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The Emotional Effects of Weight Issues on Adolescents in Young Adult Literature

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the College Honors Program

By
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Chapter 1: Dealing With Weight Issues

Concerns over body image have long been prevalent in the United States, for people of all ages. If a person is too heavy or too thin, the pressures set by society to be "normal," or oftentimes "thinner," can be quite difficult to conform to, especially for teenagers. They feel that they must change their bodies to conform to a socially acceptable standard of beauty. The emotional effects stemming from weight issues that adolescents must endure vary from practicing self-mutilation to hating their bodies just because they are bigger. They come to these conclusions based on peer problems, parental judgments, and more, and differ depending on gender. Adolescence is a difficult time, when hormones are raging and bodies are changing, and weight is often an important component that dictates how one feels, even if a person is not over or underweight. Adolescents are easily influenced by the opinions of their peers, their family, and the media about how they should look, and there are many negative consequences that come from just trying to fit in for both males and females at this important stage in their lives.

In adolescent literature, the main focus is generally on the emotional well-being of the child suffering from a weight problem. Many novels illustrate the trials, tribulations, and lessons learned from teenagers battling weight issues. These novels include *Blubber* (1974) by Judy Blume, *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993) by Chris Crutcher, *Keeping the Moon* (1999) by Sarah Dessen, *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* (2003) by Carolyn Mackler, *Gym Candy* (2007) by Carl Deuker, *Does This Book Make Me Look Fat?* (2008) edited by Marissa Walsh, and *Wintergirls* (2009) by Laurie Halse Anderson. Over the thirty six year span in which these books take place, weight issues have become increasingly important. Very few books written today do not include at least one character trying to find him or herself while battling a problem with their weight. Non-fiction texts now touch on weight problems more as

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

well, with examples like *Reviving Ophelia* (1994) by Mary Pipher and *Women, Food, and God* (2010) by Geneen Roth, which have both been written in the past seventeen years.

This thesis is going to delve into the areas surrounding weight problems in four chapters. The first will cover physical health problems that stem from being both overweight and underweight, and will also touch on different ways teenagers in fiction deal with unhappiness concerning their weight. The second chapter discusses the effects of peer relationships on children’s ideas about their self-image, specifically how peers can be some of the most negatively influential factors in a child’s life. It is also true that peers can be some of the most important people for a child with a weight problem, because friends make life more bearable and do not focus on taunting children with weight issues like bullies do. The third chapter brings up the importance of the child’s relationships with his parents and also non-parent adults. In literature, the parents tend to be painted as the problem, whereas the non-parent adult is the outsider who gives the child positive and healthy advice. In general, these novels do follow that pattern quite closely. The final chapter wraps the novels up, showing how each story ends in a way that will bring hope and confidence to any reader who can relate to it. It is something that young adult readers need in order to realize that if they are going through a difficult time, it will not last forever.

Health Issues Brought About By Weight Problems

There are years of research behind the topic of people struggling with their weight, which focus both on obesity and on weight loss disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia. Teenagers in young adult literature often face these problems and must react to the pressures they feel to be the “perfect weight,” even if this means accepting their bodies the way they are, instead of conforming to how they think they should be. Teenagers are more likely to react to negative

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

comments made by family, peers, and the media, instead of choosing to ignore the opinions of others. But they also have the capacity to understand that they can choose to accept, or change, their bodies, depending on their own beliefs.

In recent years, the obesity epidemic in America has been a frontrunner in media stories. This is not surprising, considering that roughly one out of every three American children is overweight or obese today, according to a January 2011 article (American Heart Association). Geneen Roth, author of *Women, Food and God: An Unexpected Path to Almost Everything*, addresses the fact that, “The in-your-face reality of the obesity epidemic- the fact that 75 percent of Americans are overweight- gets endless news coverage” (Roth 52). The fact that it is so prevalent in the media gives children ample time to see the health problems associated with obesity, and understand that being overweight is not a good thing for one’s physical health. While obesity is not always preventable, this number should certainly be smaller than it is today. Exercising more and retaining healthier eating habits are two ways to begin to reduce the number of obese Americans. This is such an important issue, because obesity is about more than just carrying extra weight on the body. There are a multitude of health risks associated with being overweight. According to the website TeensHealth, the health-related problems that can result from obesity include arthritis, asthma, sleep apnea, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, gallstones, insulin resistance, diabetes, depression, and more (Teenshealth). It is heartbreaking to think that children today need to worry about these problems at an increasingly younger age. Before children can even pronounce the word cholesterol, some have to be monitored for it because of their family’s health history. Instead of kids just being kids, they have to grow up faster because their health is in jeopardy. One thing that Roth brings up as an important practice for weight loss is, “Anytime you truly listen to your hunger and fullness, you lose weight” (Roth

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

37). While this might be a difficult practice, the earlier a person learns how to do it, the more likely he or she will attain, and retain, a more positive health status. It is unfortunate for a child to have to worry not only about being a child, but also about adult issues like family health history. One of the greatest problems for adolescents’ weight issues today is the availability of the food that is detrimental to their health. Fast food is the easiest type to get if you are out and on the run, but it is certainly some of the worst food to put into your body. Being overweight as a child is bound to make a person grow up a little faster, if just for the fact that he or she must be concerned about issues that his or her thinner peers cannot relate to.

It is unfortunate that children may think less of themselves if they internalize that their weight dictates who they are as human beings. This fact is illustrated in the novel *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*, in which the main character Virginia is a fifteen year old girl who has been moderately overweight for years. While many of the issues that arise from being heavier are emotional, such as when she feels like she does not fit in with both her family and her world of peers, she gets a rude awakening about her health after her mother brings her to a doctor. The doctor, a sensitive and understanding man, explains to Virginia, “Let me start by saying that I prefer to look at things in terms of *health* instead of *weight*... If you continue to gain weight into adulthood, you’ll be at risk for heart disease, hypertension, even diabetes” (Mackler 63). This is something Virginia has not given much thought to yet, and why should she? As a teenager, she has so many other things to occupy her thoughts that it is not surprising that she has not considered her weight in terms of affecting her health. Instead, she has been focusing on the way that people judge her, which is the way that most adolescent authors have their characters behave. For Virginia, now that it has been brought to her attention that her

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

health is actually at risk, it makes her truly consider how being overweight will affect her life.

She had not really considered the health aspect of her condition prior to this information.

There are more health risks beyond those described in Mackler’s story and the health articles. A research article by Sarvestani et al. (2009) states:

Obesity is the most important nutritional disease in the affluent society...

Some of the physical problems... are hypertension, coronary arterio-sclerosis, elevated cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, joint problems, stroke, and certain types of cancers (Sarvestani et al. 1671).

These physical symptoms are incredibly serious, and children should not have to deal with them at such young ages. Children should be concerned with school and friends, not the meaning of hypertension. There are also psychosocial problems related to obesity, such as “low self-esteem... interpersonal problems, social isolation, low educational attainment, social discrimination, and depression” (Sarvestani et al. 1671). This research article takes physical and psychosocial symptoms into consideration and finds that, “Treatment programs for children should not concentrate solely on weight reduction, but should also encourage children to acquire a healthy lifestyle” (Sarvestani et al. 1673). Generally, it is more desirable for children to begin to eat healthier and exercise, before choosing more drastic solutions that are considered to maintain a lower weight.

What is given less media attention, though it is of equal importance, are the dangers of being grossly underweight. With concern to eating disorders, different but equally terrible problems can occur to a person who is purposely underweight. Anorexia is a disease defined by “markedly reduced appetite or total aversion to food... a serious psychological disorder... the drive to become thinner is thought to be secondary to concerns about control and fears relating to

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

one’s body” (MedicineNet). Anorexia can be life threatening if left untreated; other negative effects include a drop in blood pressure, hair loss, lightheadedness, anemia, swollen joints, brittle bones, etc. In conjunction with anorexia, the disorder bulimia is “characterized by episodes of secretive excessive eating... followed by inappropriate methods of weight control, such as self-induced vomiting, abuse of laxatives... excessive exercise” (MedicineNet). Bulimia can cause constant stomach pain, stomach and kidney damage, tooth decay, loss of potassium, etc, and can be life-threatening as well (Teenshealth).

