

Common Sense on Girls and Body Image

Self-worth shouldn't be determined by what they see on TV or in a magazine

Read any fashion magazine or watch any music video and you'll know that media are not kind to girls. The expectations for appearance are wildly unrealistic, and many girls quickly decide they're not thin, pretty, or sexy enough. Most adults know that these seemingly perfect movie and rock stars have a team of people to cook their food, march them through workouts, dress them, do their hair and makeup, make sure their lighting is just right, and airbrush or Photoshop any imperfections. But do our daughters know this too?

Some facts

Teen girls who read magazine articles about dieting were more likely five years later to practice extreme weight-loss measures, like vomiting after eating (*University of Minnesota, 2007*).

At 17, the average girl has seen more than 250,000 commercials aimed at her looks (*Harris Interactive Poll, 2007*).

Anorexia impacts as many as 10 million women in the United States (*National Eating Disorders Association, 2010*).

60% of preteens and teens feel that they weigh too much, and that their lives would be improved if they could reach their goal weight (*Pangea Media, 2009*).

Why body image matters for girls

There's no denying that our media and culture are obsessed with women's looks. Magazines have weekly features with names like "body watch" that criticize female celebrities for being too heavy or too thin. Television and movie stars showcase unrealistic body types that most girls can't copy without hurting themselves. Ads tell girls that with the right beauty products, they can get their hair or makeup just right.

This messaging teaches girls what it means to be normal or beautiful at a time in their lives when they are looking for role models and guidance on how to present themselves. But when girls compare themselves to their favorite stars, they usually feel that they don't measure up. The results are lower self-confidence and self-esteem, which can lead girls to become obsessed with changing the way they look.

Talking to girls about their bodies is one of the hardest things parents can do — but the constant bombardment of messages about desirable weight and appearance makes this discussion crucial.

Parents of sons should also pay attention to media messages about appearance: Eating disorders do happen to boys as well, though not as often. Boys also need to be raised to understand the almost-unattainable ideals of beauty that our media broadcasts to them at every turn so that they don't judge girls unrealistically.

Parent tips for all kids

- » **Watch what you say.** When you spend a lot of time talking about dieting or criticizing your own body, your daughter is listening. You are still your daughter's biggest role model. If you take care of yourself, you will help your kids appreciate all that our bodies can do.
- » **If your kids are struggling with body image, you might share your own insecurities and how you dealt with them.** You want your kids to know you understand. After all, this is just the beginning of a life-long dialogue.

Parent tips for elementary school kids

- » **Keep girls active.** Get them involved in sports and healthy lifestyles. Find ways to do these activities together.
- » **Don't stress weight, stress health.**
- » **Make sure she knows she's more than just a pretty face.** Placing less emphasis on how girls look helps them value themselves in broader ways later in life. Compliment your daughter on all of her wonderful talents like her creativity or thoughtfulness.

Parent tips for middle school kids

- » **Offer other role models.** Get your two cents in about who your girls idolize or find pretty in the media and why. Without being heavy handed, talk about different people you find beautiful who are all different body types and say why.
- » **Help your kid become a media critic.** Pay attention to ads, magazine covers, billboards — and talk to your kids about how these messages make you feel and ask them about their own reactions.
- » **Expose the myths.** Make sure that kids know that celebrities have stylists, hairdressers, personal trainers, and more — all working to make them look polished. Point out that pictures in magazines have been altered to make models look flawless — and impossibly thin. Even better, show them just how much work goes into a cover shot by watching the short “Evolution” film produced by the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty. It's available online.

Parent tips for high school kids

- » **Talk about the health consequences of eating disorders.** Your kids will likely know someone with anorexia or bulimia. Ask them about their reactions. Point out that these are illnesses, not defects, and that their friends need help. If your child has one of these disorders, it could be a life-threatening illness and you should consult a medical professional immediately.
- » **Don't bug kids about their weight — stress health and fitness instead.** This is a time for packing on the pounds since many stop having such active lives. Get your child up and moving by taking a walk, doing a sport, or taking a class at the gym together! Use media examples of stars who are toned to show how much work goes into looking the way they do.

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