



## Body Image Issues in Young Children

By Margie Ryerson, MFT

I've just started seeing a child who, at age eight, is already struggling with feelings that she is fat. Actually, she is tall for her age and thin. "Molly" can recognize that on a rational level her feelings make no sense and are not in accordance with reality, but she still frequently thinks of herself as fat.

Part of my efforts with Molly involve working with her family to see how these feelings have evolved and what her parents can do to help her. This particular family seems to be doing everything correctly, but their daughter still developed this issue. Molly most likely adopted her fat feelings in response to her own issues of anxiety and insecurity. Body image disturbances can arise from a variety of factors, including family, societal, individual temperament, and psychological make-up. Therefore, if your child exhibits symptoms of a body image problem, it is important not to blame yourself as there are many possible explanations.

This type of problem surfaces most commonly in affluent, high-achieving communities where often people push themselves to do the best and to be the best they can. Some children, who may be temperamentally prone to perfectionism or feel that they

don't fit in, focus in on their perceived deficiencies. Finding fault with one's body is a way of externalizing inner dissatisfactions and insecurities. It is easier to "feel fat" in our society than to experience uncomfortable and negative internal feelings and try to deal with them.

Years ago I worked with another local eight-year old who also felt fat despite being a normal weight. "Ryan" had poor social skills and was usually ignored by his peers. He put all of his energies into his schoolwork and felt compelled to stand out in this way. Ryan told me that he needed to work hard so he could get into Stanford. Unfortunately, Ryan's parents had given him this message, and he was only a third-grader! With so many conflicting and uneasy feelings floating around inside of him, Ryan expressed them in the form of feeling fat. In this way, he had a focal point for his anxieties.

Body image issues can lead to serious symptomatic behavior if they are not addressed early enough. Children and teens can develop eating disorders and other compulsive behavior such as over-exercising, cutting, and drug and alcohol abuse.

Children who are overweight usually have poor body

images too, but their perception is based on reality and is not distorted like Molly's and Ryan's. In a future column, we will look at ideas for helping children who have an actual weight problem.

What can parents do to help? If your child expresses unwarranted negative attitudes toward her body, try to explore these feelings with her in a deeper way. Find out all you can about what is going on for her in all areas of her life and try to get at the root of her dissatisfactions or anxieties. If you make no headway, contact a professional who can help before the problem grows in intensity.

In the next Family Focus columns we will discuss ways to help children develop a healthy body image. My book, *Appetite for Life: Inspiring Stories of Recovery from Anorexia, Bulimia, and Compulsive Overeating*, also addresses this issue and is available on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) if you are interested in learning more.

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