The severity of eating disorders is broached in *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson. The main characters of the story are two teenagers, Lia and Cassie. They begin the novel as best friends who make a pact with each other to be the skinniest girls in school. After a falling out, they lose contact with each other, and their lives only become interwoven again when Cassie is found dead in a motel. Lia is told, “Cassie had liver damage, her salivary glands were a wreck, and her stomach was distended... her stomach walls had thinned and were showing early signs of necrosis” (Anderson 158). Lia finds this out roughly two-thirds of the way through the novel and she is highly affected by the information. She had never considered the terrible things that could happen to her body from having an eating disorder; she only thought of how she wanted to become skinnier. Again, the theme of emotional effects being more important to adolescents than the physical symptoms becomes clear. Sadly, eating disorders are serious diseases that don’t just go away. In her article “Pleasure, Pain, and the Power of Being Thin: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature,” Beth Younger addresses the fact that, “For many young women controlling food intake provides a sense of power, but that sense of power is false since deliberately reducing one’s body size usually diminishes physical strength” (Younger 51). Younger visibly highlight’s Lia’s problem: having power over her body is highly important,

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

because she seems to feel powerless in many other situations in her life. Lia could not save Cassie. She cannot force her mother to love her. But ultimately, she is still less concerned about physical power than emotional power; her body is truly so broken from her angst, anxiety, and sadness that she must know she lacks much physical control. Just because she is touched by the information she learns about Cassie does not mean she can easily fix her own broken sense of self and stop her self-destructive lifestyle right away. It takes Lia quite a while to learn to love her body and her life in a normal, stable way, and to learn that the kind of power she is after is highly unhealthy.

Self-Mutilation and Honesty as a Means of Escape

Another way that weight issues can be most dangerous is when a person chooses to self-mutilate him or herself. This is an incredibly unhealthy way to deal with unhappiness about one’s appearance, but it is also a fairly common way that very depressed adolescents handle this stress. Some say that they do it because they feel nothing for the other aspects of their lives, and they want to feel *something*. Others believe teenagers use it to draw attention to themselves, albeit in a negative way. Both these reasons support the fact that adolescents in literature tend to feel more connected to the emotional side of their weight problems than the physical side.

Lia, from *Wintergirls*, uses self-mutilation as an outlet for her pain after finding out that Cassie’s last words to her were, “You won” (Anderson 219). Cassie is referring to their pact about being the skinniest girls in school. Devastated, frozen, horrified, and filled with dread, Lia chooses to try and find some kind of feeling again by cutting herself. She describes, “The first incision runs from my neck to just below my heart, deep enough so that I can finally feel something, not deep enough to flay me open” (Anderson 223). She chooses to deal with her unhappiness by mutilating her body. Mary Pipher, author of *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves*

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

of Adolescent Girls, finds that the explanation for self-mutilation is often that, “Inflicting harm on the body becomes cathartic... hurting the self becomes a way to calm down” (Pipher 158).

The knowledge of learning Cassie’s last words is just too much for Lia to handle, and she is an adolescent who describes carrying out these actions just because she wanted to calm herself after hearing something that affects her in a horribly negative way.

Though not quite at the level of physical severity as Lia, Virginia from *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* also goes through a moment of weakness about her size and succumbs to a form of self-mutilation. She is unhappy with what she looks like, so she describes, “I proceed to pinch every unsightly part of my body- my inner thighs, my upper arms, my breasts, my hips... I’m pinching and crying, crying and pinching” (Mackler 76). She puts herself through pain because she dislikes what she sees when she looks in the mirror. For the next week or so she is covered in bruises over her whole body, proving the strength with which she hurt herself. While no blood was shed, this does not lessen the seriousness of her actions. Because of a standard that she feels like she will never fit into, she purposely hurts the parts of her body that do not fit that standard. Instead of embracing who she is, and taking the time to exercise and eat healthier at the request of her doctor, she lets her weaknesses overtake her, and she ends up in pain because of it. She does not take care of her body, addressing her physical problems and trying to become thinner in a healthy way, but her body becomes the place where she takes out her anger, sadness, and frustration in a harmful way. Pipher describes, “Self-mutilation can be seen as a concrete interpretation of our culture’s injunction to young women to carve themselves into culturally acceptable pieces” (Pipher 158). Virginia wants to fit in with the thinner girls she is surrounded by every day. She wants to pinch off the pieces of herself to

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

become “culturally acceptable.” Virginia’s actions are not intended to procure attention, but instead to try and “feel something,” like Lia.

Later in the novel, Virginia again surrenders to her unhappiness and self-mutilates. This time she is angry with her parents, and she burns her finger, purposely, on a candle flame. Her reasoning for this action is, “At least the pain is concentrated in one spot rather than dominating my entire body” (Mackler 134). It was probably easier for her to do this because she had already hurt herself once in conjunction with the emotional distress she was feeling about her body. Therefore, who is to say that these actions wouldn’t open a floodgate of reasons for her to continue these negative behaviors?

Another instance of self-mutilation is present in the short story “Alterations” in *Does This Book Make Me Look Fat?* The narrator of the story is actually the author herself, Eireann Corrigan. Her story explains how she went through a difficult adolescence trying to deal with an eating disorder. She describes, “I was burning myself with an electric iron, searing a pattern of scars into my skin... I’d keep opening up the same marks after they’d scabbed and healed” (Walsh 25). Since this is Corrigan’s true story, it upholds the fact that authors oftentimes write from experience, which gives adolescents a reason to relate more fully to the story. True stories support the fact that self-mutilation does happen, and it is very dangerous.

The benefit of learning about weight issues through reading adolescent literature is that the authors allow their characters to be completely honest with the readers. Often, this is because first person narration gives the reader an uninhibited view into the mind of the main character. This means that the reader gets an incredibly honest and frank explanation about the character’s feelings concerning his or her weight issues. It is a fascinating way to look into an adolescent’s perspective, which would likely not be given if you were to speak in person to a teenager. In

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

reality, teens are often quite reserved and do not speak out much, especially about their own feelings. These novels give an inside look into a world that teens yearn to relate to, even if they do not express this desire.

Virginia from *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*, finds comfort in honesty, with a hint of sarcasm as well. Firstly, she comes up with the Fat Girl Code of Conduct, which has rules such as, “No public displays of affection,” “Go further than skinny girls,” and “Let him get the milk without having to buy the cow” (Mackler 14-15). By including this, the author highlights the emotional vulnerability of the main character. This is the way that she deals with her discomfort of being overweight. It is ultimately another form of self-mutilation, though in this instance, she hurts herself emotionally instead of physically. She jokes it off, while at the same time believing everything that she writes. In a reference to her code, Virginia says, “I don’t candy-coat my lists, so they tend towards the brutally honest” (Mackler 15). Sadly, if this is her being brutally honest, her opinions are quite skewed. She has not been shown that she is as important and equal as any “skinny girl”, which is genuinely shameful.

The next thing Virginia does in her quest to lose weight is put pictures of skinny models on the fridge, to curb her desire to eat what is within it. She says, “*These models will be my Food Police. They’ll be my thinspiration. They’ll help me reach my body goal*” (Mackler 70). Unfortunately, she is taking unrealistic pictures and making them her reality. She is striving to become something that does not exist, instead of just aiming to be healthy and happy. The fact that she is being completely honest about her disgust with her body is important so that the reader can see the mistakes she is making in choosing something unreal to try and become. Her creation of the word “thinspiration” is also interesting, because it supports the fact that she is not striving to become a healthy weight, she just wants to be *thin*. Her idea of thin is distorted

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

because of the photos of the models, but it very much supports the fact that she is embarrassed by her weight and that she is ready to not be considered overweight anymore. Each of these details is emotionally charged; if she were not embarrassed, perhaps her honesty would be directed towards an attempt to become healthier instead of just thinner.

The male protagonist, Eric, from Chris Crutcher’s *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, is another very honest and open character when discussing his weight. He admits that when he was younger, things were more difficult because he did not know how to handle his emotions. Being overweight is truly emotionally and physically difficult for Eric. He says, “It’s really hard to imagine how afraid I was then; how I pulled the covers over my head at night and prayed to hurry up and get older so I wouldn’t care so much” (Crutcher 43). He also admits that his weight hindered his hope for future love. He feels like he does not have a chance with girls because they will only be looking at his body instead of who he is as a person. Eric states, “As a fat kid growing up I just assumed there would never be a girl for me... I think most of us tell ourselves we don’t want what we think we can’t have just to make life bearable” (Crutcher 118). It is not because of any personality trait that he possesses that he believes he won’t find someone; it is solely because of his weight. He is denying that love is purely emotional, since he believes he won’t even have the option of falling in love because he is too large. He is completely honest about his beliefs because he knows how the world treats people who are overweight. He does not think he will have certain things that thinner people are able to have, and it makes him very uncertain of himself.

