

CHAPTER 2

Girly Girls

Pretty, Pink, Skinny, and Sexy

There is a lot of pressure for us to look a certain way. We are supposed to be pretty, and skinny, and have big boobs and nice hair. The pressure comes from our friends, from boys, and even from our parents. I know a girl whose mom buys her padded bras and high heels. They go to the salon and get fake nails and spray tans. We are only in sixth grade. . . . If I did that my mom would kill me!

—Leah, sixth grade

A shopping trip for a friend who recently had a baby girl resulted in a frustrated attempt to find an appropriate gift that was not pink. I do love the color pink; however, I knew that everyone was going to arrive with a pink gift, as seems to be the case for all new baby girls. As I perused the baby clothes, blankets, toys, and accessories, I was dazzled by all the tiny pink choices!

I wondered why, at such an early age, pink is seen as the only appropriate color for a baby girl? From the moment the announcement is made, “It’s a girl!” we already have expectations on what the baby should wear and what colors are most appropriate for a little baby girl or boy. In general, I think we find comfort in the regularity of pink for girls and blue for boys. In fact, if a baby is not wearing one of the assigned colors, we may be initially unsure of the sex of the child. Have you ever seen a baby that was not dressed in pink or blue and felt confused as to what the sex of the

baby was, what you should say to the parents, or how you should comment on the child?

Research studies have observed people's reactions toward babies who are wrapped in a pink blanket or a blue blanket. How would people respond to the baby based entirely on the color of the blanket? Would they do or say anything different if the baby was in pink or in blue?

When they saw a baby wrapped in a pink blanket, they overwhelmingly commented on the baby's delicate features and physical beauty. When the same baby was wrapped in a blue blanket, people commented about how strong or strapping the baby was. If the baby was wrapped in yellow or green, most people thought twice about what they should say. What is the appropriate reaction now? They didn't want to say or do anything wrong or make an incorrect guess as to the baby's sex.

EARLY EXPECTATIONS FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

From the time a baby is born, there are expectations in place that are based exclusively on the baby's physical sex. These expectations define feminine and masculine gender for girls and boys, women and men. Early in life, we begin to place value on certain traits or specific characteristics that we associate with boys or girls, and we may unconsciously impose rules or limits based on what is generally considered acceptable for either gender. How do these early impressions or expectations translate into our ongoing thoughts about what is right for boys and girls?

Carol Gilligan, a prominent Harvard psychologist who has studied the development of girls, believes that girls construct their identities and their understanding of their gender based on how other people respond to them (Gilligan, 1982). Girls develop thoughts, feelings, and behaviors based on the messages that they receive from others regarding what it means to be a girl. For example, children generally learn at very young ages that girls, but not boys, wear dresses. They also learn that girls play with dolls and boys play with trucks. Boys don't cry. Girls don't fight. Girls do the dishes, and boys take out the garbage. The interactions that we have with children can help shape their understanding of what it

means to be a boy or girl and can influence what they perceive to be “appropriate behavior” for their gender.

Activity: Who Does What?

Consider the following common tasks, chores, and activities. As you read through the list, can you easily assign an “expected gender” to the task? Are there items that jump out in your mind as things that, in general, girls/women do and things that, in general, boys/men do?

- Takes out the garbage
- Goes golfing
- Cooks dinner
- Hosts a dinner party
- Cleans the house
- Drinks beer
- Cuts the grass
- Drinks wine
- Plants the flowers
- Buys new shoes
- Washes the car
- Plays video games
- Does the laundry
- Watches documentaries
- Organizes the carpool
- Reads fashion magazines
- Buys the groceries
- Reads sports magazines
- Irons the clothes
- Plays baseball
- Cleans the garage
- Tap dances
- Feeds the baby
- Goes to the PTA meetings
- Writes the thank-you notes
- Goes to the spa
- Bakes the birthday cakes
- Vacuums the carpet
- Pays the bills
- Changes the oil in the car
- Changes the diapers
- Drives on a date

As you completed the activity above, did you find that many of the tasks are stereotypically assigned to a specific gender? Some are a bit more obvious than others but, of course, *all* are activities that both men and women can, and do, engage in. Did you notice whether or not *you* participate in more of the gender typical or gender atypical activities? It can sometimes be difficult to step outside of the expected roles. Think about stay-at-home parents, for example. There would be nothing unusual for a mother to be a stay-at-home parent; it is much less frequent that a father is a stay-at-home parent.

