

## LET'S DEVELOP A POSITIVE SELF IMAGE: AWARENESS AND HANDY TIPS FOR PARENTS OF **GIRLS** OF ALL AGES

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Girls get many messages about how they should look and behave. These messages can start when girls are very young, and not all of these are healthy messages. Girls may be told that what matters is how 'hot, or how 'sexy' they look or dress. These messages are evident on TV and across the Internet, in song lyrics and music videos. You see it in movies, electronic games, and clothing stores. They are powerful messages.

Some of these messages encourage the sexualisation of girls from a very early age, before they are emotionally and physically ready.

Sexualisation occurs when a person's worth is judged on the basis of sexual appeal and behavior to the exclusion of other characteristics, when a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexy, or when a person is seen as a sexual object rather than a person with their own independent thoughts and behavior.

While boys and men can be the target of sexualized messages and images, research shows that girls and women are portrayed in a sexual manner more often.

### What parents can do?

As parents, you are powerful too. You can teach girls to value themselves for who they are, rather than how they look. If you also have boys, you can teach them to value girls as friends, sisters, and girlfriends, rather than as sexual objects. And you can advocate for change with manufacturers and media producers.

**Tune in and talk-** Watch TV and movies with your children. Read their magazines. Look at their web sites. Ask questions. "Why do you think there is so much pressure on girls to look a certain

way?" "What do you like most about the girls you want to spend time with?" "Do these qualities matter more than how they look?" "What do you think of the different roles that are usually given to boys and girls?" "Do you think women and men are portrayed fairly?" **Really listen to what your kids tell you.**

**Question choices-** Girls who are overly concerned about their appearance often have difficulty focusing on other things. Clothes that require lots of checking and adjusting can be part of the distraction. If your daughter wants to wear something you consider too sexy, ask what she likes about the outfit. Ask if there's anything she doesn't like about it. And maybe you can talk about being sun smart as well, and how clothes can be useful to protect your skin from too much sun.

**Speak up-** If you don't like a TV show, CD, video, pair of jeans, or doll, **say why.** A conversation with children about the issue will be more effective than simply saying, "No, you can't buy it or watch it." Support campaigns, companies, and products that promote positive images of girls. Complain to manufacturers, advertisers, television and movie producers, and retail stores when products sexualize girls.

**Try to see it their way-** Young people often feel pressure to watch popular TV shows, listen to music their friends like, and conform to certain styles of dress. Help your daughter make wise choices among the trendy alternatives. Remind her often that who she is and what she can accomplish are far more important than how she looks. But keep in mind that dress can be an important social code for girls. Girls really care about their looks because they can provide a more obvious and tangible way to compare, contrast and belong. Other personal qualities are much harder to rely on as a way to evaluate oneself and others (and people can change so much at this time that their personalities and values can fluctuate and be unpredictable). Looks are more predictable, so it's not surprising that they consume so much time and attention.

Find out why your daughter wishes to look a certain way. Ask her to think about whether her clothes and accessories sexualize her, rather than making judgments yourself. Understand that looking different and reacting against her parents' generation may all be part of her growing up. You might never wear what she wears, but she may not stand out when with her peers the way she would if she were with a group of adults.

**Encourage-** Athletics and other extracurricular activities emphasize talents, skills, and abilities over physical appearance. Encourage your daughter to follow her interests and get involved in a sport or other activity. Find ways to celebrate being female - for example, a special lunch, girls' day out ( other nationalities celebrate different to us ) , or flowers can mark when a girl gets her first period ( apart of traditional Sri Lankan rituals).

**Educate-** You may feel uncomfortable discussing sexuality with your kids, but it's important. Talk about when you think sex is OK as part of a healthy, intimate, mature relationship. Ask why girls often try so hard to look and act sexy. Effective sex education programs discuss media, peer, and cultural influences on sexual behaviors and decisions, how to make safe choices, and what makes healthy relationships. Find out what your school teaches so that you can follow up on what she is learning about at school. Let the school know if you think there are gaps in what they are teaching.

This process of teaching children can be started when they are very young. As soon as children can talk, you can be teaching them about the basics of sex education. Keep it simple and brief, and be prepared for constant revision in response to questions or as situations arise. Always tell

the child you are glad that they ask questions, whatever you really feel, but give yourself time to answer if you need it, and tell children what they need to know even if they don't ask.

One way to have a discussion about sex with adolescents without lecturing or telling or checking (which a lot of young people hate) is to say something like "I've realized I'm not sure what your values are about sex etc, and I'm interested in what you think" as a way of opening the discussion. It's then much easier to talk about your values if you have listened to theirs first, and it's often surprising how conservative they really are!

**Provide healthy role models for your children-** Marketing and the media also influence adults. When you think about what you buy and watch, you teach your sons and daughters to do so too. Parents need to be careful how much they talk about diets, or pass comments on their own body image (e.g. "I look fat in this"). It can be more helpful to talk about healthy eating, and to show their children that health is related to many more things than just weight. Mothers and fathers should be careful not to criticize their daughters or sons about how they look - this can create an unhealthy attitude towards appearances.

Fathers can be particularly important in the development of their daughter's self image, and their son's attitudes towards women. The way men treat and talk about the women in the family and women in general is a powerful model for how to behave for their children.

Encouraging your children to find healthy heroes is also important. Often people become heroes because they are rich or thin, rather than because they have demonstrated more positive values. Check who you admire and hold in high regard. Talk about people who really show what you want your child to copy. This helps your child understand how people demonstrate real worth in the world.

**Be real-** Help your kids focus on what's really important: what they think, feel, and value. Help them build strengths that will allow them to achieve their goals and develop into healthy adults. Remind your children that everyone is unique, and that it's unhelpful to judge people solely by their appearance.

**Maintain a balance-** Try to take advantage of opportunities that arise in conversations, but do not become too pre-occupied with all the experimentation your daughter tries in her dress or mannerisms. Sometimes adults see sexual references that mean nothing to young children. **Remember that it is your example and values that your children will often copy! Remember, too, that despite differences, maintaining a good relationship with your daughter is paramount.**

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