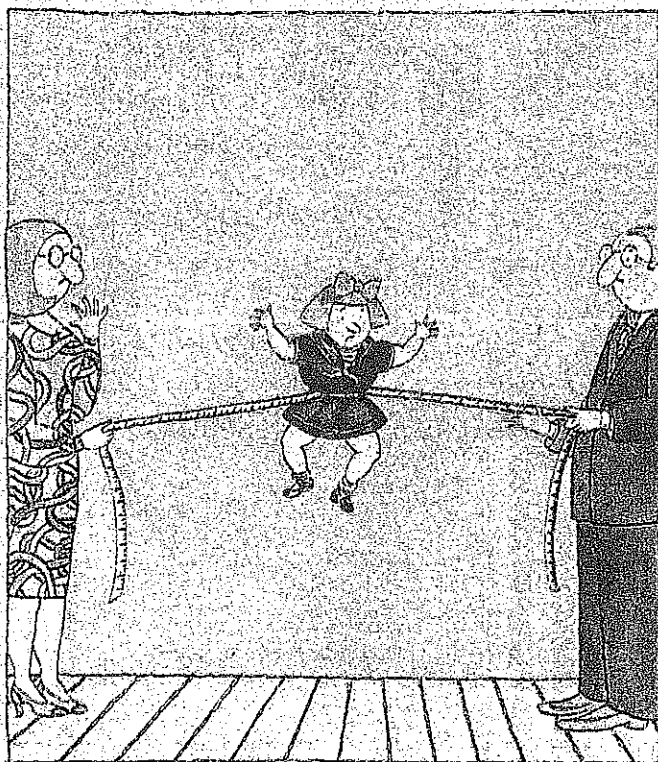


Let Them Eat Cake

Where some parents see fatness, one mother sees only baby fat.

BY MICHELLE STACEY



ONE OF MY DAUGHTER'S best girlfriends has been put on a diet. This friend is not, by any calculation, fat. Her middle is a little thick, her face round and soft about the cheeks and neck. She has the unformed fleshiness that in a less obesity-obsessed time used to be known as baby fat. When the ice cream truck pulls in at the playground and all the children

Michelle Stacey is the author of "Consumed," a history of American attitudes toward food. She writes the "Body Sense" column for Elle magazine.

run for it, her nanny tells her that she is on a diet and can't have anything. She cries about that. She is learning the humiliation of not measuring up to a culture's skewed picture of normal (or attractive) body size; she has just turned 5.

Having seen her body, I imagine it is the girl's parents, not a pediatrician, who have put her on a diet, and in this they would not be unusual. As a generation of maniacally aware parents — well read on the benefits of breast-feeding, the pros and cons of pacifiers and the right sleeping positions for infants —

we are appropriately horrified at the evidence of precocious eating disorders: 80 percent of 10-year-old girls have dieted; two-thirds of girls 13 to 18 are trying to lose weight. We bemoan the social pressure that dictates such anxieties and the low self-worth that encourages them.

But I found something out when I entered the world of daughters and parents: a significant portion of that social pressure comes not from these girls' peers, but from the grown-ups in their lives.

I have seen the anxiety in parents' eyes — mothers and fathers alike — as their young daughters wolf down a slice of pizza or a piece of birthday cake. "Her father is worried that she's chubby," a friend confides as we watch her cherubic 3-year-old climb up the stairs.

Another friend asks for advice about her lanky 5-year-old: "When she wants to just keep eating cookies, should I tell her if she doesn't stop she'll get fat? There's a lot of obesity in my family."

These parents are just as well meaning as those a few years ago who, inundated with information about the effectiveness of low-fat diets, fed their infants and toddlers skim milk and skinless chicken and ended up with undernourished children. And the statistics are indeed alarming: the current estimate is that one out of four children is obese, and that the prevalence of childhood obesity has increased 54 percent in the last 20 years — a fact that can probably be attributed to hours of watching television and playing Nintendo as well as eating junk food.

