TEN WAYS PARENTS CAN HELP GIRLS BUILD SELF-EsteEM

By Dr. Carla Stokes

In my work as a health educator, youth empowerment speaker, and life coach, I have helped countless women and girls cultivate self-love, practice compassion, and develop healthy self-esteem. I also teach parents and girl-serving professionals how to help girls thrive and buffer the effects of harmful media, peer, and societal influences. It is crucial for parents to help girls build self-esteem because low-self esteem during childhood and adolescence can have a negative impact on girls’ health, well-being, and future achievement. The following tips are designed to help parents, caretakers, and concerned adults teach girls that their value and worth is not dependent on their appearance or what others think about them.

1. **Start with yourself.** Parents/guardians play a critical role in their children’s self-esteem and body image. Research has shown that girls are influenced by their mother’s self-image and body image. In addition, fathers can protect girls’ self-esteem by valuing and respecting women, addressing their own issues, and teaching their daughters to see themselves in a positive way. Keep reading to learn more about how you can boost your own self-esteem and confidence...

2. **Talk to your daughter.** Girls want open, honest, and compassionate communication with their parents. Make an active effort to listen to your daughter and strive to be objective and nonjudgmental.

3. **Teach your daughter to know and understand her body.** Give her accurate information about her body to empower her to make healthy choices.

4. **Challenge harmful attitudes** your daughter may have internalized about her appearance and encourage her to practice self-compassion and adopt a broad definition of beauty.

5. **Affirm your daughter’s uniqueness.** Girls with high self-esteem are more likely to feel loved and accepted by their parents. Look for opportunities to teach your children that they are worthy of love and acceptance no matter what they look like. Encourage your daughter to see the good in herself instead of focusing on her perceived flaws.
6. **Model positive self-esteem.** Your daughter looks up to you as her role model. You can show her how to have a healthy relationship with herself by monitoring your words and actions and making an effort to make positive comments about yourself on a regular basis.

7. **Show sensitivity and avoid making comments about your daughter** that may be hurtful to her. Parents have a powerful influence on how children feel about themselves. Girls with low self-esteem are more likely to have parents who are critical or judgmental. Thus, your words and actions affect your daughter’s developing body image, confidence, and self-esteem for better or worse. If you tease her or make negative comments about her appearance, you will teach her to feel shame about her body, which will ultimately damage her self-esteem.

8. **Intervene when siblings, other adults, or relatives tease her, criticize your daughter’s appearance, or use damaging language.** Parents can lift their daughters up by nurturing their self-esteem and supporting them when others hurt them.

9. **Monitor the media that your daughter is exposed to.** If you see something that is demeaning towards women or girls, talk to her about it and seek out positive alternatives that feature characters that she can identify with in a healthy way.

10. **Emphasize the importance of inner beauty.** You can do this by supporting your daughter’s interests, talents, strengths, and hobbies and praising her inner qualities that make her different and special. Children who hear positive comments about themselves from their parents on a regular basis are more likely to internalize positive beliefs about themselves.

I hope these tips inspire you to start a dialogue with the girls in your life about self-acceptance, self-love, self-compassion, and body image. Even if you only incorporate one tip at a time into your daily habits, you will have a positive influence on your daughter’s feelings about herself. For more tips or to find out how I can help your daughter thrive during adolescence, please visit my website [http://www.drcarla.com](http://www.drcarla.com). I would love to connect with you!
As a health educator, researcher, professional speaker, life coach, and founder of Helping Our Teen Girls In Real Life Situations, Inc. (HOTGIRLS)*, I have spent more than 20 years listening to the concerns of thousands of women and girls. A common issue I see that connects women and girls of all ages and backgrounds is our shared struggle to confidently embrace our flaws and love our bodies. I will never forget a high school girl who approached me in tears after a speaking engagement because she was unhappy about her appearance and felt enormous pressure to measure up to thinner and “prettier” girls who fit “ideal” beauty standards. Unfortunately, there are countless women and girls who feel the same way.

