From the Green Couch

The Green Couch
STUDENT WELLNESS CENTRE

Beauty Beyond Mirrors: Empowering Girls from the Inside Out

An awareness of oneself or one's body has been an integral part of humanity across the centuries. Yet, its prominence has never been as pronounced as in the society we live in today. Whether consciously or subconsciously, our minds are inundated with images of what society deems perfection. As adults, we have the ability to distinguish between this unattainable ideal and a healthy body image, challenging as that may be. However, our children lack the capacity to make that distinction yet. In this regard, our role as parents becomes pivotal in guiding our girls to navigate society's view of perfection and to celebrate what we recognise as beautiful and unique.

Body image is a complex and evolving aspect of a girl's development, influencing her self-esteem and overall well-being. Understanding and fostering a positive body image is crucial to helping your daughter navigate societal pressures and grow into the confident individual she is destined to be. Body image is multifaceted, and discussions on this topic can become extensive, so for the purposes of this newsletter, I wish to highlight four key components: (1) Perceptual, which centres on how your daughter sees herself physically; (2) Affective, which encompasses the feelings she has about her appearance; (3) Cognitive, which refers to the thoughts or beliefs she holds about her body; and (4) Behavioural, which involves the actions she takes in relation to her appearance, such as dieting or exercise.

Perceptual refers to the way a girl interprets and visualises her own physical appearance, essentially her mental picture of her body. This component is foundational because it shapes the starting point of her body image. It's not just about what she sees in the mirror but how her brain processes and constructs that image, often influenced by external factors such as media, peers, and family comments.

For example, a girl might focus on specific features - like her weight, height, or skin tone and perceive them as "flawed" even if they are perfectly normal or healthy. This perception can be distorted by societal standards, such as idealised images of beauty that emphasise thinness or specific body proportions. A skewed perception might lead her to see herself as "too big" or "not pretty enough," even when others view her differently. Encouraging a realistic and positive perception involves creating an environment where she's exposed to diverse representations of beauty and receives affirmations that focus on her strengths beyond appearance.

The **affective component** of body image encompasses the emotions and feelings a girl associates with her physical appearance. This is about how she feels when she thinks about or looks at her body - whether it's pride, satisfaction, shame, or discomfort. For instance, a girl might feel confident when she wears a favourite outfit but anxious or self-conscious if she perceives her body as not meeting the standards she believes should be met. These emotions are heavily influenced by external feedback, such as compliments, criticism, or comparisons with others, as well as internal factors like her self-worth. Negative affective responses, such as feeling embarrassed or dissatisfied with her appearance, can lead to emotional distress and reduced self-confidence. Conversely, positive feelings, such as feeling strong or comfortable in her own skin, can enhance her overall well-being. Supporting a healthy affective component involves helping her process and express her emotions, teaching her to challenge negative feelings, and reinforcing that her value isn't tied to her appearance but to her character, talents, and actions.

Celebrate what is unique.

The **cognitive component** involves the thoughts, beliefs, and judgements a girl holds about her body. This includes conscious ideas such as "I need to lose weight to be attractive" or "My legs are too short." These beliefs often stem from internalised societal standards, media portrayals, or comments from others, and they can become deeply ingrained over time. For example, a girl might believe that only a certain body type is beautiful, leading her to view her own body negatively if it doesn't match that ideal. These thoughts can be persistent and self-critical, contributing to a cycle of dissatisfaction. Addressing this component requires helping her identify and challenge harmful beliefs, replacing them with healthier, more realistic ones. Encouraging critical thinking about media messages and promoting self-acceptance can help reshape her cognitive framework, fostering beliefs that prioritise health, functionality, and individuality over unattainable ideals.

The **behavioural component** refers to the actions a girl takes based on her body image, such as dieting, exercising, grooming habits, or avoiding certain activities due to self-consciousness. These behaviours are often a direct response to her perception, feelings, and thoughts about her appearance. For example, if she feels dissatisfied with her weight (affective) and believes she must be slimmer to be accepted (cognitive), she might engage in restrictive dieting or excessive exercise (behavioural). While some behaviours, such as regular exercise, can be healthy, others, like extreme dieting or avoiding social events due to insecurity, can be harmful to her physical and mental health. Negative behaviours can also include compulsive habits, such as constantly checking her appearance in mirrors or seeking reassurance about her looks. Supporting healthy behavioural responses involves guiding her towards balanced, self-care-oriented actions, such as eating nutritious foods and staying active for health rather than appearance, while also discouraging harmful practices. Creating a supportive environment where she feels safe to express herself without judgement can reduce the pressure to engage in extreme behaviours.

