

Raising Girls With Healthy Self-Esteem

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How to help our daughters develop confidence and a positive body image

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There's really no way to sugarcoat it: Raising a confident, self-assured daughter who is comfortable with her body is not an easy thing to do these days. From the time she's a toddler a girl is bombarded with media and other cultural messages that undermine the kind of healthy, resilient self-image you want her to develop. But parents have a tremendous influence on how a girl feels about herself, and with the right map in hand, you can steer your daughter away from influences and activities that undermine self-esteem and towards those that contribute to a realistic body image and a strong sense of self. Here are the major challenges she'll face at various points in her development:

The media

Photoshopped celebrities and rail-thin models set impossible standards of beauty for girls long before they are aware that what they're seeing on TV isn't real. "There's a lot of work that's done on women's images in terms of stretching them to make them appear taller and thinner," veteran TV and movie producer Gavin Polone (*Jane By Design*) says. "And it's not just stretching; it's visual effects to take away lines and blemishes and I would say at this point half or more of the women on TV are wearing wigs or extensions."

Girls aren't likely to stop watching TV. That's why it's crucial that parents teach them to question and decode the messages being communicated. Margaret Kahn, 16, likes *Gossip Girl*, a show in which provocatively dressed high school girls have a lot of casual sex. Margaret, who attends an all-girls school in New York City, says the show is totally unrealistic ("I don't know anyone who wears heels to school"), but its juicy plotlines make for good TV. Her mother, Jessica, objects to the representations of women and sex on the show but watches with Margaret and her sister so they can talk about what they see. "The reason I let them watch," she says, "is that it's really important to me that they develop into savvy media consumers and I want them to be aware of misrepresentations or harmful representations without losing their sense of fun."

Like Margaret, many girls say they are fully aware that the representations of women they see on TV and the models they see in magazines present unrealistic, even unhealthy standards of beauty and what a woman's body should look like. But does fully aware mean that they are unaffected? Well that depends. "Advertisers and the media keep the message alive," explains Mary Rooney, PhD, a *clinical psychologist*.

"If you look like this then you will have self-worth. If you have these things then you will have self-worth. And I think teens and girls in particular are vulnerable to this message because they haven't defined who they are yet."

Girls are affected not just by what they see, but what they do, adds Dr. Rooney. "And when things are kept at a superficial level—the more time they spend shopping, or making themselves attractive or talking about who's dating who the less time they spend engaged in activities that would actually make them develop positive core values and a positive sense of self." Every expert consulted for this article emphasized the importance of getting girls involved in an activity—whether it be team sports, theater, a musical instrument—in which they can express themselves and achieve self-esteem from the process of mastering a skill. And, they say, it needs to happen as early as possible.

Pretty in pink

From the time they are old enough to be plunked down in front of a DVD, often as early as 2 or 3, most little girls begin to consume the Disney "classics," the bulk of which involve a princess or damsel in distress engaged in some kind of sleeping or waiting until she is rescued and swept off her feet by the handsome prince. Marriage to him is what constitutes "happily ever after."

Quyen Mullin, 11, started noticing there was something very wrong with the messages she was getting when she was not quite 4 years old. "She'd been little Miss Disney Princess," her father, Mark says. "She watched those movies over and over." And then one day her mother took her to the Disney store near their Pasadena, California home to pick out a Halloween costume and everything changed. "Quyen told her mom she wanted to be Prince Philip because she told her mother, 'He gets to fight the dragon. All Sleeping Beauty does is sleep.'"

Disney princesses aren't the only passive role models encoded and encouraged in girl culture. If you walk into any 'Toys "R" Us' you will see very clearly how we as a society divide girls and boys and what we think each gender should be aspiring to do in the world," says Anea Bogue, author of *9 Ways We Are Screwing Up Our Girls and How We Can Stop* and the creator of REALgirl, an empowerment program for girls. "The boys' aisles are all about taking action, being heroes or warriors and saving others. The girls' aisles are primarily pink and focus on looking 'pretty,' being princesses or playing in the kitchen."

