

Raising Healthy and Happy Girls

Rona Renner, RN and Marisol Muñoz-Kiehne, PhD

March is Women's History Month, a time to remember the contributions of famous and not famous women, and a time to reflect on how to raise our girls to be strong, healthy, and happy.

There's a great deal of pressure put on girls these days by teachers, parents, and society. Girls are expected to be good at school, sports, friendships, and fashion. The media portrays girls and women as thin and sexy. These images work to lower a girl's self esteem when the way she sees herself doesn't match up to the expectations of others. Depression, suicide, eating disorders, and other mental health problems have increased over the years. Girls are under stress and our fast-paced media-driven culture is taking a toll on youth of all ages.

Starting early, parents can do a lot to help their daughters feel good about themselves. Children need time to play and explore their nature before they feel they have to fit into a particular mold.

Here are some things parents can do to help their girls develop healthy self-esteem as they travel along their journey to womanhood:

- Pay attention to how you talk about women's looks, clothes, and make-up.
- Read books about women who have contributed to society because of their intelligence, compassion, or work ethic.
- Don't expect your girl to be "happy" all of the time. Accept her when she's sad, angry, or afraid. Encourage her to express her feelings and speak her mind.
- Ask your daughter to help out when you work on tasks such as fixing the fence or the car. Dads can have a great influence on a girl's confidence. Help her see that your love is not based on what she accomplishes or how she looks.
- Watch TV with your daughter and talk about how girls are portrayed. Encourage her to write about her own experience.
- Have her friends to the house for play dates or dinners. See how they treat each other and keep an ear open for signs of peer pressure or an overemphasis on body size or diets.
- Provide opportunities for your daughter to participate in serving the community. Help her discover things she would like to do like volunteering at a childcare center, cooking for a homeless shelter, or working on a community garden.
- Spend time with your daughter doing things that you both enjoy. Hike, play ball, or play board games. Have fun together without pressure.
- Remind your daughter in words and actions that you love her just the way she is.

Parents want girls to grow up liking themselves and finding meaning in their lives. You can help them develop confidence and competence by listening to their concerns and dreams, and by staying connected.