Taking On the Thin Ideal
By Sanjay Gupta, M.D.

There's nothing new about TV and fashion magazines giving girls unhealthy ideas about how thin they need to be in order to be considered beautiful. What is surprising is the method psychologists at the University of Texas have come up with to keep girls from developing eating disorders. Their main weapon against superskinny (role) models: a brand of civil disobedience dubbed "body activism."

Since 2001, more than 1,000 high school and college students have participated in the Body Project, which works by getting girls to understand how they have been buying into the notion that you have to be thin to be happy or successful. After critiquing the so-called thin ideal by writing essays and role-playing with their peers, participants are directed to come up with and execute small, nonviolent acts. They include slipping notes saying "Love your body the way it is" into dieting books at stores like Borders and writing letters to Mattel, makers of the impossibly proportioned Barbie doll.

According to a study in the latest issue of the Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, the risk of developing eating disorders was reduced 61% among Body Project participants. And they continued to exhibit positive body-image attitudes as long as three years after completing the program, which consists of four one-hour sessions. Such lasting effects may be due to girls' realizing not only how they were being influenced but also who was benefiting from the societal pressure to be thin. "These people who promote the perfect body really don't care about you at all," says Kelsey Hertel, a high school junior and Body Project veteran in Eugene, Ore. "They purposefully make you feel like less of a person so you'll buy their stuff and they'll make money."

As part of the program, Hertel and a friend posted signs in a school bathroom saying YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL. DON'T BE SOMEONE THAT YOU'RE NOT. BE YOURSELF. The girls then watched their classmates react. "They'd see the signs and
say things like "That's encouraging because I always feel so fat and gross and ugly,"" Hertel says. The study's lead author, Eric Stice, designed the Body Project betting that a crucial element in preventing eating disorders lay in getting a participant to critique a fashion ad or other negative influence in front of her peers. "If I write down 10 things bad about it and post it on MySpace so anyone can view it, I'm accountable for it," says Stice, now at the Oregon Research Institute.

Psychologists are excited about his study because there's not a lot of other data measuring the effectiveness of such programs, let alone their long-term impact.

"This is a good start," says Dr. Walter Kaye, a board member of the National Eating Disorders Association. But Kaye cautions that eating disorders are much more complicated than researchers first thought. For starters, the disorders can't be blamed solely on environmental factors. Brain-scan studies show that the neural circuitry that normally responds to the pleasurable, rewarding aspects of eating doesn't seem to work in anorexics.

The Body Project study, which is funded by the National Institutes of Health, recruited participants by distributing flyers outside classrooms and posting them in school bathrooms. Now sororities and other groups are beginning to launch peer-administered versions of the program. But even if one is not available in your community, there are things parents can do to help with body-image issues. Be aware of what signals you might be giving your children when you talk about your own desire to lose weight. Pay attention to the stereotypical body image your kids are watching on TV. And perhaps most important, talk with them about it.

Sanjay Gupta's Fit Nation series airs on House Call on CNN, Saturdays and Sundays, at 8:30 a.m. E.T.

—With reporting by Shahreen Abedin

Find this article at:
http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1703763_1703764_1810730,00.html