And where little boys' birthday parties often involve some kind of sport or activity, Harvard psychologist and schools consultant Catherine Steiner-Adair says, "It's become very popular now for children to have pedicure parties in elementary school, basically saying, the way to celebrate yourself is to work on your appearance and glam up." There's no doubt our culture has a girl code firmly programmed into it. Parents need to see the code for what it is and help their daughters learn to break it for themselves.

The pressure to be polite

Mabel Hanson, a 7th grader, lives in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and attends ALPs (Accelerated Learning Program), which goes from 5th through 8th grade. Mabel is smart. But she also cares about her appearance. "I work hard on making my hair look good," she says. "I curl it every day." And she wears make-up to school everyday. "Foundation, sometimes eye shadow in neutral colors and mascara—everyday. I take pride in my huge eye lashes." She says most of her friends wear make-up regularly too. When asked who she's trying to look pretty for, the answer comes quickly. "Boys. We definitely try to look nice for guys. And," she adds, "my mom has an expectation, you shouldn't go to school looking like you just woke up. You should always look nice. You never know who you might run into."

The Full of Ourselves program was developed by Steiner-Adair to teach girls not only to be media savvy but to stop looking to external sources—like boys—for self-validation and instead to look within and find their own voice and their own strengths. "If you say to a boy, 'tell me four things you're really great at, not related to what you look like,' Steiner-Adair explains, "they'll say, 'Oh, I'm so good at the science problems. I'm so good at playing right wing on my hockey team. I'm good at this. I'm good at that.' If you ask girls that question, they blush. They don't want to answer. Because girls grow up with a code that says if you say you're good at something, you might hurt your best friend's feelings if she's not good at it. It's seen as bragging, bossy, full of yourself...in the bad sense of the word."

Asked to name four things she likes about herself, Ruby Bromberg, 9, a precocious, confident, and articulate girl who attends P.S. 41 in Greenwich Village, in New York City, blushed and was silent for a long, uncomfortable moment. "I don't know," she said. Eventually she came up with two ("my eyes" and "my personality") but since she looked pained and said the exercise was "stressful," we stopped there. Ruby wasn't alone. Most of the girls interviewed for this article had similar reactions.

The pressure to be polite and cultural messages that girls should not make waves or cause conflict puts them in a dangerous position when they reach *adolescence*

and have to deal with boys and sex. "I worry about girls in particular, because they are under just as much pressure to achieve and perform as boys are, but they still also are expected to be nice and kind," says Kathryn Crosby, Independent School

Program Coordinator for the Freedom Institute. “The need to be nice, not to hurt anyone’s feelings, can be very problematic in navigating sexual situations. We call it “the tyranny of nice and kind.” And it’s the number one reason girls give for having unwanted sex.

Puberty

Puberty itself is possibly the greatest challenge to a girl’s self-esteem and body image. “As girls physically mature,” says Douglas Bunnell, PhD, they actually develop more body fat and that’s really sort of a trigger for menstruation. So, in that sense, the things that are attached to growth and development for girls are really negatively valued by society.” Dr. Bunnell, a clinical psychologist and Director of Outpatient Services at the Renfrew Center Foundation, which specializes in treating *eating disorders*,

emphasizes that it’s almost normal for adolescent girls to go through a period where they loathe their bodies.

While a large percentage of girls engage in some kind of disordered eating (defined as anything from dieting to bingeing and purging only occasionally), girls who develop full-blown eating disorders, Dr. Bunnell says, have a predisposition to them. “Nobody gets an eating disorder from media messaging,” he says. Factors like family dynamics, genetics, and undiagnosed conditions like anxiety, depression or ADHD can all play a role. “But we do know that the premature sexualization of girls is a risk factor in developing eating disorders,” he says. “And it’s undoubtedly true that there’s a culture that promotes a thin body ideal which does get internalized. It’s a potent factor and it’s not like the culture is outside of our heads. If you grow up in a culture it ends up being the way we evaluate ourselves.”

