

Body Image Concerns & Stressors That May Affect Your Child - What Can Parents Do to Help by Janet Maurer, Ph.D., Director of Counseling Services

Did you know.....

- By the age of eight many children are concerned about their weight?
- By the age of ten 80% of these youngsters have already been on a diet?
- "My best friend Ana" is really a code term for anorexia?
- "My best friend Mia" is really a code for bulimia?

These alarming facts and the cultural, social, and family circumstances which contribute to them were the focus of a presentation to parents by Dr. Ellen Davis. Dr. Davis, licensed psychologist and clinical director of the Renfrew Center, spoke about the powerful mixed messages we receive from the media and each other about our bodies, sexuality, individual differences, and acceptance. Signs and symptoms of eating disorders were discussed, and emotional, social, and family risk factors were reviewed. It appears that for some people questions such as "Am I good enough? Smart enough? Loveable enough?" have turned into "Am I thin enough?" While professionals do not fully understand the causes, issues of self worth, control, denial, and identity may manifest themselves as eating disorders in some individuals.

What can parents do to help their children cope with these pressures? Dr. Davis discussed focusing on the relationship between parent and child and improving communication as the cornerstones of healthy development. Listen to your children and help them explore their values and beliefs as they develop self-awareness. Be aware of your own values about weight and appearance and make sure that your children know that weight and appearance should not define who they are. Help children navigate the impact of advertising by developing critical thinking skills, but acknowledge that cultural pressures are intense and difficult to ignore.

For further information: [10 Things Parents Can Do to Help Prevent Eating Disorders](#), by Michael Levine, Ph.D. & Linda Smolak, Ph.D., reprinted with permission from the National Eating Disorders Association.