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Health for  
ALL Children!



# Changing The Conversation:

From "Preventing Obesity"  
To Promoting Health  
For ALL Children

By Carmen Cool MA, LPC



**MY EARLIEST MEMORY OF HATING MY BODY CAME DURING ONE PARTICULAR THANKSGIVING AT MY GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE.**

I was in the fifth grade, and after dinner I was looking out of the big picture window and thinking about the carving knife that I had somehow

become enchanted with. It was the first time we had an electric one. How effortless it was—just turn it on, and watch how the buzzing blade easily sliced off pieces of the turkey. I looked down at my stomach, gathered it up into my young hands, and said to no one in particular, “I wish I could cut this off the way we cut the turkey”.

Looking back, I realize what a perfect moment that might have been for an intervention. If I'd had an adult in my life who could have heard me, sat down and helped me gently unpack the feelings about myself I wasn't even aware of, it could have changed the trajectory of my life. Instead, my aunts, mother and grandmother who were sitting around me looked at each other and laughed, saying, “Yeah, me too! Wouldn't that be great?” and “I'd like to do that to my upper arms!”

“If it's true that you can be any size and hate your body, then it's also true that you can be any size and love it.”

The conversation continued, with each woman imagining how much better her life would be without certain pieces of herself, while I listened and learned. I learned three things in that moment; one, that women are supposed to hate their bodies, two, that it would indeed be better if my stomach were smaller, and three, you can always form an instant community around body hatred.

Thirty years later, I walked into an art gallery in downtown Boulder, Colorado and saw the many colorful bathroom scales hanging on the walls. Several Boulder teens from the **Boulder Youth Body Alliance** had transformed these scales into individual pieces of art, working with their body image in the process. The traditionally powerful numbers on the dial were replaced with positive adjectives or phrases—those things that each person wanted to see reflected back to themselves. One scale was decorated with pieces of blue and purple tissue paper, individually torn to represent the scales of a mermaid's tail, with words on the dial like “luscious” and “captivating”. With the facilitation of art therapist Merryl Rothaus, MA, ATR-BC, the teens re-authored the scales, and each teen refused to believe that happiness was based upon a number. Rather, the language of art assisted them in celebrating their feelings about their bodies and they redefined the nature and meaning of a scale and their relationship to it. Beside each scale was a text written by the artist. One of them said,

*“Despite all the pressure I feel to attain physical perfection, I have realized that in the end, when I look back, the things in my life I will be proud of will have nothing to do with the size or shape of my body.”*

The reinvention of these scales became a form of art as social action, where each artist's personal feelings and thoughts were able to positively affect others. Hundreds of people came through the gallery that night, creating an opportunity for teens and community members to talk together about an issue that undoubtedly affects all of us in some way and to share in a different possibility—that it might be possible to feel good about and in our own bodies. People left the gallery with a new experience. Suddenly they abandoned the idea that self-esteem equals a number. From across the room, I watched a woman in mid-life approach a converted scale placed on the floor with hesitancy; her eyes down, and her body hunched over. But with a teen's encouragement, she allowed herself to step on the scale, peek through her covered eyes to see that she was “alluring”, and step off smiling and standing tall.

If it's true that you can be any size and hate your body, then it's also true that you can be any size and love it. And



if a community can join together in body disparagement, then a community can also join together in support of one another—and especially our teens—in reclaiming our bodies and allowing ourselves to fully express our joy, comfort, and ease in our bodies, exactly as they are.

## The Boulder Youth Body Alliance (BYBA)

I am a therapist who works with eating and body image issues and I'm a woman who has lost people close to me (literally and figuratively) to the constant obsession with weight we face. Because of what I witness on a daily basis, I have become interested in the work of prevention and education. On a Tuesday morning in September 2004, I walked into New Vista High School in Boulder, Colorado. The school was recruiting teens for a new pilot peer-education program on body image that I would be leading. It began with a simple idea: teens talking to other teens about how they felt about weight, body image, and the messages they receive about how they're 'supposed' to look. Interested kids were asked to gather in the Community Room for an informational meeting. I was expecting around 6 to 8 kids. I walked into the room and saw 24 high school students looking expectantly at me.

