

Girls to Women – How Dads Can Help

We live in a culture that accepts – even endorses - violence against women; females are turned into objects and young girls are sexualized to sell products and services. And these media-dictated standards of beauty are truly hazardous to our daughters' health. Pediatrics Magazine published a nationwide study in 1999 conducted by Harvard University, the University Medical School and Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital.

This survey, of fifth-to-twelfth-grade girls revealed some truly alarming statistics. Fifty-nine percent of the girls stated dissatisfaction with their bodies, and although only 29 percent of them fit the standard medical definition of overweight, 66 percent wanted to lose weight. Most disturbing of all was the fact that 47 percent of the girls surveyed said looking at pictures in fashion magazines made them want to lose weight now, and 69 percent claimed those pictures influenced what they consider to be their ideal body. Thirty years ago the average fashion model weighed about 8 percent less than the average American woman. Now she weighs 23 percent less.

These cultural messages matter to me. They matter because negative body image is a major factor behind tobacco use and substance abuse, both of which are rising among girls.

They matter because one third of nine year old girls in this country – an age when body fat is required for normal development to occur – worry about dieting.

And they matter to me because a society that doesn't respect girls and women ultimately doesn't respect boys and men, either.

Here are a few ways fathers can help their daughters:

Listen to your daughter. Focus on what she believes, thinks, feels, dreams and does – not how she looks. Fathers wield a profound influence on their daughters' self-image. Valuing your daughter for her true self helps her be herself.

Encourage her strength, celebrate her savvy. Help her learn to recognize, resist and overcome physical and society obstacles to achieving her goals. Nurture and rejoice in her strengths; make sure she knows you see her as a whole person, capable of anything.

Discourage dieting. Dieting increases the risk of eating disorders and a lifelong obsession with looks. Avoid making negative comments about her body, and gently discourage her from doing the same. Growing girls need to eat often and healthy!

Nurture her values. If you treat you daughter and the people she likes and loves with respect, you will help further her ability to choose a life partner who values and respects her.

Get active with her. Play catch, tag or jump rope. Shoot some hoops or throw a Frisbee together. Teach her soccer or hockey – or just take walks together. All these will help her discover and relish in the great things her body can do.

Girls whose fathers exercise with them are the most likely to be physically active – and physically active girls are less likely to get pregnant, drop out of school or put up with an abusive partner. Exercise is a great investment for both of you.

Get involved in her education.

Volunteer at the school or chaperone an event. Challenge the school's administrators. What types of physical activity programs are being offered? How can you encourage increased opportunities for physical activity at your child's school?

Get involved in her activities.

Volunteer to drive, coach, direct a play, teach a class – anything! Demand equality.

Take your daughter to work with you.

Let your daughter see how you contribute to the family's income. Introduce her to the world of work and finances.

Help make the world a better place for girls (and boys, too!) Next time you see an image of a girl or woman in the media imagine that it's your daughter being portrayed.

Stand up to advertisers who feed on our daughters' insecurities: write or call them, or boycott their products. Don't forget this cultural bombardment harms our sons as well.

Being told that a girl's body is the most important thing in a relationship does boys an incredible disservice.

Join forces with other fathers. You can learn a lot from other dads who are committed to their daughters. Yes, it's hard for guys to talk to each other about this stuff, but our daughters are worth it. If you are a father or someone else who cares about a young girl, you probably recognize that encouraging and influencing our daughters is an incredible obligation. But it is also an incredible opportunity.

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