

10 WAYS

by Michelle Kelley, LCSW

Parents Can Help Girls Preserve Their Self-Esteem

Research shows that girls experience a significant drop in self-esteem around puberty - often during the middle school years. They internalize negative messages they hear from others and the media. Messages about the ideal body type or ideal beauty can leave a girl with fractured self-esteem and an abundance of self-doubt. The damaging effects of chronic low self-esteem can surface at any time in her life, wreaking havoc with her relationships and happiness.

It's never too early to start helping your daughter create counter-balance in her world. This is your job as parents. Your home should be a safe place for her to question and explore her feelings, right? The problem is that many girls stop sharing with their parents around puberty and they engage more with friends - through social media or texting. Oftentimes parents find themselves on the outside looking in and feeling helpless.

Here is my top ten list of ways in which parents can help to preserve their daughter's self-esteem during the often emotionally-turbulent years of middle school and high school.

1. Praise her efforts and accomplishments. Everyone has a unique talent, if not many. Many of us, me included, did not discover this until well into adulthood. Help your daughter discover her talents be they academic, sports, art, music, communication skills, or whatever it may be. We live in a time where being athletic can be seen as the end-all, be-all - leading to a first class seat in the popular group. If your daughter is not athletic, help her find a place/group where she feels accepted. We all need to be a part of something. Early on you can guide her in a positive direction.

2. Talk about self-image. The media and fashion industry thrive on female insecurity. Body shame and eating disorders are at an all-time high. Help your daughter recognize and also reject harmful messages about her body. Encourage her to define beauty for herself. Talk about the temptation to compare and the desire to be popular. Help her realize her value is not in her looks. I believe that there is great value in each person. How do you define value?

3. Discuss social media traps. Teach your child to use social media with care. Remind her that people often brag on social media and they tend to put their lives in the best light. What they are seeing may not reflect reality. Having too many friends (such as on Facebook) can easily lead to social comparison. Great questions to ask her: What do you notice about other people's status updates? How much time do you think you spend on social media and is it balanced with your other activities? How do you want to show up on social media? One of my teen clients recently shared with me that social media causes her so much anxiety, but she can't stop. In other words, she doesn't want to miss out. FOMO is the fear of missing out and it is a real issue for teens. Be especially aware of Ask.fm or Instagram's "rate me" posts. This can be the perfect platform for bullying and dangerous rumors. Yet at the same time they can be so tempting to girls.



4. Give her permission to be herself. A girl needs to feel unconditionally loved and that she is “good enough” as is. I am talking about her physical appearance as well as her emotional world. I realize there may be concerns that you may need to deal with such as a difficult personality or possibly getting braces to help her feel good about her smile. All of us will strive for improvement if we genuinely feel accepted the way we are. If your daughter is having difficulty fitting in with her peers, you may want to seek counseling for further insight and advice.

5. Nurture positive friendships. Your daughter will experience a variety of friendships throughout her school years. Think back to the friendships you had when you were a teen. Some were likely positive and healthy while others were negative and hurtful. Some lasted and some did not. Help your daughter understand the sometimes changing-nature of friendships and to resist the urge to hold on too tightly. Discuss what constitutes a good friend and healthy relationships. Help her distinguish between being treated rudely and misinterpreting a situation. Friendships that cause her pain are not necessarily negative. Many girls tend to see relationships in black and white. Either they are good or bad. The reality is that there are many possible categories for friendships. Ask her to come up with some of her own categories. You can also ask her to reflect on what type of friend she is to others. I often see parents who struggle in this area.

6. Teach her it's okay to say NO. No is a complete sentence. Many girls feel as if they are being mean or rude if they say No to a friend. You can see how this can create problems for them in their social and dating world. A girl who is not comfortable saying No is lacking the ability to hold boundaries with herself and others. There is an epidemic of girls who have the people-pleaser personality type. I did. Standing up for herself and learning when it's okay to say No is a skill you can teach and role model. Have her practice. We all want our daughters to be able to say No to a boy who is

not respecting her boundaries. You might be surprised how many strong, outspoken girls struggle in this area.

7. Challenge the ideal beauty standard. Girls are bombarded with images of the ideal beauty standard. Today it is being thin, having straight hair (straightened with a flat iron), dark eye liner and a flawless complexion. The media today often projects an unrealistic and often dangerous standard of beauty. I hear many girls talk about their dissatisfaction with their physical appearance and their weight. Talk to your daughter about her standard of beauty. We need to widen our definition of beauty so every girl can fit into it.

8. The real scoop on popularity. I have yet to meet a teen who really understands popularity -- or anyone else for that matter. Popularity is difficult to define. It's elusive. It may always seem just out of reach. It's something most girls want at some point and it can cause a lot of emotional pain. Most adults know the reality is that after you graduate, popularity means nothing. Encourage your daughter to explore her thoughts on popularity and challenge some of her negative thinking, such as “I could never be popular.” What if she were popular in a different sort of way? Again, this is not a black and white issue. In the grey is where she will find the answers she is seeking. You can help her.

9. Dealing with mean girls and mean comments. The truth is that all girls have experienced life on both sides. We have all been a bit mean to others, and also have been on the receiving end of it. An open discussion is what I recommend here. One of the best pieces of advice is to always validate your daughter's feelings. Her feelings are real to her

and they can be scary. If she feels she is being picked on, then that is where you start the conversation. If she is experiencing emotional pain from being picked on or bullied, seek counseling to help her learn ways to stand up for herself and overcome the self-doubt she is most likely experiencing.

10. Stay connected - no matter what. Let's face it, in today's world with teens being so connected to technology, it can be challenging to keep our own connection to them. However, most teens really do want to have some quality time with parents and family members. Be creative. Listen to your daughter; don't just talk at her. Spend time with her doing something she enjoys. Research shows that when parents offer an open, supportive environment at home, teenage girls are more likely to reach out in times of trouble.

A daughter is a wonderful gift. Think back to when she was a little girl coming to you about everything. Well, she still is vulnerable and scared at times on the inside. Remember this is a difficult time for her and her hormones are causing her to feel even more emotional. So be patient, take a break, and get support. The end result will be worth it.

Recommended Readings:

- **The Curse of the Good Girl by Rachel Simmons**
- **Odd Girl Out by Rachel Simmons**
- **Think Confident, Be Confident for Teens by Marci Fox and Leslie Sokol**

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