From this meeting, the Boulder Youth Body Alliance was born. The BYBA is a youth-driven, peer education program that empowers teens to create social change around the ideas, beliefs and messages that lead to eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. Our program is based on The Body Positive curriculum<sup>1</sup>, a successful intervention model that teaches children and teens to creatively transform the conditions that shape their relationships with their bodies, food, and exercise. Understanding that messages are strongest when delivered through real stories from role models and peers, the Body Positive's programs and educational materials are developed with this philosophy, and are delivered to audiences through a variety of creative and thought-provoking methods, including videos, lesson plans, books and art. The BYBA program also integrates curriculum from Healthy Body Image, a primary prevention curriculum by Kathy Kater<sup>2</sup>, and Full of Ourselves: Advancing Girl Power, Health and Leadership, by Catherine Steiner-Adair.<sup>3</sup> All of these approaches promote self-acceptance, intuitive eating, pleasurable movement, and critical analysis of cultural imagery and ideals.



## Embracing Our Bodies, Reclaiming Our Lives

During our first day together, we talked about our relationships with our bodies and the ways that relationship affects our ability to be present in our own lives. We talked about the messages we get, how we respond to those messages, and how we can choose something different. We explored stereotypes of thinness, fatness and eating disorders and we investigated what people really mean when they say, “I feel fat”. I quickly learned that the kids want to have the chance to do something about these issues. The cultural messages they were receiving didn’t make logical sense to them, but they found themselves stuck inside the pressure to conform. Once they had the chance to speak honestly about their feelings, we spent hours discussing their questions, anger and their hope in the possibility that they could do something and work together to create a different reality.

We continued to meet twice a month throughout the school year to talk about what they observed and what they could do about it. After initiating the dialogue, I simply got out of the way while their heightened awareness burst forth. Students came in reporting on things they’ve noticed in the world, whether it was an article they found, a reality TV show, a comment from a teacher, or the way their peers are dieting and doing drugs to lose weight before prom night. For example, one teen reported, “Our nutrition teacher said today that when she wants to lose weight, she picks up smoking for two weeks.”

By doing this work together, and examining the feelings they have about their own bodies, these BYBA teens became peer educators. They applied their critical thinking skills, and analyzed the ubiquitous, often harmful societal messages about how they should look. Their willingness to explore our culture’s beauty ideal, from the inside out, and to resist pressures to conform, made them credible role models for other teens and adults in their community.

These days, BYBA peer leaders conduct presentations to people of all ages, co-facilitate teen drop-in support groups with adults, and participate in community events. By sharing how a positive body image has transformed their self-esteem, they have become change-makers. They embolden teens to question society’s prevailing views about body image and inspire them to accept their bodies. Their own family members have also benefited as the teens interact with them around what they are learning. In this way, the effects of a young person learning to be

at peace with her body ripples out into the community. The message they are teaching us is nothing less than revolutionary. As one participant said;

*“Before I joined BYBA, I thought that the only way that I could ever be happy with my body would be to change how I looked. As I began to research, read, and teach about how to love your body rather than hate it, I realized that the path towards contentment with my body didn’t have anything to do with losing weight or getting makeovers, but with accepting and appreciating my body as it is.”*

There is a certain kind of power that role models have<sup>4</sup>. High school students standing and delivering a positive message to middle school students is uniquely effective. The younger students feel more deeply understood and related with when the message they hear comes from someone who faces the same pressures.<sup>4</sup> I have heard the conversation inside of a ten-year old change from, “I’m not supposed to like my body. I want to be skinny—I want to be perfect”—to “thank you for telling us it is okay to be ourselves. Some people needed to hear that. Especially me!”

## Positively Affirming

The BYBA message is rooted in the Health at Every Size philosophy, a researched-based paradigm that focuses on health and well being, not weight. To inspire teens to reclaim their self-worth, our peer educators challenge society’s narrowly defined restrictions about ‘acceptable’ body size.

The pressure that girls feel to be thin is clear. Boys may feel this pressure also, or they may feel the need to be strong and muscular. But both girls and boys feel the constant pressure to not be fat. They inherently know what is wrong with the focus on obesity prevention. And if you want to listen, they’ll tell you how it affects them. They report experiences of feeling constantly judged, watched and monitored. As one participant said; “My mom is more afraid of me becoming fat than of any other thing that could happen to me.”

Weight-focused approaches to health can often inadvertently plant the seeds for anxiety and self-scrutiny. Young people often receive teachings about health, nutrition and exercise that are heavily laced with moral underpinnings. When that happens, those who fall outside the lines are at risk for stigmatization and bullying, and those who fall inside the lines are constantly worried and hyper-vigilant. So decisions that should be





“High school students standing and delivering a positive message to middle school students is uniquely effective.”



about what is best for their well being become decisions directed towards what will make them thin.

