



HELPING YOUR DAUGHTER COUNTER THE MEDIA IMAGES OF WOMEN

by Elizabeth A. Mellin, NCC

The picture of that pencil-thin but voluptuous model on the cover of a popular teen magazine...the TV infomercial for a new makeup that will help you become the "perfect woman"...the television ad showing a young woman turning to a male financial advisor for the answers to her financial future...the music video with the clear message in lyrics and images that "being sexy will make you popular."

We're bombarded by these and countless similar images every day. Is it difficult to understand why so many of the young women in our society are growing up with the wrong message about what they should be to be successful and accepted? All too often today, the message being sent is that for true happiness, women need to be thin, alter their physical appearance, look to men for answers to their problems, and be sexual.

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The result is not an insignificant problem. These powerful and often-repeated messages can potentially be dangerous, resulting in problems such as eating disorders, low self-esteem, depression, and addictions.

Are these media messages - many of them aimed at younger and younger audiences - impacting your daughter? The amount of time your daughter spends watching television and looking through magazines can be a key factor. Try answering the following questions:

Does your daughter seem obsessed with dressing like popular female pop stars?

Does your daughter frequently express concerns about her weight?

Has your daughter given up the interests she had when she was younger, such as sports, music, or art, and begun to worry more about her physical appearance and popularity with boys?

Have you heard of your daughter or her friends becoming sexually promiscuous at a young age?

While a yes answer to one or more of these questions does not necessarily mean a problem, it certainly may indicate that the publicity, marketing and advertising messages aimed at young women are reaching their target in your household. It should mean taking

some action.

For many parents, fighting these relentless media messages seems a hopeless battle. Yet there are things you can do. A recent, excellent book on the subject, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, by Mary Pipher, offers some solid suggestions on steps parents can take to counter some of the ways the media can negatively impact girls and young women.

Watch some of your daughter's favorite television shows and music videos, and read some of the magazines she reads. Then talk with her about what some of these things say about women and how they are perceived and judged. Ask her what would have been a more realistic depiction of women, or if she or her friends really look, act, speak or think like the characters in the shows, videos or articles. Ask her how the message in some of these media messages make her feel about herself. Talk about how fair or realistic such feelings are.

Stop complimenting your daughter and other young women on their looks. Start complimenting them on their intellect, creativity, interests, ideas and accomplishments. Encourage your daughter to continue with her interests in sports, music, nature, art, etc., or help her develop new interests in areas other than physical beauty and popularity. Empower your daughter to reject media stereotypes by refusing to watch television shows, watch music videos, or buy products that belittle women. Encourage her to write, call or e-mail companies and let them know what she thinks of the message their advertising or shows present about women. Set an example by writing or calling yourself. Monitor how media stereotypes have impacted your own ideas and actions about women and work. Work to reject those you find troubling, and thereby set a better example for your daughter.

Fighting the enormous onslaught of often-troubling media messages about young women may seem an impossible job, but you can have an impact. Opening up communications with your daughter and talking about these messages and the problems they can cause can be an important step in giving a young woman a realistic perspective on these issues.

Elizabeth Mellin holds a Master's degree in counselor education from Auburn University and is a Nationally Certified Counselor. She is currently a doctoral student at Ohio University and has worked with young girls facing problems related to the depiction of women in the media.

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