

Growing Pains

According to a recent study, our daughters' self-esteem can be adversely affected by media influences. But there's plenty we can do help them develop into well-rounded, confident young women, says Eve Menezes Cunningham



Do you ever worry that your daughter's growing up too fast? That the women and girls she sees on TV aren't as well rounded as the male role models your son has? That even the dolls she plays with seem somehow obsessed with the way they look? According to the American Psychological Association (APA), you're right to be worried. They found that when women and girls in the public eye are valued only for their sexual appeal or behaviour, it harms girls' self image and healthy development.

Mary has a seven-month-old daughter and she's just one of millions of mothers who fear for their child's wellbeing in the pressure to conform. "I am terrified that I will be incapable of bringing my daughter up to be a healthy, happy individual in the face of such an onslaught of unhealthy products, images and role models," she says. "Equally my friend is terrified she will fail to bring up her seven-month-old son to respect women as human beings."

It's natural for children to imitate what they see around them with dances and little shows. But how can you protect your child from potential predators without ruining her fun?

Eileen Zurbriggen PhD, Chair of the APA taskforce and Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz warns, "If a young girl is imitating highly sexualised pole-dancing moves, for example, try to find out where she saw them (so she won't be exposed to it again) and give her other, non-sexualised, dance moves to imitate instead." With worrying music lyrics, some children are unaware of the meanings behind what they're singing along to. Others may secretly hate the language. Dr Zurbriggen suggests "asking children what they think about the images and lyrics. Really listen to what they have to say."

At a recent party, the hosts' children performed the 'Stick to the things you know!' routine from *High School Musical*. They looked adorable but I was quite alarmed by the lyrics. So I watched the film. At first it looks like a rehash of films like *Grease* but it has a much more positive message. The leading girl and boy are both trying to break out of stereotypes they're trapped in. They support each other and the ending is empowering for them and their friends.

Positive messages

Although music videos are often filled with fully dressed men and scantily clad women, many female performers do manage to break this mould. Confident sassy women like Lily Allen, Natasha Bedingfield, Corinne Bailey Rae and Gossip's Beth Ditto are just a few examples of female role models who celebrate independence and strength of character. You can help inspire your daughter by finding out how she feels when she listens to her favourite singers and increasing her access to music and lyrics that lift her mood and make her

feel good. Fill your home with lots of positive representations of being a woman and a girl. Biographies of inspirational women and books and films with strong female protagonists will help your daughter learn to trust her own developing voice. Imogen, mum to Emily, aged five, says, "Bratz dolls are forbidden in our house. I drummed it in before she could speak how silly they were – and the same goes for Barbie. She does not own a doll. I just reinforce how much better it is to eat well in order to be strong, healthy and clever. I also change stories so that the 'beautiful' girl is replaced by 'clever', 'brave' or 'kind'." Professor Sharon Lamb joined the APA taskforce after co-authoring *Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes* (St. Martin's Press, 2006). She is concerned that the new kind of 'girl power' is actually harmful to young minds. "Girls are being sold an idea that they can find power through being sexy but it's still a superficial and narrow type of power. From age three you can talk to your child about stereotypes and give them examples of girls and women you'd like them to admire. Ask her: 'What do you like most about the girls you want to spend time with?'"

"Whenever I would see a picture of a Page Three Girl, I would wonder what was up with me. From Year 7 or 8, I was convinced I was fat, which was quite simply not true. It's quite tragic, I think, to read my old diaries and read about how much it bothered me." Amy, 17

This kind of questioning will remind her that just as she likes her friends for more than the way they look, she too is lovable for many reasons. Never focus on your daughter's looks, but praise her intelligence, kindness, ability to climb trees and the way she cheers her siblings up with silly dances. Professor Lamb recommends encouraging sports "to help girls fight eating disorders, depression, low self esteem, pregnancy, and promote all sorts of good things." Dr Zurbruggen agrees: "Whenever we are using our bodies rather than obsessing about how they look, we are powerfully contradicting the sexualising messages around us."

Last, but not least, never forget your own influence over your daughter. Learning to love and appreciate your own body is conversely one of the best things you can do for your daughter's self image. Relish swimming a long length underwater, running a marathon, getting through a hectic day at work and "second shift" at home, doing an exhilarating gym class or even the amazing fact that you created a new life in it – and share your joy with your daughter.

Confidence Coaching Tips for Girls

- Watch the way you and other adults talk about women. Is someone really "a bitch" for being pretty? This kind of language can confuse a growing girl who wants to look good but is afraid of what looking good means (envy from other women and unwanted attention from men).
- Keep an eye out for positive stories about women making a difference in the world and share them with your family. Whether they're doing well in sport, business, the arts or government, balance all the powerful men you naturally talk about with stories about powerful women.
- Teenage daughters might enjoy a mother-daughter complementary therapy session. As well as being relaxing and healing, massage, reflexology and energy therapies will help you both increase your awareness of how things feel to you instead of just how you look.

Don't forget your son

- Dr Zurbruggen says, "Notice and contradict every single message you encounter that disrespects or objectifies women. Let your sons know that you value and like women and have no patience for those who think women are inferior or objects to be used or made fun of."
- "Talk to boys about the kinds of images they are seeing about girls and how girls are supposed to look hot and sexy for them," recommends Professor Lamb. "Tell them you want them to grow up knowing girls as friends and real people and that you will respect them for that."
- Value your son for his gentleness as well as his academic or sporting achievements. Boys' self esteem and confidence can also become very damaged when they're only allowed to express 'boy' traits.
- If you ever hear him making disrespectful comments to his sister (or to any other girl or woman), don't blame your young son for the world he and your daughter have been born into. Gently explain why it's hurtful. Ask him how he would feel if someone made horrible comments to him just because he happened to be born a boy.
- Encouraging your children to value their – and others' – insides as much as their outsides will help them build lasting self esteem and true confidence.

Further information

For more details about confidence and self esteem coaching tips, please visit www.applecoaching.com

