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Self Image and Sexual Health

by Heather Boerner

When Natalie Campbell-Ybarra, 24, got her first bra in second grade, she was just an average tomboy who favored baggy jeans and loose T-shirts. She was totally unaware of how other people saw her.

But after getting that bra, everything changed. She suddenly felt that she wasn't just a kid, but "the girl with boobs." She became self-conscious about people seeing the outline of her bra through her shirts and felt horrible when kids teased her, asking her if she stuffed her bra. "Why would I do that?" she remembers thinking. "Why would I want this?"

Somewhere along the way, she said, she lost touch with her body. She lived in it "and I knew it was mine" but she wouldn't touch her breasts and didn't look at herself in the mirror.

"It was surreal because it was my body but it wasn't me," she says. "I felt removed from the whole situation."

Soon she moved desks to the back of the class and became painfully introverted. She refused to do oral reports because she would have to stand up in front of everybody. She had a hard time concentrating. She stopped playing jump rope with the other girls. Her grades started to slip. She felt depressed and hated her body. As a teenager, she says, all the teasing and assumptions from people who thought she was older than she was and more sexually experienced finally got to her. She started having sex — and not good sex, either. She didn't enjoy it.

"I would have unprotected sex, multiple partners," she says. "I was irresponsible. I never thought about the consequences because it was happening to my body, not to me."

The Task Force

Campbell-Ybarra's story may seem extreme, but it's not, according to a report recently released by the American Psychological Association. The report, issued by the association's Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, analyzed research on girls and sexualization and found that those who felt alienated from their bodies and felt their appearance was the most valuable part of themselves were also more likely to

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experience a number of poor health effects. Those health effects include:

- **Low self esteem:** Eighth-grade girls who objectified their own bodies — treating them as a product instead of as a part of themselves — had much lower self esteem.
- **Impaired thinking:** Some studies associate self-objectification with impaired concentration and decreased cognitive abilities.
- **Poor motor coordination:** One study found that the more a girl viewed her body as an object and worried about her appearance, the worse her motor coordination.
- **Depression and shame:** The report found that girls who objectified their bodies and were dissatisfied often felt ashamed, inadequate, and disgusting. The report also found that the younger a girl is when she starts objectifying her body, the worse the depression.
- **Poor sexual health:** Self-disgust and body shame are associated with diminished sexual assertiveness and reduced condom use.
- **Decreased physical activity:** The report speculates that girls may be less likely to participate in sports and physical activities because they are worried about how their bodies look and how others see them. In addition, this decreased physical activity may account for higher levels of depression and anxiety among girls because they are not doing the exercise that may relieve their anxiety.
- **Increased compulsive behavior:** Girls who objectify their bodies are more likely to have an eating disorder and to smoke cigarettes.

Little of the research so far shows that sexualization is directly responsible for these ill health effects, says task force chair Dr. Eileen Zurbruggen, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. But she says the correlative evidence — that is, the strong relationship between sexualization and all these health effects — makes the task force “pretty confident that sexualization *does* cause these ill health effects.”

“Yes, much of the research is correlational, just like much of the research supporting the link between smoking and lung cancer is correlational,” she says. “But there are populations and measures and these are complemented by experiments as well. The combination tells us a powerful story.”

If what Zurbruggen suspects is true, the story is that three major mental health problems girls suffer from — depression, low self-esteem, and eating disorders — could all be alleviated by working to stop the sexualization of girls.

“It’s almost like a smoking gun of some sort,” she says. “It could help across the board.”

Moving Forward

To improve girls’ lives, the task force made a number of recommendations, including:

- **Improving school media literacy programs for boys and girls.** Zurbruggen says such programs have been

found effective in teaching girls and boys that the physical ideal for which they're striving is often manufactured to make them feel bad about themselves and buy more things. "It's important for boys, too," she says. "Boys don't seem to be sexualized to the same extent, but boys learn to sexualize girls and the impact of that is that they seem to be less satisfied with their partners because they can't live up to those bogus ideals."

- **Providing comprehensive sex education.** Sexuality education that provides information on media, peer, and cultural influences on sexual behavior has the potential to help teens make decisions for themselves, not to live up to cultural ideals.
- **Encouraging girls to find ways to reconnect with their bodies.** Whether it's sports, meditation, or walking, the important thing is that teens "forget their bodies," says Zubriggen. "The important thing is that you think about how it feels to be in your body instead of how you look to someone else."
- **Encouraging increased research on sexualization, especially of young girls.** "The most important finding is how little research there's been on the impact of sexualization on young people, particularly from a developmental perspective," says Dr. Deborah Tolman, a member of the task force and director of San Francisco State University's Center for Research on Gender and Sexuality. "If girls are learning to objectify themselves, to sexualize themselves in early pre-puberty, what's the impact over time on their sexuality, on their good health, on their well being? We need to continue finding the answers to those questions."

Back to Basics

For her part, Campbell-Ybarra has found a way back into her body, and her health has improved because of it. After becoming pregnant four years ago, Campbell-Ybarra says she started to appreciate her body and learn what it was doing. She was able to look at her body in the mirror again.

"I had sex before I got pregnant, obviously, but I didn't enjoy it until I got pregnant," she says. "I know a lot more about my body now. I'm more in tune with it. I know why my weight fluctuates. I feel things now. Like when I get angry, my heart beats faster."

To younger women still dealing with objectification, she says the key is to "own your own body," and adds, "don't try to live up to what other people are projecting on you."

Heather Boerner is a freelance health writer in San Francisco.

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