But kids know this. One young woman said to me, “If we respect and appreciate our bodies, we make choices that are good for us.” They inherently understand the link between the pressure they feel to be thin and “healthy”, and fat prejudice. They know that there has to be a different path, they just need our support in order to find it. One of the things that successfully engages kids is appealing to their sense of social justice. Harnessing the anger and rebellion that characterizes adolescence in the service of ending discrimination propels them to stand in front of their peers and say: “Sizism is a really big deal. It’s another form of oppression. Stereotypes are hurtful to others and they also damage our self-esteem.” They become more able to ask themselves and their peers, “How can we move away from assumptions and look deeper than this?”

## BYBA In Action

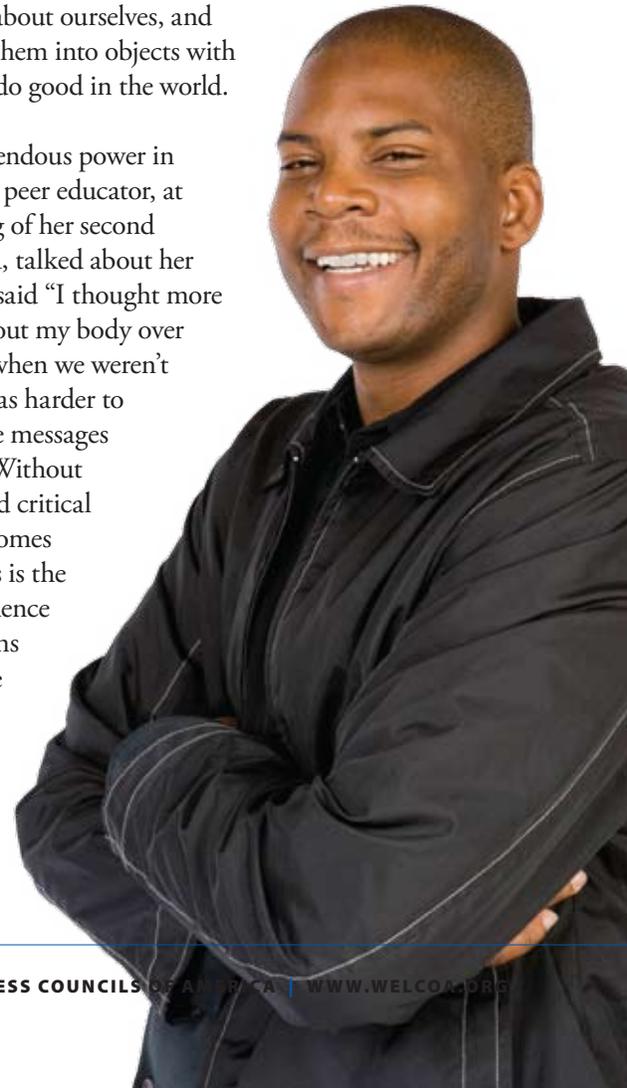
Over the past three years, the Boulder Youth Body Alliance has developed their leadership skills in a number of innovative ways. Some of these include:

»	Presenting to over 875 high school and middle school students and offering an alternative to body dissatisfaction
»	Raising community awareness with interactive activities at events such as Eating Disorder Awareness Week, 9News Health Fair, the Boulder Creek Festival, and others
»	Media appearances in the newspaper and in a Comcast MetroBeat TV program, <b>Student Voices: Dying to be Thin</b> , winner of a Heartland Regional Emmy Award.
»	Writing body positive messages on school windows and sidewalks
»	Building school/community partnerships to strengthen their ability to bring the message of positive body image to more members of their communities
»	Increasing inter-generational outreach & dialogue between students, faculty, and parents
»	Starting to work on changing the non-discrimination policies at the school to include body shape and size.

## A Community Joining Together

The Boulder community got involved for the Great Jeans Giveaway, an event in March 2007 sponsored by the National Eating Disorder Association. The Great Jeans Giveaway encourages people to donate old jeans that no longer fit for whatever reason, rather than holding on to them for the “some day” when their bodies are different. The Twenty-Ninth Street Mall, Boulder’s newly opened shopping district, hosted the event for us and provided media coverage, and local retail stores offered discounts to anyone who donated a pair of jeans. BYBA partnered with the University of Colorado’s Student Wellness Program, and college volunteers from Metropolitan State College also came to help. I was stunned as people arrived—and kept arriving throughout the afternoon—bringing bags and boxes of old jeans. BYBA collected over 375 pairs of jeans in just three hours and donated them to the National Pediatric Aids Network and Treasure the Children, an organization that turns used denim into quilts for kids with HIV. This is a wonderful example of social activism in action. Like the scales in the gallery where BYBA partnered with the Naropa Community Art Studio and Art and Soul Gallery, we took common objects that often make us feel badly about ourselves, and transformed them into objects with the power to do good in the world.

