**Media's Effect On Girls: Body Image And Gender Identity**

Did you know?

Gender identity begins in toddlerhood (identifying self as a girl or boy) with gender roles being assigned to tasks early in the preschool years (Durkin, 1998).

A child's body image develops as the result of many influences:

\* A newborn begins immediately to explore what her body feels like and can do. This process continues her whole life.

\* A child's body image is influenced by how people around her react to her body and how she looks.

\* A pre-adolescent becomes increasingly aware of what society's standards are for the "ideal body."

**Media's Effect on Body Image**

The popular media (television, movies, magazines, etc.) have, since World War II, increasingly held up a thinner and thinner body (and now ever more physically fit) image as the ideal for women. The ideal man is also presented as trim, but muscular.

\* In a survey of girls 9 and 10 years old, 40% have tried to lose weight, according to an ongoing study funded by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (USA Today, 1996).

\* A 1996 study found that the amount of time an adolescent watches soaps, movies and music videos is associated with their degree of body dissatisfaction and desire to be thin (Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996).

\* One author reports that at age thirteen, 53% of American girls are "unhappy with their bodies." This grows to 78% by the time girls reach seventeen (Brumberg, 1997).

\* In a study among undergraduates media consumption was positively associated with a strive for thinness among men and body dissatisfaction among women (Harrison & Cantor, 1997).

\* Teen-age girls who viewed commercials depicting women who modeled the unrealistically thin-ideal type of beauty caused adolescent girls to feel less confident, more angry and more dissatisfied with their weight and appearance (Hargreaves, 2002).

\* In a study on fifth graders, 10 year old girls and boys told researchers they were dissatisfied with their own bodies after watching a music video by Britney Spears or a clip from the TV show "Friends" (Mundell, 2002).

\* In another recent study on media's impact on adolescent body dissatisfaction, two researchers found that:

1. Teens who watched soaps and TV shows that emphasized the ideal body typed reported higher sense of body dissatisfaction. This was also true for girls who watched music videos.

2. Reading magazines for teen girls or women also correlated with body dissatisfaction for girls.

3. Identification with television stars (for girls and boys), and models (girls) or athletes (boys), positively correlated with body dissatisfaction (Hofschire & Greenberg, 2002).

**Media's Effect on Gender Identity**

Many children watch between two and four hours of television per day. The presence or absence of role models, how women and men, girls and boys are presented, and what activities they participate in on the screen powerfully affect how girls and boys view their role in the world. Studies looking at cartoons, regular television, and commercials show that although many changes have occurred and girls, in particular have a wider range of role models, for girls "how they look" is more important than "what they do."

\* In a 1997 study designed to study how children described the roles of cartoon characters, children (ages four to nine) "perceived most cartoon characters in stereotypical ways: boys were violent and active and girls were domestic, interested in boys, and concerned with appearances" (Thompson, 1997).

\* In another study, three weeks of Saturday morning toy commercials were analyzed. Results found that:

1. 50% of the commercials aimed at girls spoke about physical attractiveness, while none of the commercials aimed at boys referenced appearance.

2. Boys acted aggressively in 50% of the commercials aimed at them, while none of the girls behaved aggressively.

3. With regard to work roles, no boys had unpaid labor roles, and girls were mainly shown in traditional female jobs or roles of unpaid labor (Sobieraj, 1996).

\* Dr. Nancy Signorielli, Professor of Communications at the University of Delaware examined the types of media most often viewed by adolescent girls: television, commercials, films, music videos, magazines and advertisements. While the study did find positive role models of women and girls using their intelligence and acting independently, the media also presented an overwhelming message that girls and women were more concerned with romance and dating (and it follows how they look), while men focus on their occupations (Signorielli, 1997).

Sources

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\* USA Today, (1996, August 12). p 01D.