As it can be difficult for adults to cross the lines of typical gender expectations, it can also be difficult for both boys and girls to do this as well. Girls worry that they will be judged or ridiculed in some way because they are different. Janya, a sixth grade girl said,

I think that everyone expects girls to play with dolls and makeup and do super-girly stuff. I like doing girly things sometimes, but I would rather play outside with my older brothers. I am really good at sports, but sometimes I feel like people tell me I should be quieter and act more 'like a lady.' I guess I am a tomboy.

Clearly, Janya is dealing with the pressure that she feels from others to be or act in a certain way. She knows what she likes and what she is good at but also recognizes that some of the things she enjoys do not necessarily fit with what she has learned girls are supposed to do or be.

While girls now have more options than ever before to explore their interests and skills, they still recognize that there are expectations that people put upon them based on their gender. I've talked to many parents, teachers, and counselors who say that they treat both boys and girls the same and tell them both that they can be and do anything that they want. They see increased equality surrounding the things that girls can do such as get good grades, play sports, and go to college. However, when I talk to girls, they say that they feel intense pressure around fitting in, looking good, and being pretty. The girls often feel more pressure around what they think they are *supposed to look like*, than they feel around what they think they are *supposed to do*.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT BEING A GIRL?

The understanding of the term *femininity*, or the quality of being female, has changed over the years. Once thought of as nurturing, caretaking, and domestic, femininity now most often seems to be equated to fashion, beauty, and sex appeal. Over time, sociologists and psychologists have explored the concept of femininity and the feminine gender role. Most of the ways that femininity has been historically discussed and defined has been in relation to family and domestic skills, beauty and looks, and acquisition of male attention.

While many of us would like to believe that this definition has evolved, research shows that very little has actually changed as it relates to the expectations that society has for girls, and very little has changed about how girls internalize, or think and feel about,

their own gender. While girls have more opportunities around sports, college, careers, and relationships, there are still rigid expectations to which girls and women are held that can, unfortunately, limit a girl's sense of herself and her abilities.

One of the questions that we have asked several hundred girls in our research is, "What do you like about being a girl?" Overwhelmingly, girls said things such as, "I can get my nails and hair done" and "We can wear skirts and frilly dresses" and "I can get my daddy to buy me things." A full 85 percent of the responses to this question fell into the categories of physical beauty, material possessions, and getting what you want. The remaining 15 percent of the responses included themes revolving around child-birth and mothering, emotions, friendships, and family.

Activity: Redefining Femininity

As recently as 20 years ago, Fiebert (1990) defined the feminine role as having four different dimensions:

1. Adherence to cultural fashion and beauty standards
2. Performance of family and domestic skills
3. Satisfaction of the needs of others
4. Acquisition of male attention

If we want girls to be feminine, does it mean that these are the things they should be working toward? Are there more empowering messages that we can give girls about what it means to be a girl and what femininity looks like? What do you think are some of the different ways that girls can conceptualize femininity?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Somehow, femininity—and being a girl—has been defined as external beauty, sexuality, and even manipulation. These are not inherent qualities that girls possess, nor are girls “hardwired” to love fashion and beauty. The way that we, as adults, shape girls’ understanding of femininity can impact the way that they view being a girl, as well as the qualities they perceive as appropriately feminine. We want girls to connect with femininity as a concept that is not exclusively connected to beauty, male attention, or domestic pursuits. While these may be important facets of a girl’s life, these components do not have to be the only way that feminine is defined. When we equate femininity, or being a girl, to these limited concepts, we restrict girls’ options, their creativity, and their sense of themselves as complex, smart, and valuable. We must redefine for girls what feminine can actually mean.

FEMININE = PRETTY = SKINNY

Part of how girls understand femininity is, of course, looking feminine. Girls have shared at length the pressures they feel to look a certain way, have specific styles or brands of clothes, and possess ideal body characteristics. Girls also go to great lengths to achieve a specific look. Skin, hair, nails, eyebrows, breasts, legs, eyelashes, lips, stomach, eyes, nose, butt, and teeth are all body parts that girls report wanting to change. They go to tanning salons, straighten their hair, get colored contacts, whiten their teeth, wax their eyebrows, pad their bras, and starve their bodies in an attempt to achieve what they see as ideal beauty. We can clearly see in the media that girls are exposed to images of women that are overtly sexual, very thin, and with unrealistic and surgically enhanced proportions. In turn, one of the biggest struggles that girls experience is pressure to look a certain way. This “certain way” varies somewhat based on environment, culture, and ethnicity, but overwhelmingly girls report experiencing the pressures of the mainstream media on a daily basis. Many know what it feels like to spend hours of time each day thinking about their appearance, their body size and shape, and what they will wear.

