

# Cambridge academic advises on young girls' perceptions of their body

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A recent study by a Cambridge researcher has uncovered the startling way in which young girls view and feel about their bodies.

With the number of children admitted to hospital with eating disorders rising by 80% over the last 10 years, Dr Terri Apter, psychologist and writer conducted the study with Outline Productions for the Channel 4 programme 'Extreme Parental Guidance' to find out what parents can do to protect their daughters.

Groups of girls aged six, nine and twelve, all with healthy body weights, were invited to have their photos taken before the images were digitally altered to show three bodies getting thinner and three getting bigger. Each girl was asked which image they thought was accurate and in contrast, which one they would prefer to look like. The startling results revealed that many perceived themselves as being larger than they really are and that many already wanted to be thinner.

The [young girls](#) were then shown photos of other girls and women and asked whether they would like to get to know the people in the various photos.

The girls' first response was to judge the people in the photos as interesting (worth getting to know) if they were "thin", but not if they were "fat or chunky". However, their responses were quickly modified when further information about the people in the photo was given, for

example "What if I told you she was a champion swimmer?"

The overall observation made was that girls, at times, adopted but also modified and resisted ideals of the slender female physique. Dr Apter observed how receptive these girls were to changing their views through quiet interpersonal guidance and reflection.

Dr Apter said: 'Of course it is upsetting to see perfectly normal girls feel dissatisfied with their healthy bodies, but the exercise also showed how eager girls are to engage with sensible reflections about the meaning and varieties of attractiveness.'

Dr Apter's research focuses on family dynamics and work and family balance. She is the author of several books including 'Altered Loves: Mothers and Daughters During Adolescence', a New York Times Notable Book of the Year, and 'Confident Child: Raising Children to Believe in Themselves' which won the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International Educator's Award in 1998.

**More information:** Extreme Parental Guidance, Episode 3 was broadcast on Tuesday 23 February at 8:00pm on Channel 4 and can be viewed online on the 4oD website using this link

[www.channel4.com/programmes/jo ... guidance/4od#3036613](http://www.channel4.com/programmes/jo...guidance/4od#3036613)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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