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Real Beautiful Girls

From Barbie to Miss America, the media's portrayal of the ideal female body image has been shown to be detrimental in influencing a girl's body perception (Huber, 1995). Everyday girls are exposed through the media to images of beauty and thinness, and the belief that if they don't fit these images they are inadequate is reinforced. Advertisement strategies take advantage of adolescent insecurity and self-doubt in order to sell products. Young girls are increasingly at-risk for developing low self-esteem because they cannot escape the message that their bodies are imperfect (Kilbourne, 1999).

Pressure to conform to popular "ideal" girl images can lead girls to be dissatisfied with themselves and at-risk for developing unhealthy behaviors such as anorexia, bulimia, and related eating disorders. By the time girls get to college, one in every four uses "unhealthy methods of weight control" that include starvation, excessive exercise, vomiting, and laxatives (Kilbourne, 1999). Girls as young as six may be using weight control measures. One research study found that exposure to "thin-ideal advertisement affected weight concerns, mood, self-esteem, and depression" (Bessenoff, 2006).

Afterschool programs can help counter these negative messages and developing behaviors by helping girls to be comfortable with their natural bodies and develop positive self-images. Afterschool programs can bring girls together in mixed-aged and diverse culture groups to support one another in building awareness about healthy lifestyle choices. One of the hallmarks of quality afterschool programs is the opportunity for children and youth to develop meaningful relationships with caring adults. Afterschool programs have a unique opportunity to partner girls with older female role models who can reinforce positive body image, healthy eating and exercise, and the broader value/role of women in the world.

Girls can work separately in afterschool programs on these issues or work together with boys. Boys struggle through their own media developed images for ideal manhood. However, working in "all-girl" groups may help participants be more relaxed about sharing personal stories and struggles – seeing their susceptibility to media messages and popular culture influence. The following activities may offer opportunities to work together with girls on this extremely important issue. For all these activities selection of an appropriate staff leader/facilitator is key. Effective leaders/facilitators should have strong communication skills, be experienced at leading group discussions, and have some background or interest in women's studies.

Arts Activities:

- Create a bulletin board for display in the afterschool program space of positive vs. negative images of girls captured in media.
- Have each girl make a collage using pictures, images, words that show all their natural positive attributes and characteristics.
- Develop and role-play advertising ads using healthy/positive images of girls.

Literacy/Communication Activities:

- Write letters to selected advertisers to respond to their ads, both positive and negative.
- Have youth bring in advertisements from magazines or newspapers and talk about the images portrayed and how to overcome them.
- Review together interactive websites that show how advertising and technology is used to create idealistic images. (i.e. <http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com>).
- Develop a media awareness workshop that older girls could share with younger girls in school or other afterschool programs.
- Look together at TV programming such as “Ugly Betty” and discuss body images and female portrayal.
- Read together books that are noted as “empowering” for girls (middle school) (i.e. <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/cwgs/msrl/index.html>).
- Create a list of women girls admire and discuss why.

Other Activities:

- Invite guest speakers to talk about nutrition, health, physical fitness, and eating disorders.
- Promote facilitated friendship groups and girl discussion groups that raise strategies for building positive self-image.
- Listen to popular music and identify body image messages.
- Develop a recipe book with healthy food and snack suggestions.

Quality afterschool programs can provide an environment and community that is welcoming and uplifting for girls. To keep girls on a healthy trajectory it is important that they are affirmed for nurturing the bodies they have and developing a positive and healthy image of themselves. Helping girls re-define beauty away from media images is an important contribution that afterschool programs can make towards supporting healthy development for girls.

“If the definition of beautiful gets any thinner, than no one will fit in.” (www.newmoon.org)

Resource suggestions for leaders/facilitators:

-Strong, Smart, & Bold by Carla Fine.

-Raising Confident Girls: 100 Tips for Parents and Teachers by Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer.

-See Jane Win: The Rimm Report on How 1,000 Girls Became Successful Women by Sylvia Rimm.

-200 Ways to Raise a Girl’s Self-Esteem: An Indispensible Guide for Parents, Teachers & Other Concerned Caregivers by Will Glennon.

References:

Bessenoff, G. (2006). Can the media affect us? Social comparison, self-discrepancy, and the thin ideal. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 30, 239-251.

Huber, J., & Fuccella, J. (1995). Cross cultural examination of women's body image perception. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology. Retrieved September 7, 2007 from <http://www.eric.ed.gov>. ED404576.

Kilbourne, J. (1999). *Deadly persuasion: Why women and girls must fight the addictive power of advertising*. New York: The Free Press.