

Idols or Idle

Jessica Sidgwick's article in last month's *Tatler* was an illuminating and moving first hand account about being a member of a cadre of hardened "extremist" public schoolgirls spiralling into the grasp of anorexia. I note the article was cover titled with a question.... "Does boarding school make you anorexic?". Jessica talks of a "psychological disease reaching epidemic proportions" and "an account that will horrify every parent". Strong stuff in an equally strong article that all people trying to understand the complexities and devastating effects of anorexia should read. However, I am afraid that statistically anorexia is far from being a horrifying epidemic amongst our schoolgirl population, but there is a far more common eating disorder, with well-recognised long-term implications, that has reached the numerical proportions that could afford it epidemic status.

Earlier this year the media grasped a well-publicised piece of research that revealed that our children and teenagers were some of the most unfit and overweight in the western world, and this particularly applied to girls from age 11 to 16. Last month a similar study came to the same conclusions, and grabbed even more headlines. Yet more worries again have been highlighted by this year's revelations that type 2 diabetes has been found in our overweight youngsters. I am a chartered physiotherapist, and in my practice I regularly see girls with chronic postural and weight related orthopaedic conditions, whose level of general fitness can be generously described as poor. The research suggested 45% of girls were falling beneath the fitness threshold expected...that's basically half of all our female youth. Similar and equally well-publicised research suggests that the British diet is quite simply a fat soaked, convenience food mess when compared to our European counterparts.

But hang on a minute, how can this be? Hasn't the constant exposure of our girls to media and advertising driven images of catwalk emaciation and Hollywood chic created a generation of anorexic waifs? The subsequent victim T.V, and the "my story" articles laced with images of Belsen-like teens do make shocking and voyeuristically intriguing viewing. Anorexia and Bulimia are a genuine and tragically destructive problem that should never be dismissed lightly, but the research suggests that by far the most common eating "disorder" is simple over-indulgence. It's a generation of wobbles and wheezes, not waifs.

Teenagers are undoubtedly impressionable, and we are also led to believe that they worship, and mimic their superstar icons with tenacious enthusiasm. We can't stop them doing this, and if we try, the very fact that they are teenagers will mean that they'll only do it more. Superstar bodies are like the clothes that cover them, they go in and out of fashion over the years. At present it can have a bit of "shape", maybe a bit of curve, sometimes a few muscles, still lean, but maybe not too mean. Jennifer Lopez has been voted the most beautiful/sexiest/whatever woman in the world by every lad rag around, but she's not skinny, and is famous for the size of her "booty"! Athlete Diane Lewis has made six packs sexy...real girl power. Jodie Kidd showed us at the LFW that she has found a few curves whilst wrestling with her ponies, and that the waif is so last century.

Even the original Hollywood “head-on-a-stick” Callista Flockhart has gone up a couple of dress-sizes and is no longer “see-through” thin, and one could argue that Britney, Shakira, Holly V and Cat D are all positively “bonnie” for want of a much better word! These personally trained, nutritionist fed, physical specimens are going to be our daughter’s physical icons whether we like it or not. Teenage girls are brilliant mimics; they can sing like Britney (unfortunately), they can dance like her, wear their hair and their clothes like her...but what about if they decide they want a body like her. This, I am constantly reminded by some socially aware “experts”, is tantamount to psychological sacrilege, and the mental distortions created by even thinking about a flatter tummy will lead to all manner of eating and behavioural disorders in our youth. Apparently, it seems the price is too higher one to pay, and it is better that we allow almost half of our teenage population to slip into an early acceptance of an unhealthy lifetime of junk food fuelled physical redundancy, rather than risk the potential epidemic of the “disorder”.