We know that early exposure to some of these beauty ideas can be harmful to girls. Girls who are exposed to media images that promote a thin-as-ideal body actually have increased

dissatisfaction with their own body. The longer they are exposed to these kinds of images or messages, the more dissatisfied they become and the more likely they are to report being on a diet. This was found to be the case even among girls who were already thin with low body mass indexes as well as with very young girls (Knobloch-Westerwick & Crane, 2012).

Activity: Helping Girls Critically Analyze the Media

The images of women in magazines, on commercials, and throughout the media are often overtly sexual, airbrushed, cropped, and resized. The skin of black women is often lightened in print media and complexions of models are edited to look as though they have no pores and flawless skin. Even famous supermodels do not look the same in real life as they do in magazines. Girls often see these images and feel that this skinny, pretty, sexy ideal is what they should look like and is the image that they should emulate. We want girls to recognize that these images are not actually real; rather, they are edited and refined to look flawless. We want girls to develop a critical eye when it comes to media consumption and possess the ability to recognize the difference between a “real” body and a computer-generated body and to be cautious of judging their own bodies against these unrealistic images.

Have girls peruse a variety of magazines: teen, men’s, cooking, sports, entertainment, and so forth. Have them identify the healthy and the unhealthy bodies in each magazine. Encourage them to critically analyze what the photos represent and how they portray girls and women. Can they find images of women with healthy and realistic bodies as well as discern the bodies that are manipulated, computer generated, or airbrushed? Do they notice the way that women’s sexuality is often used in advertising?

While these popular media and cultural images can play a significant role in how we feel about ourselves and our bodies, the messages that we receive from parents, teachers, and peers are also critically important. I saw this first hand with Meghan, a young woman who struggles with issues around body image. She

shared with me that at least half of the thoughts that she has on a daily basis revolve around her weight, her eating, and her appearance. She, at age 21, says that she feels better and more confident when she is thinner and that she will avoid going places or meeting up with friends if she feels like she has gained weight or does not look “presentable.”

I was interested in learning when her thoughts and negative feelings about her body began. She told me that when she was in second grade she went on her first diet. Her mother was on Weight Watchers, as were all her mother’s friends. She said she remembers them all being over for lunch one day and all they talked about was food, diets, exercise, and fitting into a bikini in the summer. Meghan said that day she went to her room and looked at her own body in the mirror. She said she never wore a bikini before and thought that she needed to be slimmer to do that. She began to notice that she was not as small as the other girls in her grade and made the decision to start a diet. She said ever since second grade she has been on some type of diet or eating plan and was constantly trying to lose weight. Over ten years later, and well within a healthy weight range, Meghan is still dealing with feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and negative body image. She says,

I also remember when I was in elementary school, my dad came up to me and kind of pinched my stomach and made a comment about my weight. I don’t really think he was trying to be mean, but that experience has stuck with me for all of these years. I can still feel the exact feelings that I felt on that day when that happened. My dad is my best friend but also my biggest critic. When I slip up with my eating, he is the first person who will comment on it.

As we can see from Meghan’s situation, our issues with food and eating do not disappear when we become adults. Many of the insecurities and pressures that we had as young girls continue for us well into our adulthood. When I talk to parents and teachers about some of these issues, I always bring up the infamous office potluck. Lots of schools and offices have potluck lunches or birthday lunches where everyone is responsible for bringing something to contribute. Rarely can we observe an entire lunch without hearing multiple comments about diet,

weight, what we can or should eat, and what is off-limits. “Oh, those brownies look so delicious, but I just shouldn’t” or “I am cheating today and going to have to do some extra time at the gym tomorrow” or “As soon as this diet is over I can’t wait to eat some pizza!”

Regardless of the actual comments, it is rare that you can have a room of women together with food without there being negative and self-deprecating dialogue.