Not only is the thin body ideal a risk factor for developing eating disorders but it’s an even greater danger for girls trying to recover from anorexia. “If your goal is to gain weight and you’re living in an environment that is massively promoting the opposite,” says Dr. Bunnell, “it takes a lot of wherewithal to swim against that.”

Peer pressure

For many girls, it’s not the celebrities and models that make them feel bad about themselves but rather their own peers. “I’m not influenced by magazines and stuff, because I know everything is edited and it’s kind of fake,” says Katherine Dryer, 16, of Menlo Park, California. “But when you see it in front of you on other teenage girls it makes me wish I could look like them or act like them.”

It’s a theme that comes up early and often. Ruby Bromberg says if she could change one thing about herself it would be her tummy. Why? “It’s too...I mean it’s not fat but it’s not my friend Izzy’s tummy,” she says. “My friend Izzy has a really

fast metabolism and most of my friends do and sometimes I compare myself to them which I know isn't right." Other than her tummy, though, Ruby says she is happy just the way she is.

Andrea Bauman doesn't feel that way and neither do a lot of the other girls at her Evanston, Illinois, high school. "It's agonizing what I think so many girls go through every morning, looking in the mirror," she says. "Maybe you liked what you saw yesterday but today you don't and you hate it and you're worthless because of what you see. And it's terrible. And I go through it so much. And I have friends who are beautiful but they have this idea in their heads that they need to look a certain way. It consumes them. Girls have this link in their head about how you can only be happy if you're beautiful and skinny. Skinny is a big one. You'll never have friends if you're not skinny, you'll never have a boyfriend."

And the message about what they need to look like is served up every day at school. "All the popular girls are pretty and skinny," says Andrea. "Sometimes the guys will make lists of who's the hottest. You can step back but when you're in the moment and you're looking in the mirror and all you feel is self-hatred there's no other thought in your head."

Girls like Andrea feel pressure from her peers to look a certain way but Dr. Rooney sees peer pressure as part of the larger cultural problem. "The media and advertisers perpetuate this message that you'll be popular and you'll meet this ideal and this standard if you look a certain way and acquire certain things," she says, "and it becomes this pervasive message that people in our culture buy into. So the overarching message is there—that you need to be attractive and you need to have the hottest clothes—but where they see it actually played out is with their peers."

Rooney says teenage girls are particularly vulnerable to influence—from the media, from advertisers, from their peers—because they are still trying to figure out who they are, what their values and goals are, who they want to become. "The media and advertisers and their peers are there ready to answer those questions in a quick and easy way," Rooney explains. "If you look like this then you will have self-worth. If you have these things then you will have self-worth. So if that's the only message that they're getting then that's the only place that they're looking for answers."

Sexualization and the "mini-adult"

Kids grow up too quickly as it is but in recent years, our culture has begun to sexualize and objectify girls at an increasingly young age. "Very recently, we've seen a huge lowering of the age at which girls are now being targeted as mini-adult women," Steiner-Adair says. "So now you can get thong panties for five-years-olds. You can get bras for six, seven, and eight-year-olds who are completely flat chested." The problem and its consequences have become so

widespread over the last decade that in 2007, the American Psychological Association formed a Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. “If you grow up as a young girl being prematurely objectified,” Bunnell says, “or objectified period, that begins to create an internal representation of yourself. It’s not just that people are susceptible to the culture, but it actually becomes a core part of the way you see yourself.” The APA task force found research linking the sexualization of girls with three of the most common mental health problems of girls and women: eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression.

Now you know what you’re up against. It sounds scary but there’s a lot you can do to put your daughter on the right path or to help her if she’s taken a wrong turn.

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