



Bay of Plenty Times

By: Carly Gibbs, [Carly Gibbs](#)

Emily's cheeks are "really chubby", her lips "thin" and her chin and feet "weird".

"There's a lot of pressure to have certain facial features," the 12-year-old says of how she looks, adding that it's her weight that worries her the most.

"We need more representation of people who don't look like Barbies. I wish that the world would view beauty like something that everyone has, not just certain people."

The Tauranga girl, whose name has been changed to protect her privacy, says it's common for her female peers to compare themselves with the seemingly real-life body-beautiful photos on television and social media and feel inferior.

It's a problem that Enlighten Education New Zealand director Vicky Pond Dunlop is trying to fix.

Body insecurities can flow into feelings of worthlessness and unlovability, says Pond Dunlop, 54, whose wellbeing and resilience programme engages with girls aged 11 to 18, in schools throughout New Zealand.

"Perfectionism is another vehicle for body image issues, which ties into not only wanting to do well academically but being perceived as visually attractive and the good girl."

Pond Dunlop, a mother of two girls, a foster mum of four, plus "stand-in mum" to others, says girls need to know they're "more than just a body".

"When I was younger if you weren't size 12 you were fat - end of story. Now, it's very complicated. It's the size of your cheekbones, and they've got this idealised woman driven by the falsehood of FaceTune and other photo-editing apps, plus clever use of lighting, makeup, and digital photography that allows us to get that perfect photo."

Pond Dunlop, who has qualifications in education and psychology, says Enlighten Education raises awareness around perceived perfectionism and sexualisation.

"We encourage girls to decode the mixed messages they receive and to be in charge of their narrative, not let others take their power."

Girls are shown an advertisement where a model's body is shown but not her face.

"What's that about?" they are asked.

"We never suppose that we know better than them, we're just giving them the opportunity to have a discussion. To try and get them to see it's society, not each other, that they should be challenging."

Weight loss gone too far: 'I became obsessed'

Sarah Menlove knows the pain of being preoccupied with her looks.

She was a healthy, sporty child but it all unravelled in her 20s representing New Zealand at age-group level in triathlons.

The Mount Maunganui woman left university and started working in a gym as a personal trainer but felt pressured to slim down to fit in.

She began calculating her weight with skin fold tests and restricting food, developing symptoms similar to what's now known as orthorexia (an obsession with avoiding specific foods).

She dropped "significant" weight for her already small frame and 170cm height; reaching a very low body fat percentage and becoming "obsessed".

She lost her period for four years as a result, and then a stress fracture forced her out of triathlons for good, which in turn led to a journey of healing.

She's now a holistic health and body coach for women, teaching a "peaceful relationship" with food away from dieting, rules, and body shame. She has also spoken in schools.

Some sporty teens feel the pressure to drop weight to compete and wear togs, she says, and her aim is to deter them from going down the path that she did.

"I really believed that I was healthy and I really didn't want to hear what anybody else had to say," she recalls.



Extreme dieting and fitness caused Sarah Menlove to lose her period for four years. Now healthy, she's a holistic health and body coach for women, teaching a "peaceful relationship" with food away from dieting, rules, and body shame. Photo / Louise Burton

It took 18 months for her menstrual cycle to return and her ideas about what it means to be healthy were flipped on their head.

"I needed to deepen work around my mindset and self-love."

The 31-year-old wants to put a stop to girls being applauded on their external appearance only.

"'You look so good, have you lost weight?' That's reinforcing that idea that losing weight is good and gaining weight is bad," she says.

"It's re-learning to speak to our young girls from their internal qualities and build up their worth in what it is that they're doing and the gifts that they're here to bring into the world. That they can do anything they choose to do and it has nothing to do with how they look."

Beauty in words

Parents, not social media, can contribute to girls' ever-increasing obsession with body image, says the Bay of Plenty's only child and adolescent psychotherapist Joanne Bruce.

Bruce, who operates a private practice in Mount Maunganui and works one day a week in Rotorua, says if a girl is taught resilience from toddlerhood, her self-esteem will be high in teenagehood.

While selfies, Facebook and Snapchat are ubiquitous and play an important role for tweens and teens, girls will be less affected if they feel good about their capabilities.

"When we've got teenagers who are shaky and we blame the media, I think we've got to start thinking about where those building blocks started," Bruce says, cautioning that you shouldn't be afraid to let your child fail in their early years.

"So, when they hit teenage years, and do a lot of social comparisons, they're able to surf the wave of social media, rather than drown.