Activity: Observe the Potluck and the Dieters

Many of us will be at lunch or dinner at some point in the future with a group of friends or colleagues. Pay attention to who in the group is more likely to talk about food, calories, diets, fat, exercise, or guilt. Do more men or women obsess about their eating? Who is on a diet in the group and how do you know that?

While girls are watching these subtle, or more indirect, comments that we make around food, eating, body size and shape, they are also profoundly impacted by our more direct comments and behaviors. Girls all around us are paying attention to our own relationship with food. They watch what we eat, how we talk about food, and how we talk about our own bodies. The role that we, as adults, have in shaping girls’ attitudes about their own bodies cannot be overstated. We can see from Meghan’s story that her early interactions with her mother and father around her body and eating have stuck with her as an adult and significantly impact how she thinks about herself today.

The comments that Meghan experienced and observed were obviously damaging, but they were even less overt and direct than some girls experience from their parents. One parent, proudly shared a story about how she was dealing with Zoe, her “chubby 6-year-old daughter.” The mother, a middle school vice principal in an affluent suburb, was complaining about her daughter’s overeating and recent weight gain. She shared that on a recent shopping trip to the mall she planned to “nip that problem in the

bud.” The mother stated that, “I marched Zoe right down to the Lane Bryant store and told her that if she keeps it up, this will be the only store where she would be able to buy clothes.”

In the same way that Meghan clearly remembers what it felt like when her father pinched her stomach, I imagine 6-year-old Zoe will have a similar, destructive memory of her experience. It is hard to believe that an adult would proudly share this story, but it reiterates the fact that just because we grow up and become adults does not mean we figure out how to address complicated issues and internal insecurities. Zoe will face pressures around her looks and body size from the media and from society and will also have to endure the negative pressures and feedback from her mother. Unfortunately, she is a girl who will be a prime candidate for developing an eating disorder when she hits her teenage years.

As we think about redefining femininity to be healthier and less limiting for girls, perhaps one of the first components should be to encourage girls to have a strong and healthy body rather than a skinny body.

HOW I THINK I LOOK = HOW I FEEL ABOUT MYSELF

One of the most important predictors of self-esteem in girls is their own thoughts about their appearance and body weight. Girls’ perception of their appearance impacts their self-esteem more than girls’ self-esteem impacts their perception of their appearance. That means that the way girls think they look has more to do with how they feel about themselves than almost anything else. Young women report that their body weight is the aspect of their life with which they are most dissatisfied (Kutob, Senf, Crago, & Shisslak, 2010).

This seems to be the case for Meghan, discussed above, who told me that she estimates that about 80 percent of how she feels about herself is related to how she feels about her body and if she feels skinny or pretty. She said the other 20 percent is connected to her other characteristics such as who she is as a friend, if she is kind, and her relationships with her family.

If the number one thing that influences and impacts girls' self-esteem is the perceptions that they hold of their bodies and the thoughts they have about their own physical attractiveness, then girls are viewing their appearance as their major sense of worth. When physical beauty and external traits and characteristics are constantly reinforced as important for girls at the expense of other traits, skills, and characteristics, we are—perhaps subconsciously—telling girls that their value comes largely from their outward appearance.

Is this too far fetched? Probably not. In our research with girls, we have seen that they place extreme emphasis on outward appearance and especially on being sexy and attractive to boys. Girls talk about the importance of being “tall and skinny, with big boobs and nice hair,” and why wouldn't they? This is the consistent image that they receive from the mainstream media on what is attractive, beautiful, feminine, and sexy.

With body image so tightly connected to self-esteem, how can we change the way that girls feel about and experience their own bodies? We have to find ways to impact the messages that girls receive surrounding body image and ideal bodies. This is not accomplished by simply telling girls that all body shapes and sizes are beautiful. We must make concentrated efforts to assist girls in learning how to base their self-esteem on personal attributes other than body weight and shape.

Girls have so many positive qualities that are not associated with looks; however, these qualities are rarely emphasized. In much the same way that the baby in the pink blanket receives comments and compliments about being pretty or delicate, adolescent girls also receive many more compliments about their appearance than they do about their other qualities or their abilities. We need to help girls focus on their positive qualities, traits, and characteristics that are not related to body image. When girls are able to do this, their perceptions of their body shape change and they experience less body dissatisfaction. Girls who can identify the things that they do well and the positive characteristics that they possess tend to rely less on weight and body shape to determine their self-esteem (Armitage, 2012). Simply stated, when girls recognize that they are good at things other than being pretty, they experience higher levels of self-esteem.

