Teenage Girls + Media = Low Self-Esteem

By Kelly Nault

Kelly Nault is the award-winning author of the book, "When You're About To Go Off The Deep End, Don't Take Your Kids With You." Kelly ...

Is it really true that teenage girls + media = low self-esteem?

The issue of media's impact on teenagers has generated a lot of interest in the

last decade. Despite contradictory findings, all researchers agree that teenage

girls as a group are focused on their looks—especially on what they don’t like

about themselves! Marketing departments and ad agencies spend millions each year

targeting teenage girls who spend much of their hard-earned dollars (and their

parents’ hard-earned dollars!) on looking good. Although the message of “girl

power” is prevalent in today's marketing messages, so is the irrefutable idea

that “sexy” and “thin” are in!

The dieting industry alone generates 40 billion dollars per year in America. If

you believe diets are just for adults, you will be shocked to learn that a

Harvard study (Fat Talk, Harvard University Press) published in 2000 revealed

that 86% of teenage girls are on a diet or believe they should be on one. Diets

are common among both teens and children. According to the National Eating

Disorders Association, 51% of 9 and 10-year-old girls actually feel better about

themselves when on a diet. As a society, our obsession with thin is relatively

new. Most people (especially teens) are shocked to find that sex icon Marilyn

Monroe actually wore a size 14!

But pick up a fashion magazine today and you'll find models who are thinner than

98% of all the girls and women in America. Turn on a television and see 'sexy'

celebrities such as Shania Twain, Britney Spears and Pamela Anderson baring

their flesh. It is these role models who have become the standard of what is in

vogue in the twenty-first century.

Do Teenage Girls have Low Self-esteem because of Media?

One of the most fascinating shows on self-image for teens was aired on Discovery

Channel’s “Sex Files” program (Episode 12: Girl Power). During the show, they

reported on eating disorders on the island of Fiji. In 1995, this tropical

paradise had only 3 percent of girls with eating disorders in 1995.

Then western television programs were introduced, including “hits” such as ER,

Melrose Place and Xena: Warrior Princess. Three years later, the eating

disorders in girls on the island rose to 15%. A surprising follow-up study

reported 74% of Fijian girls feeling “too fat or big” and 62% had dieted in the

last month—surprising in a culture that typically upholds curvaceous women as

beautiful.

Five Ways to Ensure Media Does Not Contribute To Low Self-esteem in Teenage

Girls

Fortunately, parents have a huge impact on a teenage girl’s self-esteem—more so

than even the media. Thus, there is much we as parents can do to ensure our

teenage girls' self-esteem soars! Here are five helpful parenting tips:

1. Encourage and Support Your Daughter’s Achievements and Passions. Focus

on what it is that your teenage daughter is good at. If she enjoys math, animals

or singing, support her. Acknowledge the presence of pretty girls in the media

with, “Obviously outward beauty is one of her gifts. You’ve got many gifts

yourself!” Then name these gifts as well as you can.

2. Help your Daughter Get in Touch with Reality. We are bombarded with

perfect idealized models of what a woman should look like. But the fact is less

than 1% of the girls out there will ever become a super model. Besides, no one

can compete with computer airbrushing! Share these facts with your daughter. And

please note that if you are complaining about your own “thunder thighs”, this

message is going straight to your daughter’s heart. Make a commitment to raise

your own self-image. No one, including you, is perfect. It is our imperfections

that actually make us human. Having the courage to be imperfect makes our life

easier and much more joyful.

3. Focus on a Healthy Lifestyle – The less junk food you keep around the

house, the less you and your family will eat it! Do you and your family a

favor—stock up on the healthy stuff and refrain from insisting on second

helpings. If the scale in your home is a bit of an obsession, consider tossing

it out. Instead focus on how well and how healthy each of you feels instead.

4. Contribute to Others – Our preoccupation with our own weight can be

positively transformed when we start focusing on others. Volunteerism boosts

self-esteem. Volunteer as a family, bring a smile to others, and you'll all be

reminded of how truly fortunate you are.

5. Encourage Dad to Pay Attention in a Positive Way – Help Dad understand

how detrimental well intentioned teasing about weight or looks can be. Encourage

him to spend time with his daughter focusing on all the things that she is great

at.

It is sad that many teenage girls and women believe that they need to be someone

other than who they truly are. It is time to come clean for ourselves, for the

race of woman and for our children, by beginning to love the person we are—flaws

and all. Embracing our imperfection gives us the opportunity to see all the

awesome things about ourselves: to acknowledge that we do have nice eyes, nice

breasts, nice legs, nice whatever! And as we stop hiding our flaws, suddenly our

psychological zits will become the beauty marks that make us stand out from the

crowd.

Kelly Nault, MA author of When You’re About To Go Off The Deep End, Don’t Take Your Kids With You inspires moms to put themselves first—for the sake of their children. She shares time-tested tools that motivate children to want to be well behaved, responsible and happy!