I can personally relate to the pain and insecurities that many women and girls feel about their bodies because I have also struggled to accept my body and felt pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty ideals – especially when I was growing up. When I travel around the United States speaking at schools, organizations and conferences, girls often ask me how I have the confidence to speak in front of large audiences. I assure them that I did not always feel confident – in fact, I felt self-conscious throughout my preteen years and often felt uncomfortable walking across the cafeteria without a friend by my side, because I was afraid of what others were thinking or saying about me. It wasn’t until I was a teenager that I grew to appreciate my natural beauty. And I was a young adult when I finally learned to reject the cultural programming that teaches women and girls that our worth is tied to our physical appearance. Can you relate?

One reason it is so important to develop a healthy relationship with our bodies is because what we say and think about our bodies affects our health and reflects how we feel about who we are. Here are seven tips to help boost your body image and confidence. If you already have a positive body image, share these tips with a friend who could benefit from a confidence boost.
1. **Educate yourself about your body.** Understand all of its parts and functions--especially parts unique to the female body--and be familiar with what is normal and healthy for you. You can begin by reading books or articles about women’s health issues.

2. **Take care of your body.** Eat healthy foods and engage in fun physical activities regularly to build a healthy and strong body.

3. **Look for the beauty in yourself and others.** Give meaningful compliments to yourself and other women. Learn how to graciously accept a compliment, and resist the urge to point out your perceived flaws.

4. **Become a critical media consumer.** Do you feel bad about yourself after reading popular magazines or watching TV? Pay attention to how the media is affecting your relationship with your body, and make a conscious effort to tune out societal and media messages that damage your self-worth and body image. Support programming that honors and uplifts women and girls, and/or create your own positive media. Visit [http://www.sparksummit.com](http://www.sparksummit.com) and the partner organizations for creative ideas.

5. **Identify and surround yourself with positive friends and role models.** Spend time with people who uplift you and who feel comfortable in their own skin.

6. **Be a positive-body-image role model.** Encourage your friends and the girls in your life to love themselves and appreciate their bodies at an early age – and stand up for them when others criticize their appearance.

7. **Create your own definition of beauty and make peace with your body.** Avoid comparing your body to others, and remind yourself that your body is special, unique, and powerful. Choose your words carefully, and transform negative self-talk into positive body affirmations. One way you can learn to appreciate your body is by making a list of features and qualities that you like about your body and expressing gratitude for all the amazing ways your body nurtures and supports you daily. For example, instead of complaining about your “jiggly thighs,” be grateful that your legs helped you get to school or work today. Finally, instead of buying into the media’s limited definition of beauty, create your own definition and write it below:

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![Image of a piece of paper with handwritten notes about defining beauty.]

**Write Your Definition Here:**

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ABOUT DR. CARLA

Dr. Carla Stokes, Ph.D., M.P.H. is an internationally recognized adolescent health and behavior expert, professional youth empowerment speaker, life coach, and success mentor. She specializes in helping young women, girls, and parents thrive through the pressures and transitions of adolescence. Over the past two decades, Dr. Carla has educated, mentored and coached thousands of youth and is the founder of Helping Our Teen Girls In Real Life Situations, Inc. (HOTGIRLS)®, an award-winning 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering underserved young women and girls. Her expertise, activism, and research on the influence of hip hop, popular culture, and social media on adolescent girls’ health, identity and body image have been featured in *The New York Times*, NBC, CBS, Fox, Reuters, *Daughters*, and many other national media outlets.

Dr. Carla graduated from Spelman College with a Bachelor of Arts degree and departmental honors in Psychology. She earned Doctor of Philosophy and Master of Public Health degrees from the University of Michigan and completed a post-doctoral research fellowship at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

To invite Dr. Carla to speak at your school or organization or download free resources for women, girls, parents, girl-serving professionals, and concerned adults, visit her website (http://www.drcarla.com) and be sure to stay connected by following her on Facebook (http://facebook.com/drcarla) and Twitter (http://twitter.com/drcarla).

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