

The Girl Connection

Iowa Commission on the Status of Women

For those who serve adolescent females involved with or at risk for involvement with the justice system

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We live in a culture obsessed with physical appearance. For girls and women, there exists a powerful pressure to conform to certain beauty ideals. Unrealistic and unattainable images of beauty bombard us each day in magazines, movies, television sitcoms, music videos, and other print media. Advertisements for cosmetics, hair styling products, shape-enhancing undergarments, and diet programs tell us that girls and women must change: we are not good enough just the way we are. Evidenced in the rate of eating disorders and the profit margins of the beauty and diet industries, the message is internalized. Research indicates that while white girls more often succumb to the pressure to be thin, females in communities of color struggle with issues of hair texture, skin color, and facial features. Whatever the issue, it is clear that our limited standard of beauty--a tall, thin white woman with long blonde hair and large breasts--impacts the self-image and healthy choices of nearly every American woman. And while the struggle may be unique, the internalized message is the same: I just don't measure up.

As adults who care about the healthy development of all pre-teen and adolescent girls, there are many steps we can take to counter the negative messages of the media. The following list of suggestions may provide ways for parents and other caring adults to promote a healthy body image for the girls in their lives.

- Praise your daughter for her accomplishments not only for her appearance.
- Be supportive of your daughter through the awkward physical changes of puberty.
- Help your daughter to respect her developing body. Model healthy attitudes towards women's bodies of all shapes and sizes, including your own or that of your partner's.
- Model a healthy attitude towards menstruation and the reproductive processes of the female body, including your own or that of your partner's.
- Avoid emphasizing a preference for a certain skin color, hair texture, or eye or lip shape. Show an acceptance of and appreciation for the unique physical appearance of every individual.
- Discourage the development of eating disorders by rebutting negative cultural messages about body image and encouraging healthy eating patterns.
- Help your daughter to make wise choices about her consumption of media, including magazines, television, and music videos. Model wise choices.
- Subscribe your daughter to a magazine created by and for girls her age.

- Support the involvement in athletics of girls who may not see themselves as athletes.
- Encourage your daughter to participate in outdoor activities and organized sports.
- Participate with your daughter in an outdoor adventure experience organized by a women's outdoor adventure organization.

Taken from Girls Seen and Heard: 52 Life Lessons for Our Daughters (The Ms. Foundation, 1998, p.146), here is an activity a parent or other caring adult can do with an important girl in his/her life.

Activity: My Body is Amazing

Share with your daughter the fact that women's bodies are inherently strong. Women get sick less often than men do, and women live longer than men. Women also excel at activities requiring endurance such as long-distance running and swimming the English Channel. Now ask her to think of her body as a superbly functioning machine and to list all the things her body does or could do, from clearing a hurdle to slamming a basketball to having a baby to climbing a mountain. You want her to learn to appreciate her body for what it can accomplish, not just for what it looks like. Have her illustrate her ideas with sketches or photographs.

The following original activity idea around body image has the potential to be an empowering experience for the adult, girl, and others they choose to involve.

Activity: Let Me Tell You Something!

With your daughter, select an image from any media source that you both feel promotes an unrealistic, unhealthy standard of beauty for women. Write a letter to the company, publisher, and/or artist responsible for the image. Explain why you oppose the image, how it impacts you personally and females generally, and that you will not purchase anymore products from that source. Together, encourage friends and family to refuse to buy products from the company as well, explaining the stance in your letter. If they feel strongly, encourage them to write a letter too.

Most of the popular magazines targeted to teen women emphasize clothing, makeup, hairstyles, and boyfriends often to the exclusion of providing accurate and sufficient coverage of far more important issues shaping contemporary teen women's lives. The following magazines are designed by, for, and about young women. They are free from articles and advertisements that promote narrow beauty ideals. Instead, they feature articles, poetry, and artwork submitted by young women that reflect a range of experiences and concerns beyond those address in "mainstream" publications.

Blue Jean Magazine
 P.O. Box 90856
 Rochester, NY 14609
 Phone: (716) 654-5070
 Fax: (716) 654-6785

E-mail: BlueJeanMg@aol.com

HUES, The Young Woman's Guide to Power & Attitude

New Moon Publishing

P.O. Box 3587

Duluth, MN 55803-3587

Phone: (800) HUES-4U2

Fax: (218) 728-0314

E-mail: hues@hues.net

Website: www.hues.net

Teen Voices Magazine, Because you're more than just a pretty face

P.O. Box 120-027

Boston, MA 02112-0027

Phone: (888) 882-TEEN

Fax: (617) 426-5577

E-mail: womenexp@teenvoices.com

Website: www.teenvoices.com

New Moon for Girls

New Moon Publishing

P.O. Box 3587

Duluth, MN 55803-3587

Phone: (800) 381-4743

Fax: (218) 728-0314

E-mail: newmoon@newmoon.org

Website: www.newmoon.org

(targeted to pre-teen girls; also publishes the companion *New Moon Network, For Adults Who Care About Girls*)

Brumberg, J. J. (1997). The body project. New York: Random House.

Delgado, J. (1998). Salud! A Latina guide to total health--body, mind, and spirit. New York: HarperPerennial.

Edut, O. (ed.) (1998). Adios, Barbie: Young women write about body image and identity. Seattle, WA: Seal Press.

Pipher, M. (1997). Hunger pains: The modern woman's tragic quest for thinness. New York: Ballantine Books.

White, E. (1994). The black woman's health book: Speaking for ourselves. Seattle: Seal Press.

Wilson, M. & Russell, K. (1996). Divided sisters: Bridging the gap between black women and white women. New York: Anchor Books.