“A GIRL TRAPPED INSIDE A CAGE OF SHAME, SADNESS AND PRESSURE. LOCKED IN A PRISON OF HER OWN MIND, THE VOICES OF OTHERS CONSTANTLY WEIGH HER DOWN. THE FEAR OF NOT BEING THIN SUFFOCATES HER LIKE AN INVISIBLE SNAKE, SLOWLY SUCKING THE LIFE OUT OF HERE.”

– KATHERINE KIDD, INSPIRATION FOR ARTWORK

A GIRL TRAPPED INSIDE A CAGE OF WORDS

– ART BY SYLVIE FRICKER

Fear of Fat

THE YOUTH OF TODAY STRUGGLE WITH SOCIETAL PRESSURES TO LOOK A CERTAIN WAY.

BY KATHERINE KIDD

A 10-year-old kid walks into the doctor’s office and the first thing the doctor tells them is, ‘You need to lose some weight.’ Now the kid is a teenager and constantly worrying about being overweight. They spend their life worrying about something all because of one little sentence.

Children, especially teens and preteens, are struggling with eating disorders because of society’s pressure to look a certain way. Virginia Sole-Smith, award-winning journalist and author of the book “The Eating Instinct,” explains, “It’s not their bodies causing these kids to have higher rates of anxiety, depression and disordered eating behaviors. The real danger to a child in a larger body is how we treat them for having that body.” When a child is 5 and goes into kindergarten and meets other children, they have no concept of weight and how their body looks, they are simply a child. The child grows older, is now in third grade, and becomes more self-conscious. Their doctor tells them they are overweight, social media tells them they are overweight, and now they feel surrounded on all sides and undeniably hopeless.

FEAR OF FAT IN PARENTS

Parents try their hardest to help their children feel happy and comfortable, but oftentimes they confuse fear with trying to help. Parents will try to constrict or limit what their children eat and how much they can eat, but in most cases, it only makes the eating disorders worse. “Many people would come up to me and say, ‘I’m a parent and I want to change this for my kids. I want them to have a good relationship with food and their bodies,’” Sole-Smith said. “But often, they would then add something like, ‘I mean, of course, I don’t want them to be fat.’” Parents sometimes struggle to grasp the idea that every body is different and what works for one child may not work for another. They have an image of what their child should look like, and some stick to it, making the child feel worse.

Children who start off in a larger body may be treated worse by parents because their parents go into a frenzy and try anything from diets to pills and exercise. When kids with larger bodies start to develop eating disorders, they often don’t get the proper care. Eating disorders are most frequently associated with very thin bodies, so eating disorders in larger bodies are usually overlooked and misunderstood. But, every body is different and unfortunately, everybody is capable of developing an eating disorder.

GOOD INTENTIONS, BAD RESULTS

We have all heard the saying, ‘Do as I say and not as I do.’ You might think that won’t affect a child that much, but with the combination of those words and a toxic helping of a parent’s negative thoughts about their child’s body, you have a recipe for disaster. An eating disorder can be sparked by even the simplest words from parents like, ‘Why are you eating again?’ or ‘Do you want to end up fat?’ This can all add to the big pot of eating disorders that stew inside a child. Parents can be toxic without even realizing it. ¨What we know is that putting kids on diets or encouraging them to exercise a lot to change their body shape increases your risk for eating disorders,” Sole-Smith said. “And that is not good for anybody’s health.” Parents may think they are helping their child by saying things like, ‘Calories in, calories out,’ but such words may make children worry about how much they weigh, when children should not worry about how they look.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can make kids feel like they must stop eating or eat a certain way to be attractive. “Nobody should be comparing what we eat to what anyone else eats. All of our bodies are different. All of our hunger is different,” Sole-Smith said. Many social media posts are fake, and unfortunately so are some influencers. People will post things about how they eat a rainbow of fruits and vegetables, implying this is how your kids should eat too.

In most cases, a tiny piece of chicken and salad will not hold kids over. Parents may see these recipes and think they are perfect for their kids but don’t remember that kids are not all the same. “Some kids may not want to eat the whole rainbow, they may instead want to eat only the red part,” Virginia Sole-Smith said. Parents worry that children don’t want to eat just fruits and vegetables, they might want crackers and cheese, or chicken and pasta, instead of salad with chicken. They tend to forget that you can still be healthy and eat pasta or rice instead of salad because it is all about balance. Nothing in extremity.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

One of the worst feelings you can have is feeling stuck in an eating disorder. Here are some ways you can help yourself. Advocate for yourself. Stand up when a parent says a negative comment. Don’t let people tell you how your body should be.

Parents, you can stand up for your children, too! In doctors’ offices, advocate for your children. Listen when they tell you they are struggling, do not ignore them or say they will ‘grow out of it.’ You may think it is nothing now, but you won’t think that when your teenager is hooked up in a hospital because they stopped eating.

From painstakingly thin to feeling overweight and helpless, kids struggle with numerous eating disorders. Social media, parents, doctors and even friends may bury them alive in shame, guilt and fear. They don’t need another judgment, they need a parent, they need a friend.