

## Skinny Sweepstakes

**In the push for achievement, the perfect body is now part of the perfect résumé. Deprived of an internal compass, girls compete to be "hottest," turning colleges into incubators of eating disorders.**

By: Hara Estroff Marano

"I started starving myself when i was 12 or 13," Chloe, a beauty of 17, recalls. "I wasn't overweight, but I wasn't as thin as a lot of my friends. It was just something I noticed."

Around that time, "a lot of problems" erupted in her family. "Dieting made me feel like I was in control of something. It was the one thing I knew I could change on my own. I would diet and get positive feedback and feel really good. So I wouldn't eat for a few days at a time."

Dieting also bound her to her peers. "A lot of girls at school would skip meals. We'd do it together. We went on fad diets together, too." Her family never noticed her food fetishes. "I had trouble impressing my mother. I could never achieve enough for her. But she definitely noticed when I lost weight."

From the beginning, starving consumed her life. "You think about it everywhere you go. And you compare yourself to other people. Each of my friends was vying to be better than the others. I was in a restaurant with my boyfriend and a girl walked in who was really pretty and much thinner than me. I saw him glance at her. I went into the bathroom and cried."

She couldn't look at a picture of a celebrity without feeling bad, either. The boys at her public school didn't help. "They're constantly comparing women to each other: 'That girl is really hot; she's so much hotter than her friends.' So we compete to be the hotter friend. Some days it makes you feel fat. On particularly bad days, I can look at children and think that when I'm older, that little 3-year-old girl is going to steal my husband."

In a culture of plenty where the young are pressured to succeed even before birth, the achievement package has come to include, especially for girls, a "perfect" body. Starting at puberty, sometimes before, the mounting pressure launches girls into the stratosphere of fat fear, in part fueled by the ubiquity of food, in part by new sensitivities adolescence brings to the judgments of others.

But perhaps the greatest accelerant of fat fear and distorted eating is the peer culture to which adolescents have been consigned for the past few decades. Age segregation isn't new to America's schools. But since the middle of the 20th century, it has gathered critical mass until it has also come to dominate the extracurricular life of the young in their insular march through middle school, high school, and beyond.

Between 1960 and 2000, the percentages of 20-, 25-, and 30-year-olds enrolled in school more than doubled, with females becoming an increasingly larger part of the total.

The extension of schooling for more young people, especially girls—now the majority of college attendees—requires them to be warehoused together for years with those deliberately selected to share many of the same attributes, constraining exposure to the broader range of humanity. Ongoing shifts in communication technology (think: MySpace, YouTube, and mp3 files) may employ up-to-the-nanosecond science, but they turn out to be extraordinarily conservative social and developmental forces, keeping the young tightly tethered to each other, cloistered among those like themselves, and sharing sights, sounds, and other cultural effusions targeted exclusively at them, further age-stratifying their souls.

Superimpose on that nature's compulsory contribution, the mating sweepstakes, and each cohort of girls seems forced to make ever more minute distinctions between themselves—just as they compete to distinguish themselves on their college application essays. Thus does dieting become a competitive sport with the gold medal going to the thinnest, a triumph of the cultural ideal for appearance that almost every American girl will unwittingly internalize by middle school.

The strongest predictor of eating disorders among middle-school girls today is the importance that peers place on weight and eating, researchers report in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. The perceptions of peers outweighs, as it were, such traditional factors as confidence level, actual body mass, trying to look like the girls and women appearing on television and in magazines, even being teased by family and others about weight.

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