"Their resilience and sense of self is so strong that it doesn't matter to see a beautiful picture. I can just appreciate it: 'Wow, she's amazing.' It doesn't send me into a tailspin."



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not social media, can contribute to girls' ever-increasing obsession with body image, says the Bay of Plenty's only child and adolescent psychotherapist Joanne Bruce. Photo / Getty Images

When it comes to how parents compliment beauty, she advises being specific.

"'I like how you put your hair up like that' is quite different to 'you're so pretty' because it takes the pressure off them looking good every day."

Social comparison is now starting as early as 6 to 12 years she says, and if girls have worries, ask them questions.

"If we try and reassure them with 'you're gorgeous', then they aren't really given an opportunity to express that self-doubt."

Ask curious questions, rather than making sweeping statements, like, 'Of course you've got heaps of friends,' which shuts the conversation down.

"You are having access to their internal world by choosing curiosity first, before reassurance."

Be your own kind of beautiful

One event making all females feel beautiful is the Miss Rotorua pageant.

Fashion designer and Miss Rotorua Foundation director Kharl WiRepa says the pageant, founded in 1947, is built on the principles of whanaungatanga (relationships) and manaakitanga (kindness).

They look at a woman's beauty through their "mana", rather than physical attributes.

The pageant has three categories: Miss Teen Rotorua, Miss Te Arawa and Mrs Rotorua. There is no age and weight limit; no restrictions on tattoos; or a person's past, allowing former drug addicts and reformed criminals to enter.

"They might be very talented people, but they've made mistakes in their lives."

The pageant has only one category that's "visually assessed" and that's evening gowns.

The current Miss Te Arawa is "plus-sized" and Miss Teen Rotorua 2018 had a prosthetic eye.

"She had the best singing voice out of all the girls," WiRepa says.

"I just told her the whole way through 'don't compare yourself to the others because you have something that they don't have'."

WiRepa says American culture has pushed a false expectation of beauty on to Kiwi girls.



Having

battled insecurities as the "bigger girl", Aimee Wolfgram decided to "walk the talk" she feeds to the girls in her youth group about confidence, and enter the Miss Rotorua pageant. She is the current Miss Te Arawa title holder, as well as Miss Community and Miss People's Choice. Photo / Andrew Warner

"They're watching these Instagram-edited photos of supermodels that probably have no real substance to them behind their boob jobs."

WiRepa says the Rotorua pageant, which he hopes to bring to Tauranga in 2021, has remained sustainable because they're not stuck in "1950s America".

"The big pageants, they're in decline because they're only selecting women that are a certain creed."

Miss Te Arawa 2019, Aimee Wolfgram, 21, runs the girls' youth programme Diamonds, in Fordlands, the Rotorua suburb said to have inspired Once Were Warriors.

Having battled insecurities as the "bigger girl", she decided to "walk the talk" she feeds to her girls about confidence and enter the pageant.

"We go down to the park on Fridays and play, and I have girls who are 7 whose casual talk is, 'Ew, you're ugly.'

"I work with a lot of gang kids; all my (older) girls don't want to go to school, and if they do, they have very low self-esteem. I'm privileged enough to be in a place where I can help them, but that's come from having to deal with my own insecurities. Feeling like I had to look a certain way to fit in or be accepted, and have a boyfriend."

Winning, and the praise that came with it, made her realise a lot of people do have her back.

"Winning was a way of reminding myself that I do have value and character, as well as outer beauty," she says. "My identity is not just what people can see."

This year's pageant will be held on September 26 with 38 contestants, who will complete a 12-week training programme called Stiletto Camp, learning everything from career development to cultural appropriation.

"We teach them about building up their own confidence and knowing their self-worth because we do see a lot of social issues," WiRepa says, explaining that some contestants have experienced horrific things in their lives.

"I want to encourage more women that beauty is not Kim Kardashian."

Tips for parents

- Use conversation starters to help girls uncover the feelings beneath the surface - "What makes you ask that question?" - as a starting point.
- Talk up her strengths around her physical ability and talents.
- Use description rather than a sweeping statement about her appearance. "That ensemble you're wearing looks great" rather than "You're so pretty", which is a high bar to live up to daily.
- Talk positively about your own size and shape, and that of others around you.
- Educate them about good eating and healthy exercise patterns.
- If you have serious concerns, contact your GP and/or your school guidance counsellor. Students can also contact Youthline: free call 0800 376 633, free text 234, or log on to <https://www.youthline.co.nz/body-image.html>.