I think physical icons can have a positive, rather than a negative, influence on our youngsters. So, now I’ve come out of the closet as some sort of fatist fascist, I know that some readers are conjuring up images of ranks of be-vested Aryan girls swinging wooden clubs to the sway of National Socialist umpah bands. Or maybe you think I want to create a generation of six foot, six stone high jumper types, with the side-on curves of a credit card. Don’t get me wrong, the dangers of physical iconification are as transparent as a “super-waifs” skin. However, the times are changing. May be we can trace the defining moment to a young Liz Hurley...the safety pins made an impression, but overnight the boobs and bum that they pinned back were back. The floodgates opened, and along came Elle McPherson’s shoulders and a positively curvy Claudia being chased along the catwalk by the less than diminutive Sophie Dahl. Two lumpy little lasses called Gillian Anderson and Kate Winslet bagged the biggest TV and Film roles of the nineties. Renee Zellweger surprised us all by piling on the pounds and sex appeal at the same time. The trend has been maintained, and the current physical icons are impressive specimens. Britney is accused of being a teenage temptress because she flaunts a body that is all woman. Yes she's lean, toned and fit, but she’s a long way from waif-like. If a girl declares that she’d like to look like Denise Lewis or Anna Kournikova, then the sporting connection gives this request an air of respectability, but remember all she’s really saying is that she wants to look like Denise, not throw a Javelin like her. This is why we should not be frightened of the new superstar physical icons. The sofa inhabiting, alco-pop guzzling, Playstation generation don’t often volunteer the idea that they would like to eat sensibly and take some exercise. Let’s not go all PC stand-offish when they express a desire to have a body like Madonna’s, after all she’s old enough to be their mother.

“It’s not what you look like, it’s what you are inside”. Well inside are fat furred arteries and flaccid muscles. We don’t have to encourage teenagers to want to look like their superstar icons, they’ll do this anyway, so maybe we should turn this opportunity on it’s head and responsibly encourage them to achieve their goal. Jessica Sidgwick’s article voiced a concern that perhaps eating disorders could be more prevalent in our boarding schools, and I would agree that these close knit single sex communities laced with a heady concoction of comparative angst, and teenage social struggles, can upset the following delicately balanced and socially awkward equation. When internal peer pressure becomes more dominant than external influence then the seeds are sown for what Jessica eloquently describes as “an abyss of obsessive competition”. To break this cycle we have to turn this little world inside-out and be comfortable with letting it’s inhabitants look outside for their influences rather than worship themselves. How do we

do this...well one tool at our disposal is called physical education...plain old P.E. The emphasis is on education, and this doesn't have to be based at school, but it is a very good starting point. Government reports and more media hearsay informs us that competitive sports are almost as psychologically scarring as exposure to fashion magazine advertising features to our delicate teenlets. Yet more research suggests that competitive and team sports are especially unattractive and unpopular with girls within an educational setting. Some of the more progressive schools P.E. departments have taken this on board and now offer aerobics and "body conditioning" classes. May be soon we will see Pilates and Hatha Yoga, as part of the curriculum because jolly hockeysticks just doesn't always cut it with our sophisticated youth. Talking of curriculum, remember Domestic Science ("what to do all day when the man in your life is away")? Well turn this one around and it becomes Lifestyle Science...a forum for health, nutrition, hobbies, recreation, fitness and above all, physical well-being and responsibility.

Sports centres and private health clubs need to realise that their future clientele are slobbering it out in their bedrooms, and would do well to offer reduced rate, raved-up teen sessions that allow younger girls to sweat it out with their peers and not be frowned upon by lycra clad "ladies". Parents can be less wary of that dirty word "diet" and actively encourage the new adage "train". I also feel that the publications that are sometimes accused of developing a sub-culture of celebrity waif worship get a raw deal from their media cousins. I find that many magazines, and their health sections, now carry sound advice on exercise programmes, sensible eating and attitudes to body image. Magazines aimed at teenage girls are popular, they follow and set trends, and these are not always the wrong trends.

Isn't it all a bit shallow though? Of course it is. We'd all like our kids to grow up showing the courage, commitment and ambition of yachtswoman Ellen Macarthur, but they are still going to want to look like Holly Valance. The fact of the matter is that we need to encourage a healthier lifestyle in our kids and I think it has got to the stage that we should be more realistic and less politically picky in the way we do this. For the sake of their future health we can grasp this opportunity to teach our children to idol wise as well as idolise.

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