



Gill Watson on her Soap Box

Losing Weight, Losing their Youth

This time last year I spent a rare day with Zoe-the-daughter, all on our own in Manchester. We dressed up and drank fizz at a private view of photographs of Bowie, Jagger and other beauties before eating Venetian tapas at San Carlos. Life felt a little bit glamorous and exciting and I looked at Zoe and thought how great it was that, at thirteen, she had her whole life ahead of her with all its opportunities.

Zoe noted my good mood and sought to take advantage of it. "Mum, can I dye my hair?"

"We'll see. Maybe at the start of the summer holidays."

Pushing her luck she then asked, "Mum, you know how everyone keeps saying I should be a model? Would you ever let me do it?"

"If it happens by chance, if you're scouted then fine but I don't really want you to go after it at the moment. You're only thirteen and it's a big commitment." I also wanted to say 'and a portal into a world of drugs, starvation and sleazy photographers' but I didn't because - a) that may sound exciting to a thirteen year old and b) maybe things had changed since I dabbled with modelling over thirty years ago.

All I had to do now was pray that she wasn't scouted. Right on cue there was a screech of tyres as a woman stopped traffic, shouting and waving her arms around and seemingly trying to attract our attention. Enter Suzie (not her real name) a booker from one of Manchester's top model agencies. "Hello Suzie, I said, "We've been expecting you."

I pointed out that Zoe didn't usually look quite so skeletal (the result of a school trip to Croatia) and needed to put on a few pounds. Suzie the booker asked, "You are healthy though Zoe, aren't you?" This was the perfect response as it assured me that the agencies had moved on and no longer wanted girls who were happy to exist on coffee and tissue paper.

Knowing what the booker's reply would be, I asked if Zoe could dye her hair. Suzie made it clear that Zoe belonged to the agency now and hair dying and eyebrow plucking were out.

A few weeks later we were at the agency for New Faces day. We had a preliminary chat with the owner and various bookers and were told how Zoe would be paid a flat fee which was a rate fixed between affiliated agencies in London. Knowing how exhausting modelling is, to me the £250 flat fee for a day's work sounded like a rip off and anyway, wasn't price fixing supposed to be illegal?

Zoe spent five hours in a hot room

with approximately ten other girls and a couple of boys all aged between thirteen and fifteen. Some of these kids had been travelling from 5.30am to be there on time and none of them had eaten any breakfast because they were all too nervous. They were offered nothing to eat or drink while they were there and only one girl was brave enough to ask for a glass of water.

I hung around with the other mums

our children. There was a lot of walking, jumping and bending in high heels and Zoe didn't look happy.

It was months before Zoe finally told me what went on in that room. The girls - all stick thin kids - were told the only thing allowed to wobble when they jumped was their boobs. Zoe's Croatian diet, stick-thin legs were apparently not up to scratch and she was told to go home and wear ridiculous heels while repeatedly walking up and down the stairs.

They were also told that if they ate dough they would become doughy and carbohydrates like bread, cake, potatoes and pasta were all to be avoided. Zoe is naturally skinny and like most teenagers has a healthy diet which includes a mountain of carbohydrates that never translate to doughy body parts. This is quite simply because she's a child and she's still growing.

Zoe was sent away to return the following Easter and I hoped and prayed that during this time she would have second thoughts.

Three months after our day out in Manchester, Zoe asked me again if she could dye her hair and I was out of the door and home again with the hair colour before she could think about changing her mind. If doing her roots every two weeks meant she was safe from an industry made her feel worthless for giving into a bag of chips then I was happy to put up with it.

There's been no mention of modelling since then and I can't tell you how relieved I am. A few weeks ago Zoe and I went to visit her best friend who was having an operation in the Royal Free hospital in London where she and Zoe were born. We passed a room on the children's ward with blanked out windows and an intriguing list of do's and don'ts on the door. This was the children's eating disorder ward and reading that list (compiled by the patients themselves) broke my heart. Let children be

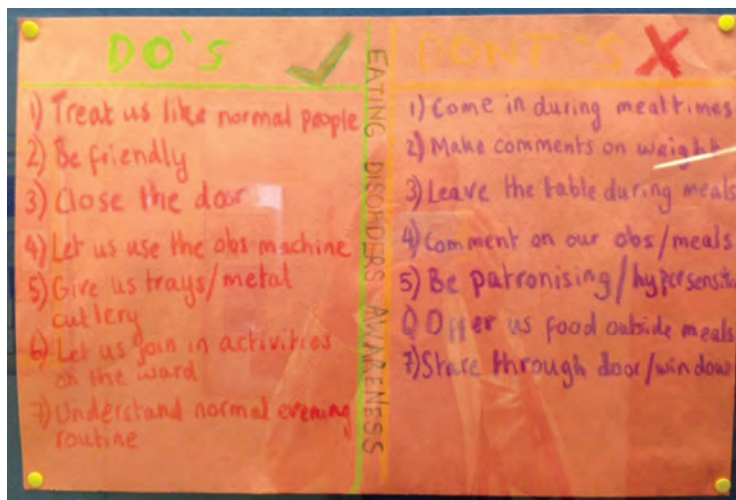
children and let women's clothes be modelled on women. It's time the industry grew up. **N**



Zoe



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watching our offspring through a glass partition, straining to hear what the choreographer and bookers were asking