

Teen Marketing And Body Image

You see them everywhere--magazines featuring emaciated teen models with brash, defiant looks that say "We express ourselves," their arms and ankles glistening with fashion accessories. The definition of "cool chick" in another magazine is a glossy-lipped, half-woman, half-child peeking ambivalently behind a set of heavily mascaraed eyes. "I am confection," she seems to say, her body eloquently displaying a padded push up bra. Such teen marketing tactics have succeeded in making their point. Girls, as young as ten, have made the word "diet" part of their vocabulary and the La Senza part of their identity.

Body image and weight control have occupied mainstream culture since the beginning of the 20th Century when film and media images created prototypes of ideal male and female bodies--men with swashbuckling muscles and women with slender waists and boyish hips. The effect of teen marketing and media images on our teenage population cannot be overstated. It is not surprising then that teenagers of both genders have distorted body images that often lead to unhealthy behaviors.

One study of adolescent girls shows that 53% of American girls are unhappy with their bodies. This figure grows to 78% by the time the girls reach seventeen--a situation which accounts for the 5--10 million girls and women who are struggling with eating disorders.

In another study of over 10,000 teenagers, researchers noted that a large proportion of boys are unhealthily preoccupied with body building. Boys are preoccupied with defining muscles through weight gain, a goal that often leads to harmful use of supplements such as creatine, amino acids, growth hormone and steroids. This is not surprising considering the teen marketing of brawns and tight abs on Much Music videos which are broadcast on weekdays between 4:30--8pm when most teens and children are home from school.

What is even more disturbing is the number of cosmetic procedures that have been performed on teens. According to a report by Diane Zukerman published in MediaFamily, in 2003, more than 223,000 cosmetic procedures were performed on patients 18 years of age or younger and 39,000 of those were surgical procedures that were incidental in nature--nose-shaping, breast lifts, breast augmentation, liposuction and tummy tuck. The author who reported on these procedures stated emphatically that media programs are responsible for distorted teen body image. Programs such as "extreme makeovers" have given our teenagers an unrealistic view of what constitutes "normal appearance."

Ironically, however, children's eating habits have run amok, even in the midst of a cultural obsession with thinness. According to one study, the average child watches 10,000 food advertisements per year on television, most of which are commercials for fast food and junk food. Recent statistics indicate that 14% of children are now seriously overweight and 60% of overweight children between ages 5 and 10 have shown at least one risk factor for heart disease.

Given the mixed messages and signals North American teens are getting about their bodies and food, what can we, as parents and professionals, do to help rectify the situation?

First and foremost, we need to challenge the teen marketing goal of thinness and foster a concept of fitness that goes beyond the parameters of weight. A fitness regimen that includes a wide variety of enjoyable activities such as dancing, yoga, pilates, swimming, walking would put the "fun" back into activity rather than isolating exercise as a workout to be endured for the "perfect body."

Secondly, we need to challenge the whole concept of weight loss and weight gain. The real issue here is not weight, as Los Angeles psychologist, Keith Valone suggests, but body composition. By taking the focus away from body weight to body composition, we can perhaps promote a better understanding of what a healthy and fit body means.

Thirdly, we need to provide role models for our teens that go beyond body consciousness. We need to provide them with media images of strong, empowered men and women who eat well, exercise regularly and who are more concerned with living their truth than following the narrow market conceptions of beauty. It is encouraging to note as well that many publishers have already taken the initiative to profile heavier models in their magazines.

Fourthly, we need to lobby for more responsible and ethical teen marketing. It is not surprising that pedophiles and child molesters have become such a significant problem online considering the fact that teen marketing of "sexiness" to children and teens seems to be an accepted business strategy in our culture.

Source: <http://www.articlecircle.com>

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