Equally unstable is Sarah Dessen’s main character in *Keeping the Moon*, Colie, a fifteen year old girl who was overweight in her childhood and early adolescence and now lives with that distressed mentality every day. She admits to the reader, “I had that sudden flash that I was fat

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

again, could feel it on me, like I always did when someone laughed at me” (Dessen 15). Because she was tortured and taunted for being overweight, her mental state has been affected and she is forced to relive the feelings of pain and fear that she recalls from her childhood. It gets to the point where Colie says, “There’s a kind of radar you get, after years of being talked about and made fun of by other people” (Dessen 61). She has not gotten over the way people used to treat her and she still reacts to the things people say as if they were making fun of her weight. This is perhaps something that a person would not immediately recognize if you were to talk to someone face to face. If you were to ask Colie to explain why she reacts negatively to someone laughing at her, chances are good that she would brush it off and keep her feelings about it to herself. Being able to look inside the mind, and subsequently uncensored feelings, of a character in a novel is most fascinating because of the lack of reserve.

Using Food as a Defense Mechanism

Some of these characters choose to use eating as a defense mechanism, where they will eat when they are sad, worried, or angry instead of just when they are hungry. Overeating can easily lead to obesity, especially when the overeater feels like they have little control over the situations in their lives; food becomes the one place they feel they are in control and it becomes very difficult to break away from it.

Carolyn Mackler’s character Virginia is no stranger to eating for comfort. When she is treated like a stranger instead of a sister by her brother Byron, she goes home and decides to “dig through a drawer for a Chinese takeout menu, call up the restaurant, and order mu shu pork and fried veggie dumplings” (Mackler 53). She is feeling vulnerable and disappointed and immediately looks to comfort from food without caring what it will do to her body. Later, when Byron is accused of rape, Virginia deals with this devastating news by breaking her diet. She

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

goes to the movies and recalls, “I buy nachos with melted cheese, a jumbo pack of Sour Patch Kids, and a Diet Pepsi” supplementing this statement with, “*Diet Fact #6: Do not discover that your beloved brother has been found guilty of date rape*” (Mackler 107). Instead of talking with someone, either a family member who understands what she’s going through, or a therapist who is trained to deal with these types of problems, she turns to food. Food is never a good answer, especially if it is greasy or very sugary or fattening, because it is only harming the body. Food cannot answer your frightened questions, it cannot comfort you when you are nervous. It is a filler for a void that would be better dealt with through some form of communication. Gaining weight is truly the emotional response to a physical problem. Emotional reasons are not given enough consideration when people are judged for their weight gain, though they are almost always the underlying problem.

The narrator of Sara Zarr’s short story “It Is Good” in *Does This Book Make Me Look Fat?* also uses food for comfort. She explains, “I’ve always loved food. Always. It’s a passion passed down to me by both my parents” (Walsh 137). She does not think about her health while she is eating; she thinks about how food makes her happy and it makes her forget about the cruel things she is told. Her doctor tells her, ““Just because you’re hungry does not mean you need to eat your way through the entire grocery store”” (Walsh 134). In this case, a person who is supposed to help her through her obstacles is more of a hindrance. He is ultimately as cruel as her peers are.

Geneen Roth, author of *Women, Food, and God*, states that, “When we inhale Reese’s peanut butter cups when we are not hungry, we are acting out an entire world of hope or hopelessness, of faith or doubt, of love or fear” (Roth 2). Both Virginia and the narrator of Sara Zarr’s story have the overwhelming negative emotional feelings that Roth addresses. Virginia

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

feels hopeless within her family and doubtful of what the rest of the world sees when they look at her. Her emotions are in utter turmoil at this fragile time in her life. Roth enhances this idea by writing, “Compulsive eating is an attempt to avoid the absence (of love, comfort, knowing what to do) when we find ourselves in the desert of a particular moment, feeling, situation” (Roth 34). It is difficult for Virginia and Sara Zarr’s narrator to avoid this absence in a healthy way, because they are not given the support that they need.

Though there are many physical problems associated with being over or underweight in society, adolescent literature acknowledges many more of the emotional problems that tend to trigger physical responses. Understanding the health risks associated with weight issues are important, but so is realizing that emotional stability is a foundation which, if cracked, can upset the delicate internal balance of the body. Unfortunately, emotional reactions are highly influenced by the opinions of others, and young adult literature is abundant with proof of this fact. One of the most influential groups for adolescents is their peers, who can be either a great hindrance or a much needed help.

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

Chapter 2: Teens as the Target of Terrorization by Peers

Something that authors of adolescent literature tend to focus on in their writing is the fact that peers are often a main cause of emotional turmoil in children battling weight issues.

According to the novels presented in this thesis, negative comments from peers are highly prevalent and influential for both overweight and underweight children. When children look significantly different from their classmates, they are often teased and taunted. Children use name-calling, threats, and other negative means of communication to let their classmates know exactly what they think of them. Bullying occurs more often than it should, and the reaction from the victim ranges from children just shutting down emotionally, to fighting back, verbally or physically. In all cases, teasing and bullying of any sort are unhealthy for the child. There are several cruel characters in young adult novels that exemplify the unkindness that bullies create for children with different body types.

Peers Can Be Very Cruel

The majority of adolescent authors deal with the emotional and aesthetic effects of weight issues in their novels, instead of focusing on the health problems that exist alongside being over or underweight. The emotional health of children is equally as important as their physical health, and is generally more relevant and relatable to adolescents, which is why emotional health is dealt with more often. Judy Blume’s novel *Blubber* clearly portrays the way peers can be cruel to an overweight child. Linda is a larger girl in the class who gets picked on for her weight every day. One time, while riding the bus, Linda hears one girl shout, “‘Here comes Blubber’,” while “sixth grade boys... make spit balls” to shoot at her (Blume 8). It does not matter to these children that Linda is just as much of a person as they are; they find superiority in their thinner body types and therefore critique Linda for being different. They

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

tease her on the school bus based on superficial facts, not bothering to get to know Linda’s personality. Linda is seriously affected by the comments of her peers and becomes a shell of a person, who does not even find it important to stand up for herself.

Unfortunately, the cruelty from Linda’s peers is not quarantined to the bus. While in the girls bathroom, Linda comes out of a stall holding a red cape around her body. When one girl asks what is under the cape, another answers, ““There’s got to be something... There’s got to be her blubber at least”” (Blume 31). This must make Linda feel low and insecure, because almost everyone in that small vicinity says something negative about her. There does not seem to be anyone to stick up for or befriend poor Linda. The truth is that she really isn’t safe from torture anywhere in school. The narrator of the story describes, “We made Linda say, *I am Blubber, the smelly whale of class 206*. We made her say it before she could use the toilet... before she could get a drink at the fountain, before she ate her lunch, and before she got on the bus” (Blume 89). Every day, Linda is forced to go to school to try and get an education, but how can she be comfortable learning in an environment where she is treated as a lesser person because of her body? Her classmates make her feel inferior for a body type that they are not comfortable with and which at her age, Linda has little control over. Instead of interacting with her as an equal, the class treats Linda as an object that can be played with. Ultimately, Linda is more miserable because of how she is treated than what she actually looks like.

In a similar vein, Crutcher’s main characters Eric and Sarah get picked on constantly. Though this happens for two different reasons, where the other children focus on Eric’s overweight body versus Sarah’s disfigured physical appearance, all the comments from their peers are cruel and unnecessary. In one instance, Eric recalls, “I spent years being embarrassed because I was fat and clumsy and afraid” (Crutcher 77). He could not accept himself because

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

those around him constantly made him feel inferior for his larger than average weight. Crutcher illustrates how Eric’s peers know more about his favorite food than his favorite song, because they don’t take the time to get to know him. They would prefer to pick on him. Even Eric’s local media creates a news story about his swim meet, nicknaming him an “orca” (Crutcher 254). It is disgraceful when it comes to the point where the media, who has an immense sway over its audience, cannot even refer kindly to people with weight problems, especially when referencing children. In addition, the media presents unrealistically thin images for its audience to aspire to, hurting the impressionable youth that they advertise to. Based on this fact, it should not surprise anyone that children use these same hurtful techniques against each other. They most often learn by modeling the actions of adults. If adults are supporting the idea that teasing children for being overweight is all right, and that everyone should want to be stick thin as a woman and muscular as a man, children do not learn the right things and cruelty just continues to spread.

