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## What We Can Do for Our Girls

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

**B**ody dissatisfaction among teens is epidemic in our society, but there are messages in Scripture that parents and other important adults can share that support a more positive body image. As our tweens and teens develop physically, they also need to develop spiritually in order to see beyond the messages of their peers and the cultural icons of thinness that are seen everywhere.

While statistics certainly aren't everything, they can assist us in understanding ourselves, as well as others who have different ideas of their world. In a study done by the Girls Scouts of America (see <http://www.girlscouts.org>), some seven out of ten girls in grades 6–12 report they are very happy or kind of happy with how their body looks. A little more than one in ten says they don't pay much attention to how their body looks. Three out of four (73 percent) compare how they look to girls in the media, at least some times, and three out of ten compare their looks either a lot or *all the time*. So certainly, not all girls are struggling with this issue. But what if you have one of those who struggles?



Numerous factors influence how girls feel about their bodies, with seven out of ten (70 percent) reporting that their friends have the *highest influence* on their body image, followed by family, fashion and the media.

For the majority of grandmothers, mothers and daughters today, the increasing pressure for thinness has caused an almost universal transfer of poor body image and weight struggles. Now spanning three generations, this is a very serious concern.

I invite you to consider these examples of what we can do for our girls:

- **Model acceptance and appreciation of your own body**, or at least avoid making comments about your own body in front of your child.
- **Affirm your daughter for who she is**, as well as for what she can do and what she looks like. The more secure she is in who she is at home, the less vulnerable she will be in

thinking her self-worth depends on her appearance.

- **Limit the amount and types of media** your daughter watches, uses or reads. Have conversations with her to help her develop a critical awareness of the images and messages we receive from

the media. Be sure your child sees images of a whole range of real people, not just those commonly found in the media.

- **Know your daughter's friends.** They are the strongest influence regarding body image for 70 percent of girls.
- **Share the characteristics** that make up a positive, caring and successful person.
- **Check out what your daughter is thinking and feeling** about many things in her life.

• **Use Scripture to guide your discussions.** See I Samuel 16:7 — *People look at outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart*; Psalm 139:14 — *I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made*; Luke 12:7 — *The very hairs on our heads are numbered* (How you talk about the human uniqueness of each individual, the wonders of the brain and how it develops, the wonders of our bodies, all make an impact. Remember that God is amazing beyond our comprehension, and we are amazing too!); and I Corinthians 12 — parts of the body. This text can be used to consider how everyone has important gifts that contribute to one's church, home, school, family and community.

Susan E. Murray is a professor emerita of behavioral sciences at Andrews University, and she is a certified family life educator and licensed marriage and family therapist.