My friends' concern for their daughters' weight could be seen as a worldly, practical response to two facts: that fat people are discriminated against, and that good looks remain for girls an invaluable passport. But this pressure to be slender — even at the

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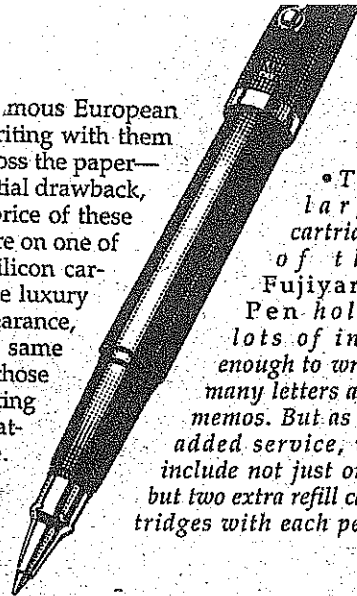
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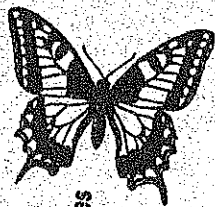
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utterly unreasonable age of 3,
4 or 5, when young bodies are
expanding like plant shoots
in a time-exposure photo-
graph — has, I think, a more
self-serving side as well.

Aerobicized, high-achiev-
ing adults don't want to dis-
play fat children. Fairly or
not, parents are judged by
their offspring and these
days, fat more than ever
suggests sloth, improper
eating habits and a lack of
education. (Will their fat
children get into Harvard?)
In a society where it seems
that the poor eat potato
chips and Big Macs while
the better-off scarf down
diet sodas and low-fat pretz-
els, obesity carries a power-
ful and unspoken message
about social class.

I will admit it: I don't want
my children to be fat either. I
have seen both my son and
daughter morph before my
eyes: round and pie-faced at
6 months (I never knew bab-
ies could have cellulite),
stocky at a year, potbellied at
2, almost slender after 4.
Even now, at 5, my daughter
will seem chunkier one week
and taller and thinner the
next. But any nascent
thoughts I have on changing
this mysterious blueprint
have an immediate brake: I
am more afraid of my daugh-
ter's developing an eating
disorder than I am of her
being fat. An eating disorder
may not be more likely, but
it is far more dangerous.

I have heard experts on
eating disorders despair over
the ever-earlier onset of ano-
rexia and bulimia. Dieting at
a young age, even if it stops
short of anorexia, often initi-
ates a lifelong physical and
psychological struggle with
food. When dieting is im-
posed by parents, it is partic-
ularly damaging.

"Parental overconcern with
their children's weight is defi-
nitely on the rise," says Ellyn
Satter, a family therapist, di-
etician and author of "How
to Get Your Kid to Eat ...

but Not Too Much." "Their
fear of getting fat essentially
acts as a curse on the child's
mental health."

Worst of all, the emotion-
al curse is unredeemed by
any healthy physical effects.
Children defeat diets the
same way adults do: they
cheat, and they become even
more preoccupied with food
and more likely to overeat
whenever possible. One re-
searcher found that the
more parents tried to con-
trol their children's food
consumption, the more like-
ly the children were to be
overweight; the association
was particularly strong for
girls. Although many chil-
dren seem defiant in the face
of parental dietary re-
straints, their intransigence
masks heartbreaking inner
damage: they know that
they have failed, that they
have disappointed the peo-
ple they most ache to please.

The most distressing aspect
of all this, to me, is that the
family itself — the very place
where so much of this anx-
iety arises — ought to act as a
haven against the onslaught
of impossible role models for
girls. The family is where a
girl can hear that not every-
one is or should be a size 6,
that hips and breasts and even
tummies can be attractive at-
tributes of womanhood —
that, most important, their
looks are only one aspect of
who they are.

But the daughters of the
fat-focused parents I know
are instead being given a dis-
piriting confirmation of the
all-importance of shape and
conformity. This harsh les-
son also fosters both a dread
of and intensified desire for
the sweets and treats that
shape their prison. My
daughter's friend, denied
cookies and Popsicles, now
seems continually hungry.
The girl's nanny thinks that
the child has been depressed
since her parents' dictum
came down. I shouldn't
wonder. ■