



Fat Talk: What Girls and Their Parents Say about Dieting

Mimi Nichter

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They hate their thighs. They binge and purge. They want a perfect body. These are the American girls we've heard about in report after report--surveys telling us that half of all teen-aged girls are dieting at any given time, and suggesting that many of them are "at risk" for eating disorders. But what do these statistics really mean? How do girls think about their bodies, their appearance, their culture? In *Fat Talk* the girls answer for themselves. The result of a study that followed hundreds of teen-aged girls for three years, this book brings to light the subtleties, the complexities, and the realities of girls' ideas about their shapes, their eating habits, and their physical ideals.

Anthropologist Mimi Nichter uses an engaging narrative style to explore the influence of peers, family, and media on girls' sense of self. In extensive excerpts from interviews, we hear how these girls differ from those we encounter in surveys. In particular, despite widespread dissatisfaction with one aspect or another of their bodies, the girls did not diet so much as talk about dieting. "Fat talk," Nichter wryly argues, is a kind of social ritual among friends, a way of establishing solidarity.

Fat Talk reveals some differences between the black and white subjects Nichter interviewed--not just in matters of weight and appearance, but also in the mother-daughter relationship that seemed to powerfully influence a girl's self-image. Moving beyond the stereotypes of such relationships, Nichter examines the issues and struggles that mothers face in bringing up healthy daughters today--and suggests how we might help girls move beyond punishing images of ideal beauty.

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