMOUR readers reveal the words that hurt them

"When I was about 11, some girls in the playground ran up to me and put their fingers around my ankles because they were so skinny. I don't think they were particularly trying to be mean, they just wanted to measure them. I didn't wear skirts for about 15 years! (And I still wouldn't wear wedges now, for fear of looking like a golf club.)" **Natalie**

"A teacher in primary school, who had taught my older, very clever sister two years earlier, turned to me and said, 'You will never, ever be as good as your sister', and pretty much implied I should stop trying. Cue six years of low confidence, general misbehaviour, bad attitude and academic apathy before I realised, hey, I wasn't stupid after all. Obviously it wasn't all her fault, but if I ever saw her now, I'd have something to say to her." **Lisa**

"My mother used to say, with the best intentions, that I was like her: I'd never be pretty, but I'd be OK. Now, whenever I look in the mirror, I hear a voice saying, 'I'm not pretty.' I hope I never have a daughter, because I don't want that to be passed on to her." **Catherine**

"My sister used to tease me by calling me 'Pyramid Lips' because of my pointy Cupid's bow. I didn't really start wearing lipstick until I was 22. Although now it's red, red, red, pretty much every day." **Louise**

"When I went shopping with my mum as a teenager, we'd be in the changing rooms and she'd always say, 'That's lovely, but why don't you get the next size up?' I took this as the 'mum' way of saying I was too big, and would buy the larger size. This went on for years, until a boyfriend asked why I wore such baggy clothes. I'd got so used to always wearing a bigger size than I needed, I didn't notice that my mum was wrong, and I wasn't as big as I thought." **Rachel**

◀ who were body image-obsessed. As an adult, I even went so far as to have weight-loss surgery (unsuccessfully, I might add) to gain greater acceptance from them.”

“**F**ood served two purposes when I was growing up: reward and comfort,” said Sarah-Jane. “Food as a source of sustenance was of secondary importance.” Sarah-Jane’s mum was a disciple of Slimming World. You were allowed food ‘sins’ each day, but God forbid you didn’t make up for it afterwards. This is something that, even from that brief memory I have of my mum, I picked up on – food is a points system, food isn’t something you eat casually. You control it, and it controls you. I think this was a common sensibility for that generation of mothers. Gossip magazines might have us quivering at the thought of a rogue dimple on our thighs, but Jane Fonda set a firm tone – slim is beautiful, come on, ladies, get to it.

What I have learned from the replies I got on Twitter is that negative body image isn’t something specific to our generation. Our mothers suffered with it too, even though their influences were very different. “I can remember being put on diets as a child, and Mum offering to pay for weight-loss programmes when I was an adult, saying: ‘I just want you to be happy,’” Marcey added. “But I was confused, because she never seemed to find this desired happiness either.”

And there it is, that association with beauty and happiness that we all, even if we don’t admit it, believe: if I am slim, I will be happy. But to be told it as a child cultivates an attitude that a young girl can’t shrug off when she flies the



nest. For most mothers, their child’s happiness is a genuine quest, but as children absorb all that they are offered, any negative association with food they pick up on at an early age will be the voices in their heads forever.

I don’t have children, let alone teenage girls, and I can’t imagine for a minute how

I would manage my own insecurities in front of them if I did. I guess the important thing is to instil confidence about who your child is, rather than a fear of what they could become. That, and to strip off and jump into the sea whenever possible, obviously.

HOW TO GET THOSE VOICES OUT OF YOUR HEAD

The expert tips on getting the confidence you deserve

- **“Let go of negative messages from the past** – remind yourself you’re not in that place any more. Question the hurtful comments: are they really true?” says psychologist Dr Cecilia d’Felice.
- **“Confront people who criticise you,”** says psychotherapist Dr Sheri Jacobson. Explain the impact it has and how it makes you feel.
- **Create a new reality about your body image** Dr d’Felice recommends having a mantra such as, ‘My body is beautiful’ to repeat to yourself when you feel insecure – “Write it down and stick it on your mirror.”
- **Be realistic** – don’t strive for bodily perfection, as it doesn’t exist. The most important factor in developing positive self-esteem, says Dr Jacobson, is accepting who you are.
- **Take responsibility for your own self-esteem** “Don’t look for external approval,” says Dr d’Felice. “It takes time to build up a healthy level of confidence, so stick with it.”
- **Don’t pass on insecurities to your children** “Keep comments about weight or diet neutral and non-judgemental,” says Dr Jacobson. ©

Dawn is a broadcaster and presenter. Her first novel will be published next spring. dawnporter.wordpress.com