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‘No Body Talk’ Summer Camps

By ALYSON KRUEGER

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Last August, on a clear summer day, Tom and Maura Gould were driving their 12-year-old daughter from [Eden Village](#), an organic farming camp in Putnam Valley, N.Y., to their home in Cambridge, Mass., when they started talking about family members who were particularly hairy.

“Why would you want to talk about that?” their daughter, Aviva, asked from the back seat.

“There are much better things to talk about than someone’s looks.”

For many people, including children, talking about physical attributes would be no big deal. But for Aviva, this kind of talk sounded an alarm, mostly because she had not heard it at camp.

At Eden Village, staff members and campers follow something called the “no body talk” rule. “The specific rule is while at camp, we take a break from mentioning physical appearance, including clothing,” said Vivian Stadlin, who founded the camp six years ago with her husband, Yoni Stadlin. “And it’s about myself or others, be it negative, neutral or even positive.”



Credit James O'Brien

On Friday afternoon, when the campers, girls and boys from 8 to 17, are dressed in white and especially polished for the Sabbath, they refrain from complimenting one another's appearances. Rather, they say, "Your soul shines" or "I feel so happy to be around you" or "Your smile lights up the world," Ms. Stadlin said.

Signs posted on the mirrors in the bathroom read, "Don't check your appearance, check your soul."

Haley Binn, who owns fashion-focused luxury magazines with her husband, Jason Binn, and whose 9-year-old attended Eden Village last year, said that unlike her family's life in New York City, where clothes and looks are paramount, the camp's "no body talk" rule makes it "this wonderful, utopian kind of place where you're not judged on anything except your spirit."

Eden Village may be one of the newest institutions to embrace the "no body talk" rule, but it is certainly not alone.

[Farm & Wilderness](#), a network of seven summer camps in Vermont, has used the rule since the 1970s to teach campers how to appreciate their friends for their character, rather than their appearance.

At [Rosie's Girls](#), a chain of day camps across the country that introduces girls to traditionally masculine skills such as carpentry and firefighting, the “no body talk” rule is taken even further by covering mirrors so participants can’t analyze their own bodies, let alone those of others.

Mina Samuels, author of “Run Like a Girl,” a [book](#) and [blog](#) that helps women tackle body-image and confidence issues by using sports, encourages her adult readers to stay away from body talk. “I started noticing that all the language that women use, they are constantly like: ‘Oh, you look great. Have you lost weight?’ ” she said. “It’s all just damaging, but it’s also just a waste of time. There are so many more interesting, I won’t even say important, just more engaging things that women could spend their time thinking about than their bodies.”

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While eliminating body talk may seem extreme, it is part of a movement among organizations, especially those dealing with children, to take the pressure and focus away from physical appearance.

Last year, [New York City ran an ad campaign](#) to improve the self-esteem of girls, putting up posters on buses and subways that declare in part: “I’m a girl. I’m a leader, adventurous, outgoing, sporty, unique, smart and strong. I’m beautiful the way I am.”

Independent schools around New York City have hired psychologists and counselors to work with students on their body-image issues, including [eating disorders](#).

Even [New York Fashion Week](#) joined the trend last September by staging its first plus-size fashion show, [a collection by Eden Miller](#). The Daily Mail was one of many publications to [hail this development](#), calling it a “victory in the size-zero war.”

Perhaps because of its severity (eliminating conversation very natural in our culture), the “no body talk” rule elicits passionate responses from its most ardent supporters as well as its critics.

For Ms. Stadlin, adopting the rule for Eden Village was an obvious choice. “This is good,” she remembered thinking. “This is powerful. This is magical.”

And campers, knowing that no one will comment, seem more willing to experiment with their image, wearing capes, ninja outfits or big hairdos. (Ms. Stadlin said that the other campers would engage with them by saying things like, “Oh, you’re wearing a cape, let me fly with you,” or “Tell me about your superpowers.”)

Rachel Steinig, a 14-year-old high school freshman from Mount Airy, Pa., who has attended Eden Village for three years and is attending this summer, believes that because her fellow campers can’t comment on her clothing, they focus on who she is as a person. “People really like

me for who I am and not what I look like, and people actually pay attention to the sort of person that I am,” she said. “Your dress isn’t really you, it’s just something you bought. But whether you are a good friend, that’s truly you.”

At Farm & Wilderness, the rule is so ingrained in most alumni that many of them stop thinking it is something special or different. “It’s something that we’ve been doing for so long that it doesn’t seem like a new or a novel thing,” said Pieter Bohlen, an alumnus and the camp’s president. “It’s just part of the way we operate.”

Ms. Stadlin also receives emails from parents, including Ms. Gould, saying that as a result of their child’s request, they have started the “no body talk” rule in their home.

“I think that if you are going to send your child to a camp like this, you are making a pretty conscious decision that it is important to you,” Ms. Binn said. “And I would imagine, at least for us, that you would try to take the focus away from that when you are in your home as best as you can.”

Some psychologists, however, don’t see the spread of the “no body talk” rule as a good thing. They worry that it could lead children to bury important issues that need to be discussed.

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“Precisely because the focus on physical appearance is so pervasive, the conversation should be had,” said Lisa Morse, a clinical psychologist in New York City who works with many parents of teens. “Difficult and uncomfortable issues don’t go away because people hope they will. And they don’t go away because they are ignored.”

Jill Lewis, a clinical social worker in New York City who specializes in helping women with eating disorders, agrees. “It’s like not eating carbs,” she said. “You’re going to crave it, you’re going to want it, and you still feel this need to have a conversation about it and then you are not. And eventually you do it unhealthily.”

Dr. Morse also worries that because body talk has been eliminated from the table completely, children are not learning how to deal with comments that may make them feel uncomfortable, something that happens often in life.

“Kids need to learn how to process these feelings, not how to push them away,” she said. “And I think it’s a perfect opportunity in a summer camp. Where else are they learning how to deal with it productively?” (Eden Village and Rosie’s Girls do hold body-image programs to help campers deal with these issues.)

Because of these arguments, the “no body talk” rule can still be found in only a handful of places. But its proponents say that the rule creates effects that last well after participants have left them and have re-entered the “real world.”

Rachel Steinig said that the feelings of strength and security that she received at camp stayed with her throughout the school year. “If I’m feeling sad about things, about how I look or just about anything,” she said, “I just remember my friends from Eden Village, and I just remember that they love me for who I am.”

A version of this article appears in print on June 19, 2014, on page E1 of the New York edition with the headline: Where Mirrors Don’t Rule.

If you went to summer camp as a kid, your experiences there are probably among your best childhood memories. I know that's true for me. I was a true summer camp kid. I went to sleep away camp for at least a week, if not multiple weeks, every summer. When I was too old to attend the camps, I became a counselor in training and eventually a counselor. My summers from the age of eight or nine until seventeen were spent in a cabin, in the lake, in the woods, and around a campfire. Summer camp influenced my entire young experience and shaped my future life. In fact, I'm still a part time day camp co A Jewish summer camp makes "no body talk" part of its mission. 1 Comment. When Rachel Steinig first heard about the "No Body Talk" guidelines at Eden Village Camp, she found them "a little strange." Continue reading this article! Already a subscriber? Log in above to keep reading. Or subscribe now for immediate access to the complete digital and print editions, plus exclusive online access to Lilith's back issues. Beth Levenson Praver. What a great, thoughtful method for addressing one of the more pressing challenges of young women's development.