These four components are deeply interconnected, each influencing and reinforcing the others. A distorted perception can trigger negative emotions, which fuel critical thoughts, leading to unhealthy behaviours. Conversely, fostering a positive perception can promote confident feelings, constructive thoughts, and healthy actions.

Understanding these components is crucial for supporting a young girl's body image. Any strategy to promote a healthy body image should be realistic and sustainable. Instead, focus on fostering balanced lifestyles and open communication.

Food is fuel. Movement is fun.

In the following sections, I briefly outline age-specific approaches to support girls aged 5–18 in developing a positive body image.

Ages 5–8: Building a Foundation
At this stage, girls are beginning to notice their bodies and compare themselves to others, often in playful or innocent ways.

Parents can lay a strong foundation for positive body image by emphasising that bodies are unique and capable of amazing things.

- Encourage body appreciation: Highlight what their bodies can do, like running, dancing, or hugging, rather than focusing on appearance. For example, say, "Your strong legs help you jump so high!"
- Model positive behaviour: Avoid negative self-talk about your own body, as young children are highly observant. Instead, demonstrate self-acceptance by saying things like, "I'm grateful for my body because it lets me play with you."
- Keep conversations simple: If your daughter comments on her appearance or others', gently redirect to non-appearance-based qualities, like kindness or creativity.
- Promote healthy habits: Frame food as fuel and movement as fun. Avoid labelling foods as "good" or "bad" to prevent early associations with guilt or restriction.
- By fostering a sense of body gratitude and avoiding judgement, you help your daughter build a positive relationship with her body from an early age.

Ages 9–13: Navigating Preteen Changes
The preteen years bring physical changes due to puberty, which can spark self-consciousness and comparisons. Girls may become more aware of societal beauty standards, making this a critical time to reinforce self-worth beyond appearance.

- Validate feelings: Acknowledge that physical changes can feel overwhelming. Phrases like, "It's normal to feel unsure about your body changing; let's talk about how you're feeling," can open supportive discussions.
- Educate about diversity: Discuss how bodies come in all shapes, sizes, and abilities, and that media often portrays unrealistic ideals. Use books or programmes with diverse characters to spark these conversations.
- Guide healthy choices: Encourage balanced eating and physical activity as ways to feel strong and energised, not to change appearance. If your daughter expresses interest in dieting, discuss why restrictive behaviours can be harmful and focus on nourishing her body.
- Monitor media exposure: Help her question images in magazines or on television by asking, "Do you think this reflects real people?" This builds critical thinking about beauty standards.

By addressing her concerns with empathy and equipping her with tools to challenge unrealistic ideals, you can help her navigate this transitional phase with confidence.

Ages 13–18: Empowering Teens in a Digital World

Teenage years are marked by heightened self-awareness and exposure to societal pressures, amplified by social media.

Girls may grapple with idealised images online, impacting their perception, feelings, and thoughts about their bodies.

Supporting them involves empowering critical thinking and resilience.

- Discuss social media's impact: Explain that social media often showcases curated, filtered images that don't reflect reality. Encourage her to follow accounts that promote body positivity and diversity, and discuss how "likes" don't define worth. For example, ask, "How do you feel after scrolling through certain accounts?"
- Foster media literacy: Teach her to question edited images or influencer content by pointing out common tactics like filters or posing. Resources like body-positive campaigns can help her see authentic representations.
- Support emotional health: Teens may tie body image to self-esteem. Encourage open communication by asking, "What's been on your mind about how you feel in your body?" Validate her emotions and, if needed, suggest professional support like counselling.
- Encourage balanced behaviours: If she's focused on changing her appearance, guide her towards sustainable habits, like eating a variety of foods and finding enjoyable physical activities. Warn against extreme diets, as they can harm physical and mental health.
- Reinforce inner qualities: Highlight her strengths, like intelligence, compassion, or creativity, to shift focus from appearance. Celebrate achievements unrelated to looks, such as academic or personal goals.

Social media can be a double-edged sword, offering both inspiration and comparison traps. By guiding your teen to curate a positive online environment and prioritise self-acceptance, you empower her to define her worth on her own terms. It is important to note, however, that social media exposure is linked to increased risk of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders in teens, not just negative body-image.

