

## Girls Gone Good Forging A Positive Path in A Negative World

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As the bell rings and dozens of students spill out of classrooms, two 12-year-old girls open their lockers to images of Jamie Lynn Spears, Paris Hilton, and Keira Knightley. Dashing downstairs to health class a few minutes later, they laugh over the Hollywood news of the day: teen pregnancy, prison sentences, and suspected anorexia.

Joking that Paris's Chihuahua must have a bigger wardrobe than she does, one of the girls suggests they meet after school at the mall. Her skinny companion replies: "I've got to get some new jeans. These make me look too fat."

As parents, we immediately recognize the irony in this fictitious scenario. But is it really that far from the truth? Judging by the nightly news and the magazine racks at your grocery store, who's being discussed in America today? Who sets the standards for body image and life choices among our tech-savvy teens and tweens?

"Our national organization has conducted a great deal of research, and the girls they surveyed reported being exposed to media six hours a day—MP3, magazines, radio, TV," says Bevin Prater, vice president and chief operating officer for Girls Incorporated® of Indianapolis. "Loads of those influences and messages are not positive. A lot of what they see on TV looks glamorous; there are no consequences."

Even when celebrities fall from grace—as so many have done in recent years—their continued presence on magazine covers sends a twisted message that having an eating disorder or going to rehab may be better than not making news at all.

### **Powerful expectations**

Societal expectations of girls are enormously powerful today. The media sends messages on how they should act and look; friends place demands on them; and parents and educators have their own set of expectations, from academic success to time management. "They're getting it from all sides," says Karen Wolford, vice president for member services with Girl Scouts.

While positive messages can help to shape positive self-images, negative ones can lead to low self-esteem, a pervasive issue among pre-adolescent and adolescent girls in the United States. Citing its own studies and that of other organizations, the Girl Scout Research Institute ([www.girlscouts.org/research](http://www.girlscouts.org/research)) notes that low self-esteem is associated with risky behaviors such as smoking, drinking, eating disorders, unsafe sexual practices, self-mutilation, and suicide.

According to a report released in 2007 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the suicide rate increased by 8 percent for 10 to 24-year-olds from 2003 to 2004. In particular, rates rose for 10- to 14-year-old females, 15- to 19-year-old females and 15- to 19-year-old males during this time period. Before 2003, the rates for all three groups generally had been decreasing.

While it's the biggest annual increase in 15 years, CDC officials don't know yet if it's part of a longitudinal trend. Still, it's an alarming statistic among many others.

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) notes that before puberty, the rate of depression among girls and boys is roughly the same. By age 15, however, girls outnumber boys two to one. Increasing hormone levels, an emerging sexual identity, and a changing body image all amplify an adolescent girl's risk of depression.

Additionally, the Girl Scout Research Institute notes that while 65 percent of girls correctly identify themselves as being of either normal weight or overweight, one-third has distorted ideas about their weight. Some girls become overweight by eating junk foods heavily advertised on TV. Others may skip meals in an attempt to become even skinnier.

Magazines and music videos—with lanky, often anorexic models—perpetuate societal notions of attractiveness. Clothing manufacturers do as well. "Our CEO was at the store and saw there was actually a double zero size jean. It's very unhealthy unless you're made that way," says Prater.

### **Combating the messages**

Aside from banning iPods and YouTube, how can we help our daughters combat these unrealistic expectations?

"Our philosophy, when it comes to actually educating them on self-image and confidence, is not to cut it out. They are going to encounter it at some point," says Holly Herbert, program development manager for Girl Scouts of Central Indiana. "It's learning to take it as what it is. It's not a suggestion on how she needs to look or how to act. It's a marketing piece. They're not Britney. It's teaching them to look past those images and be comfortable in their own skin."

Through short programs sponsored by the Girl Scouts, tweens and teens can discuss such topics as dressing for your body type and analyzing media portrayals of women. During more in-depth weekends, girls can explore body image and self-confidence along with leadership development.

Girls Scouts of America also co-sponsors the Uniquely ME! self-esteem program with Dove. Designed to help girls 8 to 17 years old, the program includes a series of age-appropriate activity booklets on peer pressure, healthy eating, hygiene, exercise, and core values. Troops can engage in related hands-on activities in mentoring, community service, and sports.

### **Mapping their own course**

At Girls Incorporated of Indianapolis, first through twelfth graders can enroll in Media Literacy<sup>®</sup>, which explores messages on TV, magazines, radio, and the Internet. Depending on their age, participants differentiate between factual and fictional media content, analyze body images from popular teen magazines, and discuss whether popular music videos objectify women. "When you're paying your money for that CD or downloading those tunes from iTunes, you're perpetuating that stereotype," Prater says.

Girls Incorporated of Indianapolis also sponsors Redefining Beauty for girls in grades 4-12. Participants identify their personal strengths, talents, and skills, and also analyze how lighting and photo editing manipulate images of women.

"It debunks the fact that everyone in Hollywood looks so beautiful and perfect. We don't want girls to tie their self-esteem to their looks," Prater says. Instead, participants define beauty in a way that makes sense to them. By learning to advocate for themselves, adolescent girls are emboldened to set their own optimistic course instead of changing the pessimistic one that the Paris Hiltons of the world are seemingly mapping out for them.

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When New Jersey novelist Kristina Coia talks to middle school and high school students, she spends a little time promoting the two fantasy books she's published. But for the bulk of her presentation, the 15-year-old focuses on the lessons her characters can teach the audience about self-esteem and peer pressure.

Coia, the author of *Falcon's Prey* and *Lymeria*, has created *Shine Through*, an interactive motivational program. Unlike some other character programs that are led by adults, *Shine Through* is presented by a peer who has actually faced the same challenges that participants are experiencing.

"I have found that being a teen and having gone through the pressures of middle school and my freshman high school year, I can relate to the girls in *Shine Through* and I can relate to many of the same experiences," she says. "Most importantly, I find that when I describe some of the pressures I've experienced, they nod their heads and open up with their own pressures."

For more information about *Shine Through*, see [www.ariarts.net](http://www.ariarts.net).

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