



Girls Inc. Guide

Body Image and Self-Esteem

How common are body image issues in girls?

40% of girls 9-10 years old have tried to lose weight. 95% of those with an eating disorder are between the ages 12 and 25.¹ It is estimated that almost 1.3 million adolescent girls in the United States have anorexia.²

When do body image issues begin?

All girls are different, but negative attitudes toward being overweight and a desire to be thin can emerge as early as preschool. Nearly one-third of children age five to six chose an ideal body image that is thinner than their actual one.

“The average body mass index (BMI) of Miss America winners has decreased from around 22 in the 1920s to 16.9 in the 2000s.”

Common Sense Media. Children, Teens, Media, and Body Image: A Common Sense Media Research Brief. Rep. Common Sense Media, 21 Jan. 20185. Web. 11 Sept. 2015.

How are girls specifically affected by body image and self-esteem issues?

- A girl's self-esteem decreases at age 12 and does not improve until age 20. This decline generally begins once a girl enters puberty.³
- Girls are also more likely to diet and engage in unhealthy behaviors to lose or maintain weight. In a national survey of high school students, 14.5% of girls went without eating for 24 hours or more to lose weight or to keep from gaining weight during the month before the survey, compared to only 6.9% of high school boys.⁴
- Low self-esteem often leads to behaviors and attitudes that undermine a girl's health and overall wellness. Girls with low self-esteem are more likely to engage in negative activities such as disordered eating, cutting, bullying, smoking, or drinking as well as become sexually active at a young age and fail to balance romantic relationships with other interests and goals.⁵ Furthermore, girls with low self-esteem tend to underestimate themselves academically. They are more likely to blame themselves for failures but attribute successes to external factors, such as luck.⁶

“Female characters in family films, on prime-time television, and on children's TV shows are nearly twice as likely to have uncharacteristically small waists as compared to their male counterparts.”

Common Sense Media. Children, Teens, Media, and Body Image: A Common Sense Media Research Brief. Rep. Common Sense Media, 21 Jan. 20185. Web. 11 Sept. 2015.

How does the media influence body image?

The media most often presents an unattainable, unhealthy standard of beauty, and girls are major consumers of these images. Only 6% of models in magazines have a rounder, softer body type. 80% of young teen girls compare themselves to the images that they see in the media. Out of that group, over half say that those images make them feel dissatisfied with the way they look.²

How do families influence body image?

5 in 10 girls believe their family influences the way they feel about their bodies, but this influence isn't always positive. In particular, a girl's dissatisfaction with her weight tends to be greater if her mother is also dissatisfied with her own weight, in spite of how much a girl actually weighs.⁷ Also, girls whose fathers express concern about the girls' weights judged themselves to be less physically capable than what they really are.² To inspire positive body image:

- ✓ **Compliment your girl on her abilities and personal qualities rather than her appearance.** Basing competence on characteristics others than appearance has proven associations with more positive self-esteem in girls. Always remind her that her self-worth is not measured by inches and pounds.
- ✓ **Talk to your girl about the way women are portrayed in the media.** Explain to her why these images present an unrealistic, unattainable standard of beauty.
- ✓ **Encourage your girl to have pride in her appearance without insisting that she looks a particular way.** Keeping in mind reasonable boundaries of health and modesty, try to be accepting of the way your girl expresses herself with her appearance. Tell her that you love her no matter how she looks.
- ✓ **Avoid associating outward appearance with successful relationships.** Research has shown that girls tend to believe that being thinner would improve their friendships with both boys and other girls. Remind your girl that looking a particular way doesn't make someone a good friend.
- ✓ **Set a good example.** Inspire healthy body image in your girl by modeling appropriate attitudes and behaviors in your own life.

¹ Bell, Poorna. "The Body Love Conference: Changing The Way Women See Themselves." The Huffington Post UK. N.p., 22 Jan. 2014. Web. 04 Sept. 2015.

² Common Sense Media. Children, Teens, Media, and Body Image: A Common Sense Media Research Brief. Rep. Common Sense Media, 21 Jan. 2018. Web. 11 Sept. 2015.

³ "NYC Girl's Project - The Issues." *NYC Girl's Project - The Issues*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Sept. 2015.

⁴ US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Selected Health Risk Behaviors and Health Outcomes by Sex, National YRBS: 2009"

⁵ Dove Self-Esteem Fund, "Real Girls, Real Pressure: A National Report on the State of Self-Esteem", June 2008 & Longmore, Monica A., et al, "Self-Esteem, Depressive Symptoms, and Adolescents' Sexual Onset", *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 3, 2004

⁶ APA, "Depressed children may doubt their academic and social abilities, study finds", <http://www.apa.org/monitor/may03/depressed.aspx>

⁷ The Girl Scout Research Institute, "The New Normal? What Girls Say About Healthy Living", 2006