Colie, from *Keeping the Moon*, is another child who endures taunts about her body, specifically from a schoolmate named Caroline Dawes. This girl starts rumors, makes jokes, and laughs at Colie’s expense, and worst of all, she influences others to share her opinions. What makes Colie’s situation interesting is that she was overweight as a child, but while she is narrating the story, she has actually lost a large amount of weight. Therefore, her peers know what her body used to look like, and who she has transformed into today. Caroline treats Colie with an immense amount of disrespect, both before and after her weight loss. Colie recalls, “We’d already been in gym class together for almost two years, and she’d tortured me with every fat name in the book until I’d lost the weight” (Dessen 149). Caroline’s unkindness stays with Colie even past her “fat years,” proving the impact that the words have on Colie’s life. The emotional scars stay with her much longer than she was even overweight in the first place, which

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

also happens to Crutcher’s character, Eric. Colie shares with the reader that though Caroline is her personal enemy, “It didn’t matter how old you were. There were Caroline Daweses everywhere” (Dessen 65). She learns to accept the fact that people can be quite cruel, and understands that she is not the only target of unkindness in the world, or even in her small summer community of Colby, North Carolina. She is specifically referring to the ruthless way that a woman in her town treats her Aunt Mira, which proves that children do not always outgrow their petty ways of peer torture. These adults are the people whose children are molded in the same manner, who perpetuate the terrible and judgmental actions of their parents throughout their own childhood. These parents do not tend to teach their children the proper way to treat others, but instead are negative role models for their actions.

Bullying is obviously an important issue, because it affects both the emotional and physical health of the child. Marci M. Glessner et al. conducted a study that found, “When girls lie too far outside of societal standards for weight, bullying frequently occurs” (Glessner et al. 116). Societal standards, or that which society deems to be proper, are mostly perpetuated by the media, who show pictures of super-skinny models and actresses all the time. This is not only a problem for girls anymore, though. Men in the media are shown as tall, with perfect skin and a toned physique. Glessner et al. state that, “Increasingly, boys are also starting to fall prey to the media’s perceptions of ideal body size” (Glessner et al. 117). They too are bullied in schools if they are overweight, as is seen in *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*. The negative truth is that “just as females are expected to be thin, males are expected to be strong and athletic” and if children do not fit these models, they are teased mercilessly (Glessner et al. 117). In the novel *Gym Candy* by Carl Deuker, the main character is a male who feels his body is not adequate enough to play a sport he loves. He ends up using steroids to increase his size, so he is seen as a better

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

athlete. If a child does not fit the “ideal model,” he is seen as different, and different is generally a negative thing to be. Glessner et al. uncovered the fact that, “Being overweight has been listed among the top five reasons that young people believe they... and others... get picked on” (Glessner et al. 120). All this occurs for superficial reasons; children see others who have fatter arms or a larger stomach and they pick on the child for that reason. Verbal bullying is a horrible thing that children do to each other, but it occurs in every school setting across the world, even if adults are looking out for the problem.

But bullying overweight children is not the only factor that is focused on in these novels. Bullying happens a bit differently in Anderson’s *Wintergirls*. Firstly, Lia has an eating disorder, and wants to be unhealthily thin, though she is not described as being at all overweight in the first place. Her problems do not consist of the typical peer taunts that overweight children endure. Instead, Lia believes that she sees the ghost of her deceased friend Cassie, and sometimes even admits to interacting with her. Cassie dies early on in the novel from her eating disorder, and the fact that Lia can “see” her proves the effects that her illness has on her mental capacity. At one point, Lia believes that Cassie says to her, “You’re not dead, but you’re not alive, either. You’re a wintergirl, Lia-Lia, caught in between the worlds. You’re a ghost with a beating heart. Soon you’ll cross the border and be with me” (Anderson 195-196). This is a form of bullying, because it is clearly playing on Lia’s weaknesses. Since it is Lia’s own “vision” of Cassie, it almost seems like Lia is bullying herself. Therefore, whether this appearance of Cassie is a figment of Lia’s imagination or medication, the effect that “Cassie” has on Lia is sharp and quick. She makes Lia feel guilty for not being a better friend, for not answering the phone call which could possibly have saved Cassie’s life. “Cassie” is bullying her by making Lia question whether she wants to stay alive or die. Lia’s case is so unique, because she is being taunted by a

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

person who no longer exists in the physical world. Ultimately, it seems like she is being tortured by her subconscious, which takes the form of Cassie.

Children Really Do Know Right from Wrong

It is also recognized in young adult literature that many children do have the capacity to realize that it is wrong to tease others. Often, this comes in the form of feeling guilty once they do it, and then considering how their words might have affected another person. Sometimes the children can even be seen apologizing for his or her actions. This suggests that children really do know what is right and what is wrong, even if they do not always act the correct way.

In *Blubber*, the narrator Jill gains a conscience about the way she and the other children are treating Linda after a while. Linda is forced to have a trial at the end of the story, because the class thinks she tattled on them and they want to prove that she is guilty. Unfortunately for Linda, no one wants to be her lawyer and represent her case. Therefore, Jill ends up calling the whole thing off, her reasoning being, “It didn’t matter to me whether or not she had told on us. It was the trial that was important and it wasn’t fair to have a trial without two lawyers” (Blume 132). Jill has an honest heart and believes in doing the right thing, even if it means letting Linda go free since no one will be her lawyer. She chooses to defend a person when no one else will, and this enhances the fact that she knows right from wrong. She is someone that children reading *Blubber* should aspire to be like, which is likely the reason Judy Blume created this character. The moral of this story is to be kind to everyone, even those who might be different than you. Having Jill illustrate this message without having to say it outright makes it seem less like a lesson, so children will not feel like they are being preached to. This is an important way to write a story, especially for children, because it will hopefully make the message sink in, in a clear, but not forceful, way.

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

In Dessen’s *Keeping the Moon*, Colie’s co-worker Isabel is a person who acts incredibly disdainful towards Colie for the majority of the beginning of the summer. After several weeks, Isabel winds up realizing that Colie does not deserve the treatment she has been giving her. This is likely because Isabel herself actually suffered in high school because of her physical appearance, which Colie is not yet aware of. Isabel begins to understand that Colie just needs some friends, people to hold her up and support her, which is exactly where Isabel was before she met her best friend, Morgan. Colie is invited to watch fireworks for the Fourth of July with Isabel and Morgan, who give her a makeover before they leave, which makes Colie finally feel included in a true friendship. Isabel says, “Walk with your head up high... You’re gorgeous tonight, Colie” (Dessen 154). Isabel stops making short remarks to Colie and instead begins to remind her that no matter what other people think, she should *always* know that she deserves respect. She tries to convince Colie of her worth, because she knows that Colie has never felt very confident about her body, and she feels guilty for being a part of that. Isabel begins to treat Colie better because she can actually empathize with Colie’s situation, even though she does not share this information with Colie until the end of the novel. Then, Colie realizes that a picture she thought was of Isabel’s cousin was actually Isabel in high school. Even though Isabel suffered in a similar way as Colie, even she does not initially treat Colie well. Thankfully, Isabel finally acts upon her knowledge of the importance of being kind to people who are different, and even gives Colie the nicest advice she has ever received: “*Believe in yourself up here and it will make you stronger than you could ever imagine*” (Dessen 160). It makes a huge difference in Colie’s life to have people supporting her and believing in her, instead of tearing her down, which is what she has felt for so much of her life.

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

Peers are such influential people in the lives of adolescents. It is a turbulent time of life to begin with, before the judgmental classmates or friends are added into the mix. Sometimes, peers are personally responsible for cutting down those who are different, damaging the emotional health of a person who is equal to them in every way, but must bear living in a different body type. Other times, children understand that kindness is worth more than cruelty, and they help someone who is suffering to accept himself or herself, in spite of everything. But peers are not the only group to influence the emotional stability of adolescents; parents and other adults are certainly significant sources of judgment and guidance in the lives of children.

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

Chapter 3: Parenting Style and the Influence of Other Adults on a Child’s Life

Geneen Roth writes, “Kids... know who they are but they don’t know they know... they find out... by seeing themselves in their parents’ eyes” (Roth 189). Children are all *tabula rasa*, blank slates, before they begin to develop their own personalities and opinions. They are highly affected, and shaped, by the most prominent people in their lives: their parents. The opinions, comments, and feelings shared between a child and his mother and/or father leave a lasting impression, most especially if the parent thinks something negative about the child. Children absolutely understand that they see themselves in their parents’ eyes; if the parents fail to support a child’s positive self image, the child will suffer emotionally, because parents, like peers, are incredibly influential. The point that becomes important in this chapter is that it is not always the parents who neglect their children who have the most negative affect. Taylor et al. found that most of the 455 college students that were participants in her study “reported that their parents or siblings... made a few negative comments” about their weight (Taylor et al. 736). This statement supports the finding that “even a few comments may have a negative impact” on children, even if the child is not clinically overweight (Taylor et al. 736). Parents who are overly critical of their child’s size create an unhealthy environment for his or her growth.