There is tremendous power in support. One peer educator, at the beginning of her second year in BYBA, talked about her summer and said “I thought more negatively about my body over the summer when we weren’t meeting. It was harder to contradict the messages on my own. Without discussion and critical thinking, it comes back in.” This is the strongest evidence that these teens need both the peer support of one another and our support as well.



## A Different Way of Thinking

The teens with whom I have worked have repeatedly described the depth of the societal pressure they feel about how they “should” look. They are barraged with messages from media influences and peers, to physicians and the war on obesity. The collective input of the teens I have spoken with is that there is an imminent need for a program that can serve as an antidote to this dominant, damaging part of their culture. They articulately and passionately describe the ways in which being a part of this peer educator group has affected them. As Rachel, one BYBA peer leader said;

*“BYBA has been more meaningful to me than any other experience I have had. It has helped me in my own personal growth. I have emerged a more confident, body positive, self-accepting, knowledgeable and aware young woman. I have never felt more comfortable or beautiful in my own skin.”*

Doing this work with teens is to invite them into a different way of thinking that runs counter to the usual I-have-to-change-my-body-in-order-to-be-happy-and-healthy message. And slowly, change is emerging. The conversations between kids, in classrooms, and in families, are different than they once were. Some examples of these changes include;

- ▶ One’s participant’s brother who came home from school and told her how he noticed and spoke out about a size-prejudiced comment he heard as a result of her talking about it over the course of a year.
- ▶ Another teen’s little sister spoke to her about how often she heard her friends in middle school talking about feeling fat. “I think twice about it when I hear it now.” she said. “Before, it’s just how it was.”
- ▶ And another teen described the way her mother got on the scale every morning and always said something disparaging about herself, comparing her body with her daughter’s. The teen said “I sat down and talked to my mom for the first time and told her how that makes me feel.”

## A Call To Action

It is clear that we can choose to be allies with our bodies, we can be allies with our children, and together we can engage our communities to weave a web of support. This work starts when we begin to pay attention, non-judgmentally, to the conversations we engage in and dare to start new ones. We must include kids in policy and decision-making, because they often know better than we do what they need and what will work. Support for organizations like

the Boulder Youth Body Alliance and The Body Positive is essential, so that teens can continue working towards the kinds of social change that benefit all of us. If you are interested in sponsoring the eating disorders prevention and body image work of The Body Positive or BYBA, please let us know! Send an email to The Body Positive at [connie.sobczak@gmail.com](mailto:connie.sobczak@gmail.com), or The Boulder Youth Body Alliance at [carmencool@yahoo.com](mailto:carmencool@yahoo.com). All donations are tax-deductible. We thank you in advance.

Working with adolescents is challenging, and one of the most rewarding things I’ve done. They teach me how to be an effective adult in their lives. I have witnessed one of the peer educators standing up in a classroom and embodying a powerful message. I have heard an eleven-year old during a BYBA presentation say that she will never see the world the same way again and will no longer commit herself to looking like the models. I have seen someone bring back a calendar they found in Alaska that has drawings of women of all sizes on it. All these things make me feel incredibly hopeful.

I wonder what would have changed if the women in that kitchen with me on that Thanksgiving Day all those years ago had stood up for my stomach and engaged me in a different conversation. I often imagine what it would have been like if the fifth-grader who wanted to slice off her belly could have heard an 11-grader talk about learning to be okay in her body.

There are groups of kids across the country right now who are sick and tired of worrying about their bodies, and want an easier and healthier way to live their lives. As one young woman said, “We think that if we can change, maybe we can start a whole movement of change.”

The only question left is; will we join them? ★

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### About Carmen Cool, MA, LPC

**Carmen Cool** is a licensed psychotherapist in private practice in Boulder, Colorado, where she works primarily with adults, teens and groups around eating problems and weight concerns. She received her Masters in Transpersonal Counseling from Naropa University and is the Founder and Director of the Boulder Youth Body Alliance, helping teens change the world, rather than their bodies. Carmen has worked closely with the University of Colorado at Boulder, helping them implement a Health At Every Size approach in their training programs. She is a frequent presenter in the Denver Metro area, and she especially enjoys speaking to psychology students about the importance of eliminating size bias in their work. Carmen can be reached at [carmencool@yahoo.com](mailto:carmencool@yahoo.com), or 303-440-5775.



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**Suggested Citation:** Cool, C. (2007). *Changing the Conversation: From “Preventing Obesity” To Promoting Health for ALL Children.* WELCOA’s Absolute Advantage Magazine, 7(1), 16-23.