Fostering a positive body image in girls is a vital step towards nurturing their confidence, resilience, and self-worth. By understanding the interconnected components of perception, affective, cognitive, and behavioural aspects, parents and caregivers can guide girls to see beyond society's narrow definitions of beauty. Through open communication, positive role-modelling, and age-appropriate strategies, we can empower our daughters to embrace their unique qualities and value themselves for who they are, not how they look. Let us commit to creating environments where girls feel celebrated for their strengths, supported in their challenges, and free to define beauty on their own terms. Together, we can help them grow into confident, self-assured individuals who shine from the inside out.

Mandi Grobbelaar
Educational Psychologist

You are altogether beautiful, my darling; there is no flaw in you.

– SONG OF SOLOMON 4:7

Teach your children to eat well, move often, and love themselves fiercely.

- Unknown

10 INTERNET SAFETY TIPS FOR PARENTS

1 Don't block all access to technology. Help your child learn to use tech **safely and positively.**

2 Take an **interest in** your child's favourite apps or sites. Co-view or co-create at times.

3 Be the parent. You're in charge. Set **boundaries** and consider using filtering software.

4 Create a family media agreement with tech-free zones such as cars, bedrooms, and meals.

5 Teach your child what **personal information** they should not reveal online (YAPPY acronym)

6 Help your child learn to **filter** information online and navigate fact from fiction

7 Navigate digital dilemmas with your child. Avoid using devices as rewards or punishments.

8 **Balance** green time and screen time at home. Focus on basic developmental needs

9 Don't support your child to sign up for sites with **age restrictions** (e.g. 13+) if they're underage.

10 Learn more: Explore reliable resources for parents so you can educate yourself.

PERCEPTION EMOTION THOUGHT ACTION

Don't share your YAPPY online...

Your full name
Address (home/school/email)
Phone number
Passwords
Your plans and birthday

RAISING DIGITAL NINJAS
• NOT SCREEN ADDDICTS! •

Confidence grows from within.

Wellness Talks Across the School
Term 2 Highlights

This term, learners across the school engaged in focused wellness and psycho-educational talks designed to foster emotional growth, strengthen social skills, and support age-appropriate development. Each session was aligned with the social-emotional themes relevant to their developmental stage.

Here's a brief summary of the talks presented:

Foundation Phase

Grade R – **Good and Bad Touches**, Personal Boundaries, and Safe vs Unsafe Interactions
Grade 1 – **How to Be a Friend**: Exploring different types of friendships and creating a class pledge for kindness
Grade 2 – **The Not-So-Friendly Friend**: How to speak up for yourself and set boundaries
Grade 3 – **Bullying and Bystanding**: Learners explored how to move from being a silent bystander to a "hero" who chooses kindness and takes small, brave actions to support others and stop unkind behaviour.

Intermediate Phase

Grade 4 – **Bullying and Words that Ripple**: 15-second rule, school rules, and the ripple effect of our words
Grade 5 – **Peer Pressure and Friendships**: Recognising influence vs identity and using a friendship check-in
Grade 6 – **Resilience and Peer Pressure**: Using the bouncy ball metaphor to build internal strength.

High School

Grade 7
- **Who Do I Want to Be in High School?**: Navigating change, choosing kindness, and embracing individuality
- **Kindness Causes Confusion:** A reflective session on the power of words, teaching learners to choose genuine kindness, respect others, and set healthy boundaries.

Grade 8
- **It's Okay to Be Me**: A session focused on self-acceptance, healthy friendships, and the lasting impact of bullying. Learners reflected on how they want to be remembered and the value of staying true to themselves.
- **Study Skills Workshop**
- **Kindness Causes Confusion**: A reflective session on the power of words, teaching learners to choose genuine kindness, respect others, and set healthy boundaries.

Grade 9
- **Where's My Compass?**: Self-image, subject choice, navigating transitions, and finding your true north.

Grade 10
- **Study Skills Workshop**
- **Communication 101**: Conflict resolution, respectful conversations, and responsible expression.

Staff Wellness and Development

A focused talk was also presented to Foundation and Intermediate Phase School teachers on Reducing Anxiety in the Classroom. This session provided practical tools to support learners' emotional regulation and offered strategies to create calmer, more connected learning spaces.

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In a world telling her who she should be, remind her who she already is — loved, enough, and worthy.