Activity: Strength Bombardment

Sometimes it is difficult for girls to identify their positive traits. Having a group of girls participate in an activity called a strength bombardment gives girls the opportunity to identify the traits and characteristics of their peers that they admire and allows girls to hear positive comments from an entire group of girls.

This activity can be used with a group of girls who already know each other. The group sits in a circle and one person at a time takes a turn sitting in the middle of the circle. The person who is in the middle should not speak; rather, she should just listen to the comments made by each person in the circle. Each person in the circle takes a turn sharing a positive comment or compliment about the person who is in the middle of the circle . . . but the comment cannot be related to looks, beauty, clothes, or any external factor. Compliments and comments must be related to character, kindness, behavior, and work ethic—internal qualities.

After each girl in the circle shares a comment about the girl in the middle, the girl in the middle should say thank you and return to her seat in the circle. The next group member then can make her way to the center of the circle and the process is repeated until all girls have participated.

FEMININE = PRETTY = SKINNY = SEXY

Girls in elementary school begin to understand at a very young age concepts around beauty, desire, and sexual appeal. In talking to a group of fifth grade girls about what they think are some of the big issues going on for girls their age, several girls talked about “looking nice for boys” and “boys wanting to kiss you and touch you.” As girls get older, the intensity of their responses increases. But the theme is consistent—being feminine means being pretty, skinny . . . and sexy. Girls report pressure to be sexy and to receive attention from boys and to compete with other girls for boys’ attention.

I feel like girls are in constant competition with each other. We want to be smarter than other girls, prettier than other girls, skinnier than other girls, and sexier than other girls. We want boys to pay more attention to us than to the others. There is a girl at my school who gets up at 5:00 in the morning and literally spends like two hours getting ready for school every morning. She always looks perfect and, in gym class, I don't even think that she sweats. She has big boobs and she wears tight shirts and the guys, like, follow her around the school; it is so annoying. —Lora, tenth grade

The pressure for girls to be sexy can begin for girls as early as elementary school. A recent study found that girls as young as 6 years old want to look and dress sexy and that they equate sexiness with popularity (Starr & Ferguson, 2012). By fourth and fifth grade, girls are dressing more adult-like and wearing clothing that is sexually revealing or suggestive. Padded bras and thong underwear can be bought for elementary school-aged girls, and low-rider jeans, yoga pants, and low-cut tops are the dress of choice for many teen girls today. Even among school spirit and athletic wear, the trend toward sexier clothes is evident.

Case Study: It's Just Fashion, or Is It?

School Spirit Wear

As I have talked to many school staff, coaches, and administrators about the issue of sexualization of girls, invariably, a question of school spirit gear and athletic uniforms arises. The following are two recent examples that illustrate this point.

Lots of schools have school stores where you can purchase school sweatshirts, hats, and "spirit wear." Additionally, many girls' athletic teams have shorts, warm-up suits, or sweat suits that they wear on game day or prior to a sporting event. One recent trend has been for the school mascot name to be printed on the backside of the shorts or pants. We must ask the question, Why would we, as adults who are selecting and designing the spirit wear, want to draw attention to the backsides of our elementary, middle, and high school girls? Are we saying this increases school spirit? The girls wearing the shorts can't even see the printing on the back; rather, the design is exclusively for the benefit of the observer.

With an increased understanding of this issue, one school program opted to stop printing yoga pants for girls with the program name on the backside; rather, it began placing the printing down the front of the leg.

(Continued)

(Continued)

The girls at the school went crazy! They scrounged through the old boxes trying to find the last few pairs of pants that still had the printing on the backside. They wanted to fit in and be fashionable—they probably didn't see themselves as being sexualized.

Athletic Uniforms

A second, recent example was with a junior varsity girls' volleyball team. Athletic uniforms have evolved over the years and, in some cases, not for the better. The modern trend for the volleyball short is the tinier, the better. Among girls as young as elementary school, shorts are skin tight and often so short that the lower cheeks of the buttocks can be seen. Teachers report that high school girls actually hitch up their shorts to the point they actually look more like cheeky underwear or a bathing suit bottom, than an athletic uniform. While we must recognize that all sports have uniforms designed to enhance play and performance, it is hard to understand how these tiny bottoms help a young girl perform better at this sport.