The Negative Effects of Parents on a Child’s Psyche in Literature

During adolescence, children are particularly impressionable, and negative comments can become extremely detrimental to their mental health. Sometimes parents think that they are doing what is best for their child, when really their actions are hurting the child. It is ultimately up to the child to react to the comments, or succumb to their poisonous effects. Young adult novels often portray the adult as the negative influence in the child’s life, even if the parent loves the child. Sometimes the parent just does not understand how to deal with the child, and this

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

weakens the parent-child relationship, along with the emotional strength of the child. The novels in this thesis mainly focus on the relationship between a working parent and a child. A parent’s career can really put up a roadblock in her relationship with her child, especially if her career becomes more important than the child, or at least the child perceives this. Novels tend to focus on the negative aspects of the relationship to show how the child can ultimately overcome emotional instability to make something of, and respect, him or herself in conjunction with eating disorders and body image. Glessner et al. (2006) state that “conflicts with parents and the pressures inherent in family relationships are a staple of contemporary adolescent fiction” (Glessner et al. 121). Very often, the family relationship focused on is that between mother and daughter. Jacqueline Berke’s article “‘Mother I can do it myself!’: The self-sufficient heroine in popular girls’ fiction” (1979) states, “Mother may be incapacitated by any one of a number of factors. [She] may be a total incompetent... frivolous, self-indulgent, and ultimately stupid... absent: dead, deactivated, or simply not there” (Berke 188-189). These are some reasons that it is easy to see why mother-daughter relationships are common in story lines. But mothers are also sometimes too involved, trying to fix the problems they see in their daughters, which they themselves may have suffered through in their own adolescence. Interestingly, mother-daughter relationships are not the only ones focused on anymore. The Glessner et al. research article found that “parent conflicts with overweight characters deal with overprotective mothers and rejecting fathers,” which adds a new layer to family discussions in adolescent literature (Glessner et al. 121). This overprotective mom and rejecting dad template is still not the only case available though, as illustrated by the following four characters.

One adolescent who is greatly affected by a parent’s opinion is Sarah Dessen’s main character, Colie. Colie’s mother, Kiki Sparks, is a former overweight mom turned fitness-savvy

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

exercise guru. Colie’s father is absent from her life, so Kiki is the main source of stability for her daughter. While Colie was growing up, both she and Kiki were overweight. This provides evidence that Colie’s weight problems partly stem from genetics; both her mother and her aunt Mira either struggle, or have struggled, with obesity throughout their lives. When Kiki decided that she and her daughter needed to become healthier, she regimented both their diet and exercise programs. Now that both mother and daughter have lost the weight, Kiki is very insistent that Colie be careful to maintain her thinner look. When they separate for the summer, Kiki says to her daughter, ““You’ll keep up your workouts, right? It would be a shame to gain all that weight back”” (Dessen 2). Whether Kiki understands it or not, this kind of pressure is harmful to Colie’s development. Kiki is reinforcing the fact that Colie’s weight is of paramount importance to her identity, and she is also treating Colie as more of a project than a daughter. When Kiki discusses working out, she is exercise guru first, mother second. She is unintentionally reminding Colie that her overweight years were the bad years, and subsequently, that she is a better person while she is a smaller size. This hurts Colie, who believes that her mother is supposed to be the adult figure in her life who supports her no matter what.

Colie is constantly reminded of Kiki’s phrase “stuffin’ for nothin’” when she thinks about the extra weight she used to have (Dessen 35). Being aware of her weight is a constant battle that Colie must deal with, even while away from her mother. Colie spends the summer with her aunt Mira, and when she speaks with her mother, she explains, “I assured my mother that I was not stuffing myself with onion rings and was running every day” (Dessen 52). She must convince her mother she is behaving the way that Kiki wants her to; Colie does not have much of a say about her own body. She has become a product of Kiki’s health and fitness regime, instead of just being Kiki’s daughter. Her mother, now a successful professional in the exercise

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

business, tends to forget that she is more than just a fitness instructor, but she is also a mother to an insecure daughter who really needs her mother’s guidance. When Kiki seems to prefer being an instructor, this puts Colie in second place in Kiki’s life. It is hard for Colie to see that her mother does not want *anyone* to suffer through being overweight, and she believes her job is to show anyone and everyone how to combat obesity. Kiki’s own scarring makes her into the workaholic mother that she has become, even if this is at the expense of her own flesh and blood. In truth, it is not that Colie would want to go back to being overweight; it was not a particularly happy time of her life. It is clear she is happier with her body when she is thinner, but her happiness is not dependent on her size, which her mother sometimes inadvertently suggests.

It is important to remember that Kiki *does* have the best intentions in being aware of her daughter’s weight. She does not want Colie to have to deal with the extra burdens, both physically and socially, of being overweight that she did for so many years. But sometimes in the way she speaks to Colie, she intimates that when she herself was overweight, she was inferior to the skinnier person she is today. She says to Colie, “You don’t remember how hard we had it in the Fat Years” (Dessen 116). Kiki does not recall the good memories of Colie’s childhood; she retells the bad memories that were created because they were overweight. Kiki focuses on the negative things that weight problems presented for her life. This makes Colie increasingly self-conscious and uncomfortable. These feelings are unfortunate for Colie, because the weight loss should have been a confidence booster for many reasons. It is true that Kiki does not always make negative comments about Colie’s weight, though. Her good intentions become clear when she explains to Colie, “I think that being brave and self-confident does not necessarily start inside... It starts with the rest of the world, and it leads back to you” (Dessen 117). In these moments, she does try to give her daughter good advice and be a positive role model. Colie

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

desperately needs this; she is stuck between the feelings she has held since she was overweight and the new feelings she has as a thinner teenager. She needs her main source of stability to assure her that she will be all right, and that her feelings are normal. In an interview with Sarah Dessen, the author is asked about the relationships between mother and daughter that often appear in her stories. She states, “Even within the complicated relationships in my books, there is love, and that’s what I hope to show. Just because you don’t see eye-to-eye with your parents doesn’t mean there isn’t a connection” (Sutton 250). That is the important part of these familial relationships that authors often try to portray. It is difficult in adolescence to deal with parents; a lot of the time, neither party understands the other and this leads to tension and discord. But families generally have a lot of love to give, and the discord comes from a lack of comprehension and communication between parents and children. For Colie, this is in part due to her mother’s obsession with her career, which Kiki does not realize is negatively affecting her daughter.

In Anderson’s *Wintergirls*, as in *Keeping the Moon*, Lia has a very complicated relationship with her mother. She feels crushed under the impression that her mother, Dr. Marrigan, abandons her, after realizing the difficult and perilous road her daughter begins treading in her mid-adolescence. Lia’s mother is also a workaholic, like Kiki. She is a doctor instead of a fitness expert, but Lia believes that her mother’s job is worth more to her than her own daughter, especially since Dr. Marrigan understands her work more than she understands Lia. She describes:

The breakup with my mother was the same old story told a million times.

Girl is born, girl learns to talk and walk, girl mispronounces words and falls down. Over and over again. Girl forgets to eat, fails adolescence, mother

Barthel, "The Emotional Effects..."

washes her hands of Girl, scrubbing with surgical soap and a brush for three full minutes, then gloving up before handing her over to specialists and telling them to experiment at will. When they let her out, Girl rebels (Anderson 68).

Lia is so upset with her mother that she seems to attribute much of her deterioration to the relationship that she has with Dr. Murrigan. Lia thinks that her mother gives up on her when she actually needs her most. This can be contrasted with the fact that Dr. Murrigan also wants to direct every moment of Lia's life, which requires serious parental involvement. This dissonance between attention and neglect makes Lia unwilling to spend time with her mother, and so she moves in with her father, her stepmother, Jennifer, and her stepsister, Emma.

This living arrangement does not always work out well, though, because her mother's influence is still present in her father's house. Lia becomes angry with her father when he intervenes on behalf of her mother, or her mother's opinions. One night, her dad tries talking Lia into eating some pie, saying, "We don't want your mother to be right... About you slipping back into your old habits. The bad ones" (Anderson 101). Lia is insulted and feels completely undermined in this situation. Her mother is using food as a way of holding power over Lia, allowing or disallowing the intake of the item that controls Lia's life, even when she is not present in the house that Lia lives in. She sees this as her mother becoming involved in an area where Lia would prefer no one to bother her, a place she keeps the truth to herself. It is also likely that she does not think her mother deserves to be in this part of her life, since Lia believes her mother has chosen her job over her daughter. If Dr. Murrigan gains control over her daughter's eating habits, Lia will lose another part of herself. That is what drives her resentment throughout the novel: if she has no power over her body, she loses what she has been working

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

towards her whole life. And since being thin is so important to her, she puts all the blame for any setbacks onto her mother and father.

