



Christina Parsons of BodySense spoke to a crowd in Little Current about promoting healthy self-image in young athletes.

photo by Alicia McCutcheon

# BodySense workshop shares tips on guiding young athletes' self image

by Alicia McCutcheon

LITTLE CURRENT—According to studies and research, athletes of both sexes will experience some sort of disordered eating, or even eating disorder (anorexia, bulimia, binge eating), in their lifetime and, as stated by the creators of the BodySense initiative, it is up to the key influencers in an athlete's life to help promote positive body image.

BodySense is a joint program of the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport and the True Sport Foundation, offering workshops and resources for athletes as well as "key influencers" such as parents, coaches and counsellors.

The Sudbury and District Health Unit invited Christina Parsons of BodySense, an athlete herself, to make the trip North for two workshops last week, one in Sudbury and the other at the Little Current Public School. The all-female group was made up of teachers, guidance counselors, dietitians, mothers and students and began the discussion with the many factors that affect self esteem, including peers, fami-

ly, teachers, media, coaches, society and body image.

"While we can't control many of the outside influences, we can control body image," Ms. Parsons explained. She gave examples of often-uttered phrases, such as "I have to go work off that dessert" or, "I'm on a diet," as these words are internalized by the athletes around us. "We must be careful of what we're saying as key influencers."

Ms. Parsons suggested that when giving constructive criticism to an athlete, it's couched by two positive statements—the technique known as a "love sandwich."

She spoke of the high instances of disordered eating (dissatisfaction with body weight and shape and attempts to control and change it) among athletes (15-64 percent) and how perception plays a key role. Ms. Parsons asked the group to define their image of a beach volleyball player. Words that came to mind were tall, thin and well defined. "In our minds we

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have ideas of what different kinds of athletes should look like," she added. "This means added pressures for athletes."

There are four main types of sports: aesthetic, judging, weight categories and endurance, the group learned. They then chose the sport of cross-country running, an endurance sport, and came up with a list of what it takes to excel at that sport—performance indicators. The list included many indicators such as strength, endurance and power, but weight was not among them.

Ms. Parsons explained that in order to be an elite sportsperson and to stand out from the group, an athlete would be in their best physical shape to begin with. A coach need not say that their protégé must lose weight, but rather that they should focus on training to gain ground with the aforementioned performance indicators. Weight loss, the group was told, will naturally follow. Weighing an athlete at the beginning of the season will by no means aid in helping the situation, she added, and should be avoided at all costs.

The group also touched on the female athlete triad: disordered eating, loss of menses and osteoporosis.

"There's a misconception that if you're a young female athlete and are training really hard it's okay to lose periods," she said. "It's not okay."

The triad begins with low caloric diets due to disordered eating or eating disorders, leading to lost periods and, eventually, osteoporosis. Disordered eating could range from skipping breakfast to fad diets to bulimia, binge eating or muscle dysmorphia (the phenomenon

that occurs when a person becomes preoccupied with the thought that their body is too small and is especially a concern with male athletes).

Warning and detection of disordered eating include emotional states, weighing, exceedingly high standards in sport, over-exercise, strange food and eating behaviours, attitudes and language, poor self-image and physical changes in the body.

"We should be aware of these things and realize it can lead to disordered eating," Ms. Parsons said, noting that what some consider a "good" athlete will share some of these same signs (selfless, performs through

pain and injury and accepts nothing less than perfect). "The deciding factor here is self-esteem. Are they critical of self, eager to please or place emphasis on ideal body shape or weight? How was my pass? How do you think my game went?"

Ms. Parsons encouraged key influencers to share and provide accurate information as well as to keep an open line of communication between coaches and parents.

"We need to respect body weight, shape and size," she continued. "At BodySense we believe there is a sport for every body."

"How many people here know a six- or seven-year-old that plays hockey at least four times a week?" the presenter asked to a large show of hands. "It's not a good idea to specialize in one sport as early as six or seven. Their bodies might outgrow that sport. Sport should fit a body."

Ms. Parsons added that specializing in one sport, and perhaps outgrowing that sport, might eventually lead to a life without physical activity at all, having soured on their former pastime.

She also shared that that young athletes should "eat what they crave (if they

want McDonald's it's probably their body's way of saying they need a carbohydrate), eat when hungry, stop eating when full and live actively. Within a year of healthy eating and living, a body will find its natural weight—our bodies have a set range."

Girls ages 9-16 should expect to gain between five and 10 pounds every year and grow up to 28 centimeters within that time while boys aged 9-20 can expect to gain 88 pounds and grow up to 42 centimeters in that timeframe.

"Key influencers need to talk to young people about this and how it may throw them off if they gain weight temporarily, but it will make them stronger (more weight and height means more power) in the long run," Ms. Parsons explained. "We need to treat each athlete individually, recognizing body growth. We need to comment on health and fitness, not weight and shape."

For more resources visit [www.bodysense.ca](http://www.bodysense.ca).