One junior varsity volleyball coach sought to impose a more modest short for his team. While still a modern, spandex-style, very short bottom, the new uniform short was just a bit less revealing than what other teams were wearing. Thinking that parents would be grateful for this change, you can imagine his surprise when it was the mothers of the players that began calling him to complain about the uniforms and insist on a smaller, shorter bottom!

Girls learn very early that they are sexual beings. They are taught that their value comes from being pretty and sexy, and they learn through socialization and their interactions with others that receiving sexual attention is important. Patrice Oppliger (2008) suggests that young women are pushed toward external validation and objectification based on the insecurities that are brought on by ongoing exposure to media images of "perfect" women. It should come as no surprise then, when girls begin to embody what has been reinforced for them for many years—be pretty and sexy. Adolescent girls begin acting out sexually, seeking sexual attention, and connecting their own value to the ways that others respond to them or give them attention.

I think there is a lot of pressure for us to look a certain way. Like if you don't have certain brands of clothes or if you don't have big boobs, people are going to make fun of you. I think we want to look nice for ourselves, but we also want boys to pay attention to us. And we know what they like too. —Tina, seventh grade

Girls recognize that their bodies can get attention from boys and men, and they learn at early ages how to get this attention. Unfortunately, we, as adults, have a great deal of responsibility for how girls understand their own sexuality and their bodies as sexual objects. A 2010 American Psychological Association report entitled “The Sexualization of Girls,” examines a concept called *sexualization*. It discusses the ways that girls become sexualized—or valued for their sexuality or sex appeal over all other traits and characteristics—at very young ages. When physical attractiveness is equated to being sexy and a person is sexually objectified—or treated as if they have been made for someone else’s sexual use—a person has been sexualized. For girls, this is happening at younger and younger ages as girls learn to equate value with being pretty and being pretty with being sexy. Girls learn to objectify themselves by what we teach them . . . and then we judge them.

I really don't understand why girls dress like they do. It's almost like they are asking guys for attention with their low-cut tops, jeans with their underwear hanging out of the back, and a ton of makeup. I mean what do they really expect a guy to think, that they don't want his attention? They are trying so hard to make themselves look older than they are, and they end up looking cheap and easy.
—High School Teacher

MY BODY IS FOR OTHER PEOPLE

Should we blame girls for how they are dressing and for adopting the messages that have been reinforced for them on what it means to be a girl, what it means to be feminine, and what is valuable and important? What are the messages that are internalized for a young girl when her value is connected to, and judged almost exclusively on, how she looks? When a girl sexualizes herself, objectifies her own body, and harshly judges her own appearance, we see the internalization of all the messages that she has received about her value (APA, 2010). *Body objectification* is when we believe that our body exists for the benefit of another person’s gaze and desire (Tolman, Impett, Tracy, & Michael, 2006).

When we emphasize the sexuality of young girls and encourage their receipt of sexual attention, we are objectifying them and we are teaching them to objectify themselves. When girls are sexualized, they can experience negative effects in a variety of areas, including (APA, 2010)

- cognitive functioning—difficulty concentrating and completing mental activities.
- emotional functioning—lowered confidence and increased levels of shame, anxiety, and self-disgust.
- mental health—increased prevalence of eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression.
- sexuality—diminished sexual health and sexual assertiveness.

These issues are intense and long lasting. Girls' early experiences have a significant role in how they come to understand themselves and value themselves. If they are not getting the attention or the approval they have learned to seek, they believe themselves to be not good enough. Thus, we reinforce the ideas that value comes from femininity, looks, body size, and sex appeal.

We need to help girls develop a healthy image of their bodies, a sense that their bodies are not designed for the pleasure of others, and the understanding that their sense of worth and value does not come from others finding them pretty or sexy.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Encourage girls to identify their strengths and talents

We are all good at different things, but sometimes it is difficult to truly identify what those things actually are. Girls have a very difficult time believing that they are good at many things. In fact, research from the American Association of University Women (1995) found, by high school, only 27 percent of girls would report that they are good at a lot of things. This is down from 47 percent in elementary school. When I am working with girls in individual counseling, I often ask them to tell me what they do well. More often than not, this ends up being a homework assignment for them because they can't come up with a list on the spot. We need to help girls find their value through their skills, talents, and interests.

