



Fostering a Positive Body Image in Girls

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

Body dissatisfaction among teens is epidemic in our society, but there are messages in Scripture that parents and other important adults can share that support a more positive body image. As our teens develop physically, they also need to develop spiritually to be able to see beyond the messages of their peers and the cultural icon of thinness that is seen everywhere.

According to researcher Michael Peterson,¹ high school girls tend to see themselves as 11 pounds over their ideal body weight, while boys perceive their current and ideal body images as almost the same. This infatuation with thinness is more than just vanity, it contributes to an array of unhealthy behaviors, including poor eating patterns, preoccupation with food and self, extreme dieting, lower self-esteem, drug and alcohol abuse, and general physical and mental ill health. Peterson found that not only did girls perceive themselves as heavier than they really were, they wanted to be even thinner than their ideal weight.

We know that even in childhood body image is influenced by how people react to a child's body and how he or she looks. Pre-adolescent girls are becoming increasingly aware of what society's standards are for the "ideal body," and most bodies don't fit the "standard" of an unrealistically thin type of beauty. Girls nine and 10

years old are trying to lose weight, and many have already tried dieting. Over the past 30 years, the number of dieting women has risen by 300 percent, and the number of dieting girls has jumped by a staggering 1,300 percent. For the majority of grandmothers, mothers, and daughters today, the increasing pressure for thinness has caused an almost universal transfer of poor body image and weight struggles. Now spanning three generations, this is a very serious concern.

Invite you to consider these ideas:

- ▶ **Model acceptance and appreciation of your own body**, or at least avoid making comments about your own body in front of your child.
- ▶ **Affirm your daughter for who she is**, as well as for what she can do and what she looks like. The more secure she is in who she is, the less vulnerable she will be in thinking her self-worth depends on her appearance.
- ▶ **Limit the amount and type of media** your daughter watches, uses, or reads. Have conversations with her to help her develop a critical awareness of the images and messages we receive from the media. Be sure your child sees images of a whole range of real people, not just the ones commonly found in the media.
- ▶ **Share the characteristics** that make up a positive, caring, and successful person.
- ▶ **Use Scripture to guide your discussions:**

1 Samuel 16:7—People look at outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

Psalms 139:14—I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Luke 12:7—The very hairs on your head are numbered. Anytime you talk about the human body, the uniqueness of each individual, the wonders of the brain and how it develops, remember that God is so amazing beyond our comprehension, and we are amazing, too!

Romans 12:1—Offer our bodies as living sacrifices. Caring for our bodies is an act of spirituality. We can help our girls focus on being smart and healthy by recognizing both their inner and outer beauty.

1 Corinthians 12—parts of the body.

This text can be used to consider how every one has important gifts to contribute to one's church, home, school, family, and community.

¹ M. Peterson, *American Journal of Healthy Behavior*, July–August 2003.

