

Let's Get Real—Teaching Our Children What Being Attractive Really Means
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Today Contributor

Is your daughter concerned about being stick-thin like the super models? Are her fifth grade buddies oogling over the cover girls on slick magazines or idolizing young celebrities with supposed beautiful bodies, sleek hair and gorgeous features? Well, join the club, as most kids, especially girls, base their perceived attractiveness as well as self-worth upon these role models. Recent studies serve to confirm our worst fears—time and again children, adolescents, parents and even teachers appear to fall prey to what Marius Griffin (Body Image Task Force) denotes as “looksism”—the tendency to perceive social acceptability based upon how a person looks. And yes...if you're thinking that sure sounds similar to racism, you're probably right.

Study statistics are startling. “Almost half of normal weight 3rd to 6th grade girls say they want to be thinner, a third have already restricted their eating to lose weight, and 78% say they are very afraid of becoming fat” (BodyImageHealth.org). How children view themselves is strongly influenced by parental body image, and often this is set by the age of six years.

Griffin, writing for Radiance Magazine.com noted “In a study done with six year old children they were shown silhouettes of different people, then asked to talk about them. The children consistently labeled a silhouette of a fat child as ‘stupid, dirty, lazy, slow, etc.’, regardless of the body size of the child identified in the picture”.

Teachers are just as guilty, it seems, from various studies. One research project gave teachers extensive student files to review. These files contained student grades, work habits and attitudinal information as well as a “student photo” (changed randomly between the files). As it turns out, teachers can be just as tuned into looksism as are peers—physically cute boys and girls were assumed to be more intelligent and able to get along better with peers than were plain or less attractive kids. This held true even though the grades and attitudinal information in the files of the less attractive children were exactly the same as the more physically attractive students!

How to become a proponent for body diversity? The trick is to help your children to understand and accept a new definition for the word “attractive”. Teach your kids that *being attractive* encompasses many traits—kindness, being interesting, curious, and physically healthy among others. Deter the myopic thinking that attraction is totally physical—especially thinness for girls or possessing a six-pack ab for boys. Cherish diversity and teach it to your kids. And in doing so, you must live it yourself. Give your kids diverse images of healthy bodies—real people, real kids. Don't purchase dolls with unreal figures or clothing that you do not embrace. Encourage a varied group of friends for your children, as well as yourself. And, most of all, watch your language and your behavior. Talk about food and exercise in terms of health, not looks. Encourage activity in order to run faster, have greater balance and stamina, and to enjoy sports as a life-long endeavor. Discuss food choices as nutrition, not diet. Don't obsess upon food yourself,

and dissuade those types of discussions with your kids. Remember, a good body image is based in having a healthy body—regardless of height, weight or measurements.

Point out to your children how unrealistic the media is—note that many of the celebrities, news anchors and show hosts appear to be *unrealistically* “pretty”, thin or muscular. Describe how that does not necessarily mean that they are “healthy”. When a healthy, normally proportioned person is seen in the media (TV, magazine, movies) comment upon the positives so that your children note the nice diversity in body types.

One of the best learning lessons is to treat your children to the “expectations” video from the Dove Self-Esteem Fund. This graphically depicts how even a supermodel doesn’t really look like herself! In fact, your children may have difficulty seeing the relationship between the actual person in the video and her transformed (computer doctored, made-up, coiffed) counterpart on the billboard at the end of the short video. It’s a viewing must for child development—so check it out at:

<http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/flat4.asp?id=6909>

You’ll also note the following statistics at the Dove site ([campaignforrealbeauty.com](http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com)):

- Half (54%) of women around the world see family relationships as having the greatest impact on their self-esteem.
- Two-thirds (63%) of women believe that they are expected to be more physically attractive than their mother’s generation.
- Dissatisfaction with body image increases as girls progress to adolescence. While 75% of girls 8-9 years old say they like the way they look, only 56% of girls 12-13 years old feel that way.
- One-third of girls 14-17 years old think they are overweight, and 60% are trying to lose weight.
- Over 50% of girls 11-15 years old say that their mother helps them the most when they have a problem.

So, get real with your kids—bring “normal” images of real people into focus and into your lives. Discourage “looksism”, focus upon fun activity and healthy nutritious eating. Don’t fall prey to the “D” (diet) word, stay in close communication with your children, be a good listener and a wise advice-giver. And, most of all, encourage your children to view attractiveness in terms of kindness, responsibility, health and being a good friend!