

# WebSource

## Video Short

### **Kids Think about Media's Messages** **By CWK Network Producer**

*"Don't criticize your daughter for how she looks. The messages she gets every day are harsh enough and damaging enough."*

--Elizabeth English, Academic Dean of Atlanta Girls' School

The average American child is in front of a screen for 11 hours a day ... all that time in front of video games, computers, television screens can increase their chances of being violent, having sex, doing drugs, and having an eating disorder. How can parents counteract all these messages?

According to the Academy of Pediatrics, kids see 40,000 commercials every year. A new study published in **Pediatrics** magazine reports that teaching children as early as third grade to be more skeptical of media messages can help affect their consumer decisions later on.

"It's always skinny women," says 16-year-old Leigh. "Most of the time they have the perfect hair, the perfect make-up, the perfect clothes."

That's why Atlanta Girls' School offered an elective called "I Love Lip Gloss," to teach girls about the influence of advertising.

"I think many times ads simply create a discomfort and an anxiety around how a girl looks or simply feels about herself," says Elizabeth English, academic dean of Atlanta Girls' School. "So that in turn, she's constantly searching for products or ways that will alleviate that discomfort."

Every day for three weeks, they study how ads affect how they see themselves.

Junior Chaquana says, "If you're big and you never see anybody who is big being called beautiful or who is black being called beautiful, you don't want to be who you are anymore. You want to be what you see being called beautiful."

17-year-old Brooke says, "It's telling women that if you are not pretty enough, you are not going to get married and nobody is going to love you."

"We want them to be able to say, 'No, I won't buy this product. I don't need this product to be happy, to be fulfilled, to be beautiful,'" says English.

She recommends that parents ask their daughters to analyze commercials they see in print and on television and then ask them how they feel about their own bodies.

"Give them an opportunity to talk about it," says English. "And then, above all, don't criticize your daughter for how she looks. The messages she gets every day are harsh enough and damaging enough."

What else can parents do?

Sophomore Amani suggests, "Maybe it's just them saying, 'Hey, you look beautiful! And you be yourself.'"

### **What We Need to Know**

So how can you determine if your teen has a negative body image and whether or not he or she is in danger? The experts at *Chicago Parent* magazine suggest looking for these trouble signs in your teen:

- Engaging in excessive exercise or training that isn't required for his or her athletic activities at school and that intrudes on other important activities
- Engaging in sports for the sole purpose of improving appearance

- Having a preoccupation with looking like the extremely thin women or muscular men in the media
- Using large quantities of dietary supplements, such as creatine or protein powders, or steroids, such as ephedrine or androstenedione
- Experiencing sharp fluctuations in weight
- Fasting, attempting extreme diets or using laxatives, diuretics or other dangerous techniques to lose weight
- Feeling like he or she never looks good enough
- Needing frequent reassurance that he or she “looks OK”
- Thinking, worrying about and feeling distressed about his or her appearance
- Allowing his or her appearance concerns to limit social activities or negatively affect school or job performance
- Avoiding having all or part of his or her body seen by others (avoiding locker room situations or wearing clothes that alter or disguise his or her body)

If you recognize any of the signs previously listed, it is important that you talk with your teen about these issues as soon as possible. Whether your son or daughter has a negative body image, experts from the University of South Florida suggests the following tips to help guide your discussion:

- Tell your teen how important it is that he or she identifies and accepts his or her strengths and weaknesses. Remind him or her that everyone has them and that no one is perfect.
- Remind your teen that goals must be realistic and he or she must take pride in his or her achievements.
- Tell your teen not to be someone else but to be proud of whom he or she is.
- Have your teen explore his or her own talents and learn to love and appreciate the unique person he or she has become.

As a parent, it is important to remember that you play a crucial role in how your teen feels about his or her body. You are often his or her role model, and your teen learns from what you say and do. To be a positive role model and to help prevent your teen from developing a negative body image, the NEDA suggests the following strategies:

- Consider your thoughts, attitudes and behaviors toward your own body and the way that these beliefs have been shaped by the forces of “weightism” and sexism.
- Educate your teen about the genetic basis for the natural diversity of human body shapes and sizes and the nature and ugliness of prejudice.
- Make an effort to maintain positive, healthy attitudes and behaviors.
- Avoid conveying messages that will lead your teen to believe he or she needs to look more like a model and fit into smaller clothes.
- Learn about and discuss with your teen the dangers of trying to alter one’s body shape through dieting, the value of moderate exercise for health and the importance of eating a variety of foods in well-balanced meals consumed at least three times a day.
- Make a commitment not to avoid activities, such as swimming, sunbathing, dancing, etc., simply because they call attention to your weight and shape.
- Make a commitment to exercise for the joy of feeling your body move and grow stronger, not to purge fat from your body or to compensate for calories eaten.
- Help your teen appreciate and resist the ways in which television, magazines and other media distort the true diversity of human body types and imply that a slender body means power, excitement, popularity or perfection.
- Encourage your teen to be active and to enjoy what his or her body can do and feel like. Do not limit his or her caloric intake unless a physician requests that you do this because of a medical problem.
- Do whatever you can to promote the self-esteem and self-respect of your teen in intellectual, athletic and social endeavors. Give boys and girls the same opportunities and encouragement. A well-rounded sense of self and solid self-esteem are perhaps the best antidotes to dangerous dieting and a negative body image.

## Resources

[American Medical Association](#)

[Chicago Parent](#)

[National Eating Disorders Association](#)

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