New research from the University of Georgia shows a connection between being a feminist and having a better body image.

Published in *Body Image*, the study found that feminist mothers and their daughters felt more positively about their bodies and less shame about how their bodies look than those who don't ascribe to feminist ideals. Additionally, the paper showed that how mothers view and speak about their bodies can affect how their daughters view their own and vice versa.

The researchers focused on feminist embodiment, which they define as women rejecting societal norms and expectations about what they should look like while also feeling empowered and embracing their own bodies for their strengths and uniqueness.

Led by Analisa Arroyo, lead author of the study and an associate professor in the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences, the researchers surveyed 169 mother-daughter pairs for the study, but they specifically didn't ask participants whether they self-identified as feminists. Instead, they analyzed participants' feelings about their own power as a woman, how connected they feel to their bodies and how in control they feel of their own lives, in addition to other measures of feminist values.

Previous research linked negative comments about one's own body to negative outcomes such as depression, disordered eating, body dissatisfaction and more. The present study showed that when daughters hear their mothers talk negatively about themselves, the daughters' own body image takes a hit.

Daughters who embraced their bodies and spoke positively about themselves, though, served as a positive influence for their mothers. Moms with more body-positive daughters were more likely to have a better body image of themselves.

"I think one of the key takeaways of this study is the importance of focusing on moms as the agent of change," Arroyo said. "One way we can break the intergenerational cycle of negative body image is by empowering mothers to accept themselves and love their bodies, and that's what we can teach our daughters."

But Arroyo said that's much easier said than done.

"There's a whole group of people who've never been taught to think positively about their bodies," said Arroyo, who is based in the Department of Communication Studies. "In fact, they're ashamed of their bodies, whether it's because of body size, gender identity, race ethnicity or something else. And their negative talk about their bodies is hurtful."

**Negative body talk is a vicious cycle**

Negative "body talk" is common, particularly among women. And Arroyo said it sometimes operates like a feedback loop.

A woman tells her friend that she thinks she needs to lose weight. The friend rushes to reassure her that she looks great. "When people compliment us, that reinforces that behavior, but you can't not say..."
anything different, right? You can't be like, 'Yeah, maybe you could go on a diet.'"

But it's not as simple as telling moms to fake confidence until they make it.

The moms in the study grew up in the '70s and '80s, a time period where body positivity wasn't a concept, let alone the movement it's grown into over the past decade.

"They grew up at a time when thin was the ideal, and there was no embracement of the body," Arroyo said. They were also likely hyperaware of the obesity epidemic, which placed value judgments on bodies and condoned discrimination against people in larger bodies.

"The mothers in our sample were likely taught that their bodies, which naturally could never meet those beauty ideals, are deficient and should be subjected to ongoing improvements," the authors wrote.

So, is the answer to the body image crisis for mothers to talk more positively about themselves in the presence of their daughters? Not exactly, Arroyo said.

"We can say, 'Say this when your daughter says this. Act this way when she is watching.'" Arroyo said. "But if they don't experience this embodiment and don't really accept their body, that's just acting, right? That's faking it. That's not what we want. We want them to truly accept the body that is carrying them through their lives."

Moms can be honest and open with their daughters about their struggles with body image, but they should also strive toward being more accepting of themselves and encouraging their daughters to follow suit.

"What we think is that the mother-daughter relationship is one of the few times that this kind of body talk is OK because they have a history of sharing and caring that might be different from two strangers who typically engage in body talk to fit in," Arroyo said. "Mothers and daughters are very important for one another."


Provided by University of Georgia