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Class teaches media literacy and healthy eating to middle-school girls

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By: Madolyn Rogers

Middle-school girls participating in an after-school class designed to prevent eating disorders learned something about magazine photographs of models: They're not real. The models' beauty secret is Photoshop.

The knowledge was empowering, said their teacher, Johanna Wise-Levine. "They said, 'Why am I going to spend my time trying to look like a model when a model doesn't even look like a model?'"

Wise-Levine, a senior community studies major at UC Santa Cruz, wanted to develop a program to support girls, because "I know from personal experience how hard it is growing up female in this culture."

She teamed up with the Santa Cruz County Office of Education to offer the class "Full of Ourselves" at Mission Hill, Branciforte and Shoreline middle schools in the fall. The curriculum was developed at Harvard Medical School, and is one of the most promising and extensively researched eating disorder prevention programs, Wise-Levine said.

"We view that eating disorders are part of a spectrum of issues that girls face as they enter adolescence, and so by addressing these risk factors for eating disorders we're also addressing risk factors for other problems," Wise-Levine said.

The class seeks to boost girls' self-esteem and help them to make healthier choices. In addition to learning to critically examine media images of women, girls engaged in role-playing, art, discussions and yoga. They discussed healthy food choices and learned to distinguish when they were really hungry from when they were lonely or had some other need.

Hannah Rogge, 13, who took the class at Mission Hill Middle School, said she liked the yoga and the media discussions. "I learned to be more confident in myself," Hannah said. "I'm less stressed out."

The class is part of a year-round program, "Healthy Girls Santa Cruz," [that] Wise-Levine developed. She plans to offer other classes soon, like "Girls for a Change Action Teams," which works to build leadership skills and community involvement.