

O'Dea tackles body image

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When Jenny O'Dea began her career as a public health professional, she was intent on being “a good little nutritionist”. But as she interviewed teenage girls about iron consumption and anaemia, she discovered a common theme: all the girls wanted to talk about their weight.

O'Dea, an associate professor in nutrition education, soon changed her research focus and quickly came to realise that “for these young girls, their whole self-image was based around their weight.

“I was shocked to see how much of their self-worth was dictated by their body image. I could see these kids spending their precious young lives pursuing something as futile as ‘the perfect body’.”

Prompted by this insight, O'Dea has devoted her career to studying child and adolescent health. In her latest book, *Everybody's Different* (ACER Press) she targets educators in a bid to improve self-esteem amongst young people in order to prevent eating disorders and obesity.

In 2000 O'Dea conducted a program designed to boost self-esteem in Year 7 and 8 students. The program, held over nine weeks, aimed to improve students' self-image by emphasising that their uniqueness is to be expected, accepted and celebrated. Most importantly, O'Dea concentrated on boosting self-esteem in ways unrelated to their body image.

Initially “stunned” by the results, O'Dea re-analysed the data to check that they

were accurate. After a second assessment, she realised that her original hypothesis was correct: given a dose of self-esteem, children's body satisfaction would increase.

“I think the program worked because it's such a simple, universal truth. By emphasising that a person is worth so much more than what they look like, they acknowledge their good qualities and their body image is just not so important any more.”



Emphasising uniqueness: Jenny O'Dea