

Like mother like daughter - The legacy of the dieting mum

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Research is beginning to show just how vital a role mothers play in passing on good eating habits to their children; especially their daughters.

Establishing a healthy balanced attitude to diet at home will form the basis of your child's approach to food for life, and the younger it starts the better because children start to learn from parents from an early age.

"By the age of four Simone was wanting to copy me by trying on my shoes. By four and a half she loved to try on my lipstick" says Bernadine Guillion, a 32-year-old mother and nurse from Lyon, France.

The tendency for girls particularly to mirror not just mother's fashion and beauty routines, but also her attitudes and reactions around food is well documented. A recent study has shown how mothers with overweight have a significantly higher proportion of pre-school daughters with weight problems compared to sons and it is well documented how current obsessions with food and dieting are being passed through female generations.

The fact that a mother's dieting history becomes her daughters' dieting future is being increasingly recognised and is a link that behavioural scientists do not find surprising. Dr Andrew Hill, a senior lecturer in this subject at Leeds University in the UK says it is important that adults around children are aware that their attitudes and behaviour are picked up on whether they are political and moral beliefs or ideas on nutrition and health.

It is not always easy to see how views on food are being transmitted since much of the influence may be passive. It can be as innocent as a mother saying, "I hate my big thighs" and eating differently from others in the family. Daughters particularly, look, listen and learn to use what they have seen and heard to change areas of their bodies with which they are dissatisfied.

In other cases the influence may be much more active and may not simply be restricted to mothers. Family member's desire for girls to look good, which in most cases is simply a euphemism for 'slim', can create difficult legacies for the girl concerned. 25 year old Nora Klein from Bonn, Germany recalls "My parents were like the food police. Both would look critically at what I was eating at every meal, my mother would ask me what I'd had during the day at school as snacks and then patrol the kitchen in the evening to see if I tried to eat anything after dinner. I became completely paranoid and have battled ever since to gain a sense of perspective around food".

References

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