Lia allows her anger towards her parents and the situation she has found herself in stew until she ends up hurting herself. Rather than channeling her frustration in a positive way, she acts in a highly unproductive and dangerous manner. She both drives herself, and is driven, to committing self-mutilation to relieve her depressed feelings, highlighting the relationship between her emotions and the way she treats her body. Sadly, her little sister Emma is the one who finds her and she is permanently affected by this experience. Lia describes, “The screams of my little sister shatter the mirrors” (Anderson 226). Anderson explores this issue because it is one way that some intensely unhappy teenagers do choose to deal with their misery. Having a young adult novel focus on self-mutilation provides awareness for teenagers, highlighting the dangers and the truths associated with it. Anderson includes the reaction from a sibling, someone younger who Lia truly loves, to make her start to think about how her actions affect the people around her. Many of Lia’s choices might have been different under different familial circumstances. If her mother supported her when her life began to unravel, instead of running away and completely investing her life in being a doctor, Lia might have more trust in the opinions and guidance of adults and more respect for herself. She should have been taught to talk about her problems with the people who are supposed to be the most stable adults in her life.

As with Colie and Lia, Virginia Shreves from *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* initially has serious problems with her family, most specifically her mother. As an overweight teenager in a family with what seems like no other weight-challenged members, Virginia often feels alone, like she is “blemishing the image of a picture-perfect family” (Mackler 18). She has no one to commiserate with about her body, because she looks around

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

and sees athletic builds and thin bodies with her DNA coursing through their veins, yet she does not look like them. Though her mother admits that she was heavier when she was young, her reaction to Virginia’s being overweight is distaste, and she does not hide it. She remembers how she felt about being overweight in her childhood and so she projects those feelings onto her daughter. This is the same way that Kiki Sparks treats Colie; both mothers cannot allow their daughters to go through the same experiences that they did with weight. Where Kiki invests herself in her job which works to prevent obesity, Virginia’s mother directly invests herself in her daughter’s life, trying to force Virginia to lose weight. Perhaps the saddest thing Virginia admits in relation to her parents is that she changes herself just to get acknowledgement from the people who are supposed to unconditionally love and support her. Virginia describes, “I’m determined to order something light... Maybe that will score me another approving maternal smile” (Mackler 92). She must try harder than her siblings to gain attention, and approval, because she does not look the same as them. She must change herself just to get a smile from the person who created her, which must be a terribly difficult thing to do. Mary Pipher states that the reason for such discord between mothers and daughters is that “mothers don’t understand the world that their daughters now live in. Their experiences were different” (Pipher 104). The world was a much different place when Mrs. Shreves was young and overweight. There was less information on health and how to maintain a fit self. Now that the information is readily available, Mrs. Shreves wants to use it to help Virginia. But she does not take into consideration whether or not Virginia wants to be helped in the ways that her mother is pushing on her. Mrs. Shreves only considers that she would have loved to be thinner as an adolescent, and therefore she just assumes Virginia feels the same way.

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

It is not only Virginia’s mother who influences her feelings about her body, though. Virginia’s father shares critical remarks against his daughter several times throughout the novel, without even thinking of how they will affect her. At one point he says directly to her, ““You’ve got a got great face, Ginny. Think how much prettier you could be if you lost twenty or thirty pounds”” (Mackler 65). Virginia is blindsided; a comment like that cuts right through to the bone for a girl like her. Instead of practicing constructive criticism and promoting a thinner Virginia for her health, her father bases his opinion entirely on vanity to tell his daughter she would look nicer if she lost some weight. In the same way that Lia’s father is concerned with what his daughter looks like, both fathers forget about the more pressing issue that is in play. They disregard the issue of health and remain focused on weight loss which would “improve” their daughters’ appearances. This is a cruel emotional blow to a teenager who is just trying to find herself in a changing, hormonal world. Virginia is again hurt by her father when he brings home her most detested object, a mirror. He tells her, ““I thought if you could watch yourself losing weight, it might help you reach your body goal”” (Mackler 72). Virginia is doubly hurt by this, because she feels like it is the first time he’s really paying attention to her, and it is only because he’s hoping she will lose weight. It has nothing to do with who she is as a person, but instead who she is perceived to become because of her physical attributes. She feels like her parents care more about her weight than who she is as a person, and her emotional stability is put into question. The fact that her father does not even consider that she might not want a mirror is also telling. It proves that he does not listen to Virginia’s likes and dislikes very carefully at all.

It is interesting that Mackler addresses both parents having a negative influence on Virginia’s self-confidence. Oftentimes, a father figure is featured as the “good cop,” the one the adolescent daughter goes to for advice and comfort when she is fighting with her mother. In

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

Virginia’s case, as in Lia’s, it seems that she has no parent to go to, even though both are supposedly acting in Virginia’s best interest. There seems to be a fine line between wanting to help a child and unintentionally damaging one by trying to help, instead of listening to what the child wants. Pipher states, “Fathers... have great power to do harm... Some fathers, in their eagerness to have their daughters accepted by the culture, encourage their daughter to be attractive or lose weight. They produce daughters who believe their only value is their physical attractiveness” (Pipher 117). This is exactly what Mr. Shreves does for Virginia. He insinuates that her size is more important than what she has to offer the world. This is unhealthy both for Virginia and for the relationship she has with her father, and if things do not change, the way he treats her might irreparably damage their relationship.

This line is again crossed in *Gym Candy* by the main character’s father. Mick exhibits an adolescent male’s perspective on how parental influence affects body image. Mick’s father pushes him to be the best, to win everything, and not to accept anything less than first place. He is told to act this way because his father once had a chance at a professional career, but lost it, and wants better for his son. As with Virginia and Lia’s mothers, Mick’s father does not want his own past repeated through the actions of his son. Mick’s body is always on both of their minds; Mick thinks that if he was stronger he would be a better football player and his father does nothing to deter this sentiment. At times, Mick becomes very insecure when discussing his life with his father, and he is not always sure how to take the advice he is given. He explains, “Sometimes it seemed as if he were asking me to slit my own throat, but at other times I’d think he was right” (Deuker 64). As a child, he wants to follow what his father tells him to do, because his father is an adult and children are supposed to follow the guidance of adults. Unfortunately for Mick, his father’s messages are confusing, and this leaves Mick to decide that

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

his dad’s advice means that he should do whatever it takes to be the best. He chooses to turn to steroids to enhance his body, even though it is quite unlikely that his father really wanted this to happen. This is comparable to the mothers of all the female characters in these young adult books, who would like their daughters to be a healthy weight and get there in a healthy way. No parents mentioned want their children on crash diets, or in Lia’s case, to stop eating. They want their children healthy, and if Mick’s father knew his son’s intentions, he would likely want to put a stop to the steroid use quickly. Nevertheless, in Mick’s confusion over what to do to become better, he turns to a negative form of body enhancement so that he will achieve what he thinks he is supposed to achieve: greatness. His father, like so many, has good intentions, but he never asks Mick how he feels about playing football. In a way, Mick’s father is living through his son in the same way that Colie’s mother, and Virginia’s mother, try living through their daughters. These parents project their childhoods onto their children, wanting better for them, but they try too hard. Mick, Colie, and Virginia just want parents to love them and support them. Instead, they get parents who push their own opinions onto them so forcefully that they are afraid to even have their own opinions, their own dreams. Mick wants to play football because his dad played football. Colie just wants to know what it is like to be a normal teenage girl, without being reminded to watch her weight at every step. Brian W. Sturm and Karin Michel support the idea that parents are more influential than they know in their article “The Structure of Power in Young Adult Problem Novels” (2009). They discuss Sheila Egoff’s ideas, paraphrasing the idea that, “Adult are usually the teens’ biggest problems (they are inept, uncaring, or downright callous and insensitive” (Sturm and Michel 40). Mick’s father does not know how to deal with a son he wants so badly to succeed. Colie’s mother does not understand what her actions and choices mean to her daughter. Virginia’s father’s insensitivity is unbearably sad to read about.

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

Each story illustrates the statement from this article, though because it is young adult literature, the parents are most often painted in a light where they did have the child’s best interest at heart, despite the outcome.

