

Lighthearted story, somber theme for schoolchildren

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By Lisa Vernon-Sparks

Journal Staff Writer

COVENTRY — Tracey Z. Poole spent Tuesday morning doing something many working mothers would relish but seldom get a chance to enjoy: reading a storybook to a group of schoolchildren.

Poole, the spokeswoman for the state Department of Corrections, took a break from her routine to stop by Hopkins Hill Elementary School where her children, first-grader Amanda and fourth-grader Alison, are students. The book she came to read, *Full Mouse, Empty Mouse*, was written by Dina Zeckhausen, who is a nationally recognized expert on anorexia and is also Poole's first cousin. It is the story of two young mice who use food to cope with the stresses of life. With a colorful tale told in rhyme, the book shows how easily a child may develop an eating disorder and what parents can do to help prevent it.

In the story, the Squeak family face pressures every day — their very survival is at stake. The two children, Billy Blue and Sally Rose, are deeply affected by those pressures but are shy about expressing their feelings. Unwittingly they resort to food as a way to cope. Billy eats a lot to comfort himself while his sister tries not to eat as a way of being in control, literally shrinking herself. Ultimately the children, guided by a wise aunt, open up about their feelings and learn to approach food as a way to feed their hunger rather than their feelings. Poole said she felt it was important to share the book's message not only because children are becoming



Tracey Poole, a Department spokesperson, delivers a serious message about healthy eating to young students in Coventry.

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aware of body image at younger and younger ages, but also because it suggests solutions. She hoped to persuade the Hopkins Hill school nurse and health teacher, Kathleen Larson, to include it in the school's curriculum.

"Kids have a lot of different pressures," Poole said on Tuesday. "There are a lot of emotional issues. It's good to get it out and talk to someone. [Dina] felt she should write something for children."

Dina Zeckhausen is a psychologist based in Atlanta. She works with people recovering from all kinds of eating disorders, everything from compulsive overeating to anorexia nervosa, she said in a telephone interview Wednesday.

She started the Eating Disorder Information Network, a nonprofit agency whose mission is the prevention of problems with food.

The effort must start when children are young, she said. While serious eating disorders seem to erupt more commonly during adolescence, addressing it in "high school is too late," she said. "The belief about fat being bad starts at ages 3, 4 or 5 years old."

She began to write *Full Mouse, Empty Mouse* nine years ago. After she wrote the book, the illustrator took a few years to complete the drawings. It took a few more years to find a publisher. Zeckhausen's book was published last August. Since then, she has appeared on many television news programs to promote the book as well as to promote understanding of the seriousness of eating disorders in children.

The seeds of an eating disorder can be planted in preschool.

Studies have been done with children as young as 3 about what words come to mind when a child thinks of the word "fat." What they say is astounding, Zeckhausen said.

"Lazy, dirty, ugly and stupid is what comes out," she said. "We are not becoming more acceptable that kids come in all sizes. It's now that fat is bad. The war on obesity has become the war on obese people."

"A lot of kids get chunky right before they have a growth spurt," she said. But they don't realize it, and so some children, as young as third- or fourth-graders, start dieting. "It's like anesthesia. Overeating and not eating both are ways of making uncomfortable feelings go away. It's a way for kids to cope with stress," she said.

In her story, Billy Blue and Sally Rose are coping with stress in different ways, she said. One of the things Zeckhausen wanted to show is that peers react to body size and weight and that their reactions make it worst.

"Billy gets teased and Sally Rose gets told she looks good, so she eats less and less," she said.

At Hopkins Hill Elementary School, the staff nurse, Larson, said the school starts teaching about healthful eating in kindergarten and encourages the children to eat healthful snacks because they are good for you and "make you feel better." "We teach that a treat is a sometimes food, but candy and soda are not snacks and shouldn't be brought to school," Larson said.

Larson said the school talks with children in the lower grades about expressing feelings, and where and whom to go for help.

"We don't really go into a lot of details because they do that in the middle school. When you are in the fourth and fifth grade your body is going through so many changes," she said. Good nutrition is important in how your body will respond to those changes, Larson added.

The children in Holly Riecke's first-grade class liked the book and were enthusiastic about its lessons.

"You have to eat healthy and like vegetables," said Tyler Cicione, 7, when asked what he learned from the book.

"When we are full you don't have to eat any more. When you are not full, you should eat," said David Rexter, 7.

lsparks@projo.com