

Youth Culture Window

Image is Everything

Girls' Ongoing Search for Physical Perfection

An article from [David R. Smith](#) at [TheSource4YM.com](#)

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No, those aren't the winning numbers for this week's lottery jackpot; they're even more prized than that! Those digits represent the measurements of the "perfect" female physique.

And today's girls are doing everything they can to find the winning combination.

The Pursuit of Perfection

Ever since the American Psychological Association initiated the [Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls](#), studies have been underway to discover the impact our racy culture has on our young ladies. Their findings are often unsettling, but so is what they study.

Researchers from Knox College (Illinois) are some of the latest to join the effort with [a study on young girls \(ages 6 to 9\) and their idea of "sexy."](#) Girls in this age bracket were shown two different dolls: one that was dressed in "tight, revealing" clothing, and one that was dressed in "trendy, more modest" attire. The girls were then asked to choose which doll most-resembled themselves, which doll was the most popular, which doll was wanted for play, and which doll she most-wanted to look like.

Unsurprisingly, the young girls chose the sexier doll most often. In fact, 68% of the girls picked the sexier doll as the one they wanted to look like, while 72% said the sexier doll was the more popular of the two options. It's abundantly clear; girls – even those at a very young age – know exactly what they want to look like in life.

So it's no wonder that little girls who idolize sexiness try to emulate it as young ladies.

These days, teenage girls are just as likely as older women to wear [form-enhancing undergarments like Spanx](#) to try and alter their body image. Celebrities ranging from Miley Cyrus to Oprah have sported the shapewear, but nowadays, many regular girls also use the products to mask "muffin tops" and other physical flaws. Meanwhile, several doctors are worried about the long-lasting effects of wearing such constricting fabrics.

Other girls pass on wardrobe changes...and opt for *body* changes instead.

Nadia Ilse just made news for having roughly [\\$40,000 worth of cosmetic surgery done...at the age of 14](#). Another high-profile case of cosmetic-surgery-for-minors was that of [13-year-old Nicolette Taylor](#), who had her nose operated on after it was broken twice in childhood. To be fair, both of these girls were experiencing taunting, in person *and* on social media. I don't want to blur lines here; there's a big difference between trying to look sexy and trying to avoid bullying. But it's just another example of how image-driven our society has become. By the way,

there were over [a quarter million aesthetic procedures performed on teens](#) in 2011.

And where has all their efforts landed them?

3D: Dieting, Disillusioned, and Depressed

Girls' pursuit of perfection hasn't exactly taken them to Utopia. Far from it, in fact.

Even though [Miss Representation's](#) "Keep It Real" campaign claims that [80% of 10-year-old girls say they've dieted](#) and 81% of the same group are afraid of getting fat, the greatest desire of 11 to 17-year-old girls is still to "be thinner." Moreover, almost half of girls, 48%, wish they were as skinny as today's models. Based on those stats, it's no wonder, that in 2011, the National Institute on Media and the Family found that 53% of 13-year-old girls in the U.S. were ["unhappy with their bodies,"](#) a number that grows to 78% by the time the girls reach the age of 17.

But it gets worse.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) reported that [adolescent girls experience depression](#) three times that of their male counterparts. According to their findings, 12% of girls (12 to 17-years-old) have battled "major depressive episodes" compared to just 4.5% of boys the same age. Their studies also show that girls' depression worsens (in frequency and severity) the older they get.

I've already written about [the dangerous side effects of girls' low self-esteem](#) in previous Youth Culture Window articles. [Several times, in fact.](#) Our girls' reality still isn't improving...so our strategy must.

Real Change

It's an unfair world that our young ladies live in these days. Everything from magazine covers to towering billboards promote a female image so unattainable that it would be comical if not for the devastating heartache it causes millions of young girls. But in a world where the deck is stacked against girls, there are still several moves that loving parents and youth workers can make that will make a big difference.

1. **Discuss reality...actual reality.** One of our first actions should be to help girls gain a firm grip on reality when it comes to their self-image. If they're comparing themselves to glossy pages, what they're *really* comparing themselves to is some anonymous Photoshopper's imagination. If you want proof of that, just check out this [humorous compilation of "unreal advertisements."](#) Our girls need a realistic goal for themselves, one that's not only healthy, but holy. Fortunately, we've provided [a totally free resource to help with this](#) on our [SPIRITUAL GROWTH AGENDAS page](#).
2. **Teach where self-worth really comes from.** If a girl's self-worth is tied to her appearance, it's going to shatter at some point in the future. No exceptions. Physical beauty is important, without a doubt, but it's not the end-all-be-all. She'll need something that's much more meaningful and long-lasting to guide her through the wrinkles and blemishes of life. The greatest sense of self-worth for young ladies comes from being

aligned with God’s Word on issues such as their character, ethics, faith, and relationships. The Book of Proverbs is a great place to start building this DNA of self-worth into young girls.

3. **Help them model gratitude.** New research from California State University reveals [a link between gratitude and depression](#) in the lives of young people: when gratitude is low, depression is higher. Likewise, they discovered that when young people’s gratitude increased, so did their levels of happiness, hope, and satisfaction in life. Furthermore, grateful teenagers had noticeably lower levels of depression than their ungrateful peers. This just makes sense. Granted, not every girl has hands that will be used in commercials for diamond rings, but every girl who has functioning hands is grateful for them. We can reinforce so many positives – and avoid so many negatives – by helping girls simply be grateful for their bodies.

Beauty is subjective (“in the eye of the beholder”) and somewhat shallow (“skin deep”). Yet so many girls are trapped in a hopeless search for physical perfection. Do everything you can to help them genuinely love themselves just as God created them...in His image.

David R. Smith is a 15-year youth ministry veteran who helps youth workers and parents through his writing, training, and speaking. David specializes in sharing the gospel, and equipping others do the same. He co-authored his first book this year, *Ministry By Teenagers*. David provides free resources to anyone who works with teenagers on his website, DavidRSmith.org. David resides with his wife and son in Tampa, Florida.