The Importance of Having a Non-Parent Adult Figure

Non-parental adults can also provide significant influence in the lives of adolescents. Many characters in young adult novels are given a teacher, a family friend, or perhaps a therapist with some worldly advice which will benefit their lives. While this may not always be the case in reality, giving children a role model outside of the home can be highly beneficial. If adolescents read about the benefits, perhaps they will be more likely to find an adult in their school or community to talk to if their home life is not giving them the support that they need. Children need to turn somewhere to deal with their feelings, which the authors of these novels try to make obvious to their readers. In a way, each time a child reads a book with this theme, the author has indirectly reached out to try and help that child. Finding a helpful adult to talk to is much better than having teenagers turn to drugs or drinking. While adults are often mistrusted by the suspicious minds of the young, they can also help to turn a child onto the right path that his or her parents might not be doing in an adequate fashion.

For Mackler’s protagonist in *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*, the non-parent adult turns out to be Virginia’s teacher, Mrs. Crowley. Virginia feels comfortable enough with Mrs. Crowley to explain to her about her problems at home and her concerns over her body. She spends time with Mrs. Crowley during her lonely lunch hour, because she is too self-critical to feel comfortable making friends in the cafeteria. The most important thing that Mrs. Crowley adds to Virginia’s life is a realistic comparison between the two of them. As someone unrelated to Virginia, her sentiments add extra importance, because Virginia won’t think she is being

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

placated. When Virginia is upset about her diet, Mrs. Crowley, who is also overweight, shares, “I’ve heard everything... You name it, I’ve been called it. When I was younger, it affected me so strongly... I’m just asking you to be careful. Don’t try to change everything overnight” (Mackler 81). Mrs. Crowley’s comparison allows Virginia to see that other people deal with the same problems she is going through. She provides Virginia with a way to accept her body, which Virginia’s mother cannot do. This teacher-child relationship really ends up being healthier than the relationship between mother and daughter. Mrs. Shreves would prefer to forget about her overweight days, while Mrs. Crowley shows Virginia that she can learn so much from her body. It is wonderful for Virginia to have an adult care about her because she wants to, not because she has to. Often, a parent will tell her child she is beautiful, just to then have the child say, “You have to say that because you’re my mother.” The fact that Mrs. Crowley can relate to Virginia and treat her as an equal is the main reason that Virginia trusts and listens to her teacher. She needs this, since her home life is not quite as supportive as she deserves.

Colie also has a non-parent adult who is influential in her life. Since Colie’s mother is on tour for her fitness career, Colie spends the summer in North Carolina with her aunt Mira. At first, Colie is embarrassed by Mira. She describes Mira’s outfits while she bikes into town, saying, “She was still wearing her yellow overalls, rolled up at the cuff, and a worn pair of purple high-tops. Her hair was flowing... she was wearing sunglasses... and she kept ringing that bell” (Dessen 47). She is not sure how to react when people in town tease Mira; she is stuck between agreeing with them and wanting to be loyal to her aunt. Therefore, at the beginning of the summer, she has not decided whether she wants to become close with her aunt or not. She only begins to understand Mira when she chooses to spend more time with her. Then she realizes Mira is a kind and intelligent person, and she begins to trust and depend on Mira’s

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

advice. When confronted with a difficult situation, Colie thinks, “I wanted Mira to appear at my elbow, carefully guiding me away... saving me from whatever would tumble next from my mouth” (Dessen 200). She goes from having suspicions about Mira’s sanity to wishing she was there to help her through her problems. Mira becomes a very important and influential figure in Colie’s life this summer, and helps teach her that her body is not the only thing that people see when they look at her, working in the same way that Mrs. Crowley helps Virginia. Both adults know firsthand what is it like to struggle with weight and they share their knowledge with the adolescents who need some guidance. It is a positive addition to any novel where the focus is on the relationship between a teenager and a non-parent adult. This helps to show adolescents that family members besides parents are often there to talk to, and can be a real asset to their lives.

Anderson’s main character Lia has a positive relationship with different sort of adult figure, her therapist, Dr. Parker. While generally unwilling to talk to anyone, Lia really begins to understand herself, with the help of Dr. Parker, after dangerously self-mutilating her body. She is still fragile and afraid and alone afterwards, but she begins talking about seeing Cassie, which Dr. Parker sees as a sign of recovery. Dr. Parker congratulates Lia, saying, “You really should be proud of yourself, Lia. You made a breakthrough today” (Anderson 250-251). Lia needs a therapist, someone trained to listen to her and support her through her difficult times, because her parents do not do this for her. Lia is the most emotionally unstable of any of the characters in this thesis, because she has absolutely no one she feels like she can trust for a long time. She needs the guidance of someone trained to listen to the problems of others. She needs someone who is not directly related to her family, because of the lack of trust and closeness she feels towards her parents. By including Dr. Parker as a positive figure in *Wintergirls*, Anderson makes it seem okay to go to a therapist, which is something many adolescents feel like they will

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

be judged for. She also paints the therapist in a positive light, hopefully allowing readers see that therapists can be helpful and be advantageous for helping adolescents with their problems.

Another health professional that proves important to a character is Virginia’s doctor, Dr. Love.

He treats Virginia as a person instead of a thing; her weight is not as important as her health.

These lessons are the most important for readers to learn about doctors.

Both parents and non-parental adults are prominent figures in adolescent literature. Most often, problems with the parents lead the child to find comfort from another adult, someone who will listen, sympathize, and help, where the parents will not. This should not paint parents in a bad light, however. Instead, it should just be understood that adolescence is often a time of tension between children and their parents, and these books simply illustrate different ways that the tension unfolds. In any case, the interactions between parents and non-parental adult figures lead the child to understand more, and accept more, about him or herself. Acceptance is the greatest lesson learned at the end of the novel, because it is something to give hope to children who might have none.

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

Chapter 4: When Children Learn to Accept Their Bodies

The important distinction between young adult novels and young adult reality is that novels typically end on a positive note, while reality is not always so clear-cut. Novels are often meant to provide reassurance for readers that even if life is sometimes difficult, it will not stay bad forever. Setbacks have the distinct possibility of looking up, because people get tired of suffering and want to move past that which hinders them. This is what adolescents really need to hear, especially during the times that it seems like things will never get better. The lesson in most of the novels is that the children will not always be seen as victims. They will be able to learn and grow enough to conquer the physical and emotional issues that occur throughout adolescence, which is what many adolescents need to be reinforced. Roth believes, “The most difficult part of teaching people to respect and listen to their bodies is overcoming their conviction that there is nothing to respect” (Roth 64). And yet she also states, “When you believe in yourself more than you believe in food, you will stop using food as if it were your only chance at not falling apart” (Roth 81). This is what happens to these fictional characters; they conquer the problems they have with food and learn to respect themselves, which hopefully helps any adolescent child struggling with the same problems to realize that they are worth believing in too.

The first story to end on a positive note is Lia’s, from *Wintergirls*. Everything that Lia has gone through in her adolescence results in her learning from her actions and realizing that her life is worth living. After her final tragic self-mutilation, she goes to rehab again, determined this time to succeed in getting better. Her story leads her from being “a victim to a vixen,” which is just a way of saying that she learns how to move past her problems to live a healthy, strong life. When a character is seen as a victim, it is often her greatest goal to leave this state of

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

sorrow. Becoming a vixen means that she loses her title of victim, and gains respect and love for herself. This often happens with help from others, whether they are family, friends, or other adults. The victim will be given enough positive feedback about herself, enough support, that she will see her self-worth and want even more people to see it, too. This is a very common feature in adolescent novels. In Lia’s case, her little sister Emma is her guiding light, the strongest force that makes her decide to try her hardest to get healthy again. Lia’s mother is also a part of her life again, and because of this, Lia has regained some of the trust in adults that she lost over the past several years. Perhaps most importantly for her mental health, Lia has come to peace with Cassie’s death. Her final inspired statement is, “I am thawing” (Anderson 278). She is finally a “wintergirl” no longer. She is not a victim. She has learned to love her body, and this is a lesson that should inspire young adult readers that they can do the same.

Virginia also learns to become a “vixen” from her victim status in *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*. She decides that her weight should not be a source of shame, but instead something to embrace. She forgets about her “Fat Girl Code of Conduct” and starts working on a webzine, where she finally feels positive, confident, and like she is a part of something. One of her greatest sentiments comes at the very end of the novel, where she is thinking about what it means to do whatever she wants to do with her life. Virginia says, “Maybe it can mean whatever I want it to mean, like taking care of myself and not letting people walk all over me. Yes, that’s much more like it” (Mackler 243). She finally understands the importance of valuing her own personal feelings over the opinions others have about her. From this moment, she values only her own opinions, and not her mother’s, or father’s, or what she thinks Froggy’s opinions are. This is such a monumental moment for her, and it is one that the author knows that adolescents can relate to. Adolescence is such a difficult time to come into

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

oneself, so getting reassurance from books geared towards supporting young adults is a positive way to help them become more comfortable with the concept of self-love.