☆ Teach life skills to girls

Life skills are not skills for boys or skills for girls. Girls need to know how to change a tire, shovel snow, stand up for themselves, jump rope, play chess, throw a baseball, and cut the grass. These are not activities that either boys or girls can inherently do better, but they are skills that we tend to see become assigned to one gender or the other. Girls and boys need to develop skills in all areas.

☆ Emphasize and compliment internal rather than external traits

As a society, we easily notice and compliment the external characteristics of others. How often do we hear, “You look great, have you lost weight?” or “You’re hair looks great!” or “I love that outfit” and “You must have been in the sun, your skin is glowing.” It is much easier to comment on these factors; however, in doing so we reinforce the value placed on external factors and/or looks. The following chart provides examples of external versus internal traits.

<i>External</i>	<i>Internal</i>
Body Shape	Competence
Weight/Body Size	Persistence
Clothes	Courage
Hair	Performance
Skin Tone	Character

☆ Pay attention to the way that you talk about your own body and about food

Girls who have mothers who diet and constantly talk about food, calories, and body size are far more likely to develop issues around their own bodies at very early ages. Additionally, pay attention to what you say about food and calorie consumption in front of girls. Girls are watching us when we comment on how everything looks so delicious, but we “shouldn’t,” “couldn’t,” or “mustn’t” have dessert. Pay attention next time at that office meal

or potluck and see how many people comment on their food selections. Also, notice if your visceral reaction is to participate in this dialogue as well.

☆ **Host a “No-Fat Talk” Day/Week/Month**

This is an opportunity to point out the ways in which our ongoing discussions and thoughts are pervasively centered on how fat we are. Several groups, including the Eating Concerns Advisors and the national sorority Tri Delta, have sponsored and publicized events focused on limiting the negative messages we give ourselves about our bodies. An undertaking such as this actually is a harder concept to pull off than you might think. Try it with a friend first and see how often you talk about weight, body shape, eating, calories, and so on in a specific period of time.

☆ **Emphasize strong, healthy bodies rather than thin bodies**

Skinny does not necessarily equal healthy. The media has a focus on lean body shapes for women and 95 percent of fashion models are lean. In women’s fitness magazines, 55 percent of the models are lean and 36 percent are muscular. Only 6 percent of the images of women in either type of magazine had a softer or more curvaceous body type (Wasulkiw, Emms, Meuse, & Poirier, 2009). When you see billboards, advertisements, magazines, music videos, and television commercials, ask girls to identify the bodies that look strong and healthy. What do they notice about the differences between the various body types? What is realistic and attainable, and what type of body requires starving oneself or having plastic surgery?

☆ **Point out to girls unrealistic images of girls and women in the media, on television, and in magazines**

In most cases the advertisements and photographs of women that are featured in print media consist of images that have been computer enhanced, photoshopped, and airbrushed. The result is a final product that is actually no longer a real person.

The Renfrew Center, an eating disorders treatment facility, has a campaign with stickers that you can purchase and place on magazines and print media that are in your home or office (<http://renfrewcenter.com/resources/action-resource-guides>). The stickers are shaped like caution signs and say, “This promotes eating disorders” or “This promotes healthy body image.” Provide girls an opportunity to explore media and magazines and identify for themselves what a healthy body actually looks like versus a fake body versus an unhealthy body. Having an ability to critically analyze the media is of paramount importance in the development of a healthy sense of self.

☆☆ **Pay attention to how you think about and reinforce traditional expectations around masculinity and femininity**

Do you have long-standing beliefs about what boys and girls are supposed to do or supposed to be good at? Do girls who do not fit into a traditional mold get treated differently? When we reinforce the traditional ideals for girls, we limit them and their options. We must encourage strength, determination, and competence in girls. Teachers can ensure that room tasks are evenly divided between girls and boys and that every time there is a physical task to be completed a boy is not automatically chosen for the job. Similarly, boys can be selected for domestic or caretaking room tasks demonstrating that the chores are not inherently masculine or feminine.

☆☆ **Recognize that girls feel pressure to dress in the ways that they see others dressing**

Merely forbidding girls to wear certain clothes does not do anything to create awareness or an understanding of themselves as sexual objects. Setting rules about what should or should not be worn can serve to backfire and reinforce the idea that we—the adults—have absolutely no idea of the difficulty of the teen’s life and the social pressures that she is experiencing. Talk to girls about the societal pressures surrounding looks and sexuality. Allow them to explore the feelings that they have and the messages that they receive in a place that is safe and nonjudgmental.