Virginia takes a huge step forward in dealing with her weight issues when she confronts her father about the way he discusses her body. While driving together, she says, “I have to tell you that I’d rather you don’t talk about my body like it’s the weather forecast on 1010 WINS” (Mackler 235). She does not say this with malice or anger. Instead, she calmly but firmly takes control of her body, of her life, saying that she is the only one who gets to talk about it now. This is a big deal for Virginia, who began the novel so vulnerable to the criticism instilled in her by her family. Mackler is trying to illustrate, to whatever teenager can relate to Virginia’s situation, that life is better and easier when you own who you are, instead of who other people think you should be. It is far more important to love yourself than to listen to someone who does not love who you are, and young adult novels are constantly trying to explain this to readers.

Keeping the Moon continues the tradition of vulnerable teens finding confidence by the end of the novel. These novels all wind up with the main character, the original “victim,” learning from her unhappy situation, upholding the fact that positive results *can* come from negative circumstances. Colie’s situation is unique, because she has the opportunity of finding someone who helps her find herself. She becomes close with a boy named Norman, who, Colie is somewhat surprised to find, actually likes her as a person. She has felt judged for so long, first for being overweight and then for losing the weight, that it is a relief for her to find someone who sees her just as Colie. Norman helps her forget about how she was treated when she was overweight and finally Colie seems to understand that she is an important human being. She explains, “*Let it go*, I heard a voice whisper in my head... Maybe it was my own voice, silent all this time, but no longer. *Let it go*. And just like that I did” (Dessen 202). She moves beyond the

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

person she has been stuck behind all these years; she becomes Colie instead of used-to-be-fat-and-now-I-have-nothing-to-hide-behind Colie. Norman helps her, her aunt Mira helps her, her new friends at the Last Chance Bar and Grill help her. Sarah Dessen highlights the importance of having positive reinforcers remain part of one’s life. Friends and family who will hold you up when you need it most are the ones worth keeping around, and this is something that everyone can benefit from remembering.

In Judy Blume’s *Blubber*, the most important lesson is learned by Jill, the narrator of the novel, instead of Linda, who is the overweight character. Jill, like all the previous characters, realizes the value of a friend, and she says, “You sometimes have to make the first move or else you might wind up like Linda- letting other people decide what’s going to happen to you” (Blume 148). This is how adolescents get themselves into trouble; instead of standing by their own ideas, they follow the lead of others. Linda does not even have the chance to have her own ideas, because she does not stand up for herself. She does not interact with any of her peers, and she lets them pick on her without defending herself. By having this type of character in her novel, Blume supports the idea that not only are friends a positive addition to everyone’s life, but also that not standing up for yourself is as detrimental as being picked on in the first place. This is interesting because of how different it is from the other novels. Perhaps this happens because Blume wrote *Blubber* in 1974, and social issues have changed quite a bit in the past thirty seven years. Her theme of having an overweight character who does not learn positive lessons throughout the novel is still important though, because this shows readers what they should avoid becoming even in today’s society.

Though some might believe differently, boys are not immune to dealing with problems related to their bodies in adolescence. Mick, from *Gym Candy*, is another teenager who benefits

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

from having good friends. When he goes crazy from 'roid rage, he is brought back to reality by his best friend, Drew. It is difficult for Mick to forgive himself for his actions, because he has been so concerned about making his muscles bigger that he has basically written his friend off without hesitation. Thankfully, Mick *is* lucid enough to realize, “In the daytime... I know how much I owe him. He acted the way a friend is supposed to act” (Deuker 311). If he had been around a less stable friend, or a less devoted friend, some really terrible things could've happened to Mick. Deuker's inclusion of a solid friend like Drew for an unstable teenager like Mick sends a message to teenagers, especially males, that a good friend is one of the most beneficial assets in one's life. It also reinforces the importance of being a good friend, and noticing when there are differences in the behaviors of the people you know best. Friends are an important source of intervention, whether they realize it or not. With Drew's influence, Mick realizes, “I know the person I want to become, but I don't know if I can pull it off. I think I can; sometimes I even pray that I can” (Deuker 313). He does not want to remain a victim to the drugs which have been controlling his life. He wants to overcome the addiction, the anger, and the person he cannot even recognize anymore. He does not want his world to revolve around making his muscles bigger; he finally accepts that there are more important things in his life than his creating an unrealistic body for himself. This realization might not have been possible without Drew's friendship.

Eric, the main character of Crutcher's novel *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, feels the same about his best friend as Mick does about Drew. Unlike Mick, Eric does not need Sarah to keep him in line, but he still feels like he would be lost without her. He comes to terms with his weight by acknowledging, “Once I thought being a fat kid was the worst thing... but if I hadn't been fat I would never have known Sarah... and that would have been a true tragedy in my life”

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

(Crutcher 295). He accepts that being concerned with the way that his weight is perceived by others is less important than being concerned about his friends. He stops being “orca” Eric, because he does not let it bother him anymore. Instead, he helps Sarah get away from her abusive father; he stays strong for her when she needs him most, because she is one of the few people in his life who sees him for who he is as a person, instead of who his size makes him. Her burns and his being overweight do actually initially bond them together, but after spending time with each other, they become friends because they enjoy each other’s company. Eric conquers his problems with his weight because he realizes that more important things exist to think about.

These novels are definitely positive assets to the lives of struggling teenagers, who need confirmation of the fact that their weight issues will not consume every thought, in every moment of the rest of their lives. They all have a right to move past their discontent and be happy with their body image, and going from “victim to vixen” is a constructive way to do so. Giving these kids the optimism to move past their emotional instability is a gift unto itself, and will hopefully help whoever chooses to read books on this theme.

Conclusion

Young adult novels can provide an incredible place for a children to lose themselves to a world they can learn from, where they *can* go from "victim to vixen" instead of remaining unhappy. The novels represented in this thesis all seem to prove that fact, though it is also important to consider the other side of the argument, which states that struggling children might read these books and actually want to act like the victim. In that case, these books may provide some sort of gateway for them, giving them ideas on how to self-mutilate, or how to go on an extreme diet. In Katherine L. Nolfi's article "YA Fatphobia" (2011), she states, "Children and teenagers who are ostracized tend to become readers, relying on books for succor and protection... unfortunately, those... who are... are fat will encounter not support and validation in most YA fiction but instead exhortations to diet and obsess about their appearance" (Nolfi 55). This is certainly true to some extent: many portrayals of overweight characters are negative, where being fat is gross and unseemly. Therefore, some books dealing with weight problems might persuade a child that being thinner is more important than being healthy. Beth Younger agrees with this idea, writing, "Authors portray characters that literally embody the struggles of young women who must try to conform in a society that condemns them for not being thin" (Younger 54). This fact is precisely why the books in this thesis are necessary: they each feature a weight problem that is believable and relatable, and each time, the outcomes include the characters' acceptances of their bodies. There are absolutely struggles to get to this point of acceptance, but that is what makes the novels so vital. They show that the struggles make the characters who they are, and this helps them learn more about themselves and the world. At the end of her article, Nolfi states, "It is unfortunate that young readers who are fat must struggle to find affirming literature" (Nolfi 59). The literary world is becoming ever more aware of this

Barthel, “The Emotional Effects...”

fact, and more books are being published today which focus on health and acceptance instead of becoming society’s “ideal” size. This is something that will take time to become well known in literature, because of how prevalent books that idealize being thin are, but with more and more authors acknowledging the problem, a greater number of truly helpful books must be written. Young adults struggling with any types of weight issues will have more literature to relate to, and will hopefully be able to find the books discussed in this thesis as small windows of hope into accepting who they are, while also understanding that their health is of the utmost importance.

Hopefully, readers of young adult novels which focus on weight issues will be able to take away positive messages about the connection between weight and health, instead of weight and ideal size. What some people might not realize is that adolescents are not the only age group who can learn from these books. Parents can learn from them, especially if any of them come from similar situations as many of the adults in these novels, where they see themselves in their children and try to live through them. Peers can learn how damaging their words can be to children who are different. Teachers and extended family can learn that their presence in a child’s life might be vitally important for the child’s health and safety. These books can be very powerful if the reader chooses to find the message within the words and subsequently live by it. This message seems to be that weight problems should be dealt with in a healthy way, and the consequences of dealing with them improperly are illustrated in the novels. If each of these books can help just a few struggling teenagers, then the job of the author will be considered fulfilled, and the power the written word will be upheld.

Barthel, "The Emotional Effects..."

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