

The Beauty Ideal:

Unveiling Harmful Effects of Media Exposure to Children

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Through a child's eyes, anything is possible and everything is real. Children have a fascinating tendency to believe in the unbelievable and dream of the unthinkable. This unique quality enables children to strive for imaginative ambitions despite skepticism from practicality-preoccupied adults. Unfortunately, it also makes children the most vulnerable target of danger from seemingly harmless sources.

Driving the public's conception of beauty by sending powerful messages about physical perfection everywhere we turn, the media is considered the most influential education medium in existence today. It is manipulative and misleading in nature, and it continues to perpetuate harmful implications about ideal beauty despite solid evidence of damaging effects to people of all ages. To maximize profits, the multi-billion dollar media industry deliberately targets messages of physical perfection to children and young adults during the most impressionable stages of their lives.

Television, movies, billboards, music, and magazines are only a few of the mediums through which the media conveys messages to children. A child between the ages of 3 and 12 spends an average of 21 hours per week watching television, and by the time a child has graduated from high school, he or she has spent more time watching television than in the classroom. (5) In fact, shocking statistics reveal that, on average, a child or adolescent spends between six and seven hours per day viewing the various media combined. (11) Study after study has proven that repeated exposure to ideal beauty as portrayed by the media causes detrimental psychological effects in children and adolescents ranging from distorted body images and lowered self esteem to eating disorders and steroid use. While both males and females are affected by media exposure, females, who generally experience greater preoccupation and

dissatisfaction with their physical appearances, tend to internalize messages from the media more often and are therefore more commonly targeted.

Flip through any teen fashion magazine and you will find countless advertisements and articles glorifying the importance of perfecting one's body to achieve an ideal physical form. The powerful words in magazines are usually accompanied by pictures of thin, beautiful models and celebrities. Magazines are not the only media vehicle through which young girls are targeted. Other culprits that define ideal beauty in Western culture include television commercials, music videos, and retail stores. All of these are impacted heavily by the advertising industry, often deemed the largest communicator of messages that affect body image. The average consumer is exposed to 1,500 advertisements each day, and an average young woman will have received over 250,000 commercial messages through the media by the time she is 17. (5, 3) Not only are advertisements grossly targeted at young women, but they manipulate feminine insecurities about physical appearance to make products more attractive and ultimately boost sales. Studies found that over 50% of advertisements in teen girl magazines and 56% of television commercials aimed at female viewers used beauty as a product appeal. (3) Such advertisements first erode a young woman's self esteem, then offer to sell it back to her one product at a time.

Though women of all ages are affected by images in the media, a meta-analysis of 25 studies involving female subjects revealed that children and adolescents are affected most heavily. In the study, researchers examined the effect of exposure to media images displaying the slender body ideal. The individual body images of each of the subjects was significantly more negative after viewing thin media images than after viewing images of either average-size models, plus-size models, or inanimate objects. These negative shifts in body image were most substantial in women younger than 19 years of age, suggesting females in this age group have

more difficulty coping with damaging messages from the media than do mature women. The cause of the extreme difficulty experienced by young women and children in overcoming messages from the media is their impressionable nature and longing to fit in and be accepted by their peers at all costs. (11) Constantly featuring ideal bodies like those used in the study, the media industry preys upon insecure adolescent girls by influencing them to become self-conscious about their bodies and to obsess over their physical appearance as a measure of their individual worth.

With images of ideal bodies and messages about physical perfection lurking everywhere we turn, it's not hard to figure out why just about every young girl in the Western world obsesses over her physical appearance or fantasizes about becoming a successful model or celebrity someday. Unfortunately, very few meet the demanding physical requirements to achieve this dream. Actresses and models compose only 5% of the female population, and they weigh 23% less than the average female. According to research cited by the National Eating Disorders Association, the average American woman stands five-feet four-inches tall and weighs 140 pounds, while the average American model stands 5-feet 11-inches tall and weighs only 117 pounds. In fact, by medical standards, most models are anorexic. (6) Even the mannequins that model clothing in store windows and displays set unrealistic standards. At roughly six feet tall, most mannequins are a size six with measurements of 34-23-34. The average American woman, on the other hand, is a size twelve with a 37-inch bust, a 29-inch waist, and 40-inch hips. (13) Clearly, young females are constantly exposed to images of unrealistically and often unhealthily thin figures. What most girls do not realize, however, is that the majority of the images they see in advertisements and on magazine covers are mere fabrications that have been altered to deceive the public eye.

In a presentation at the University of Maine called *The American Beauty Myth*, former actress and model Camille Cooper revealed how the media employs image retouching, lighting techniques, and camera filters to distort the images that we see. A Los Angeles-based retouching lab even admitted, “we retouch every photograph of any girl over the age of fourteen.” (5) If models and celebrities aren’t really as thin and flawless as the images we see of them, how can anyone possibly fulfill the beauty ideal that they represent? In her book *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf criticizes the media for the flawless and unrealistic illusions created by makeup artists and photographers, arguing that such unobtainable perfection invites young women to compare their unimproved reality to physical ideals that do not really exist. (14) According to one study, 69% of girls claimed that magazine models influence their concept of the perfect body shape. (3) The pervasive acceptance of this unrealistic body type creates an impractical standard that is damaging to the body images of most.

Body dissatisfaction from exposure to the media’s beauty ideal results in unhealthy weight-control habits in young women worldwide. A cross-sectional survey of 548 females from grades 5 through 12 proved a strong correlation between media exposure and dieting in young girls. After controlling for weight status, school level, and racial group, the survey found that those who frequently read fashion magazines were twice as likely to have dieted and three times as likely to have initiated an exercise program to lose weight than infrequent readers. (11) Even more startling is the increasing number of girls who feel pressured to restrict their diet regimes at dangerously young ages when their bodies are still developing. While 42% of first- through third-grade girls wish to be thinner, a staggering 80% of girls have dieted by the time they reach the age of ten. (6,3)

Not only are young girls motivated to diet by the physical ideals they observe every day in the media, but they are also motivated by their desire to emulate the influential women in their

lives for whom dieting is a way of life. According to the National Eating Disorder Association, 80% of women are dissatisfied with their appearance, and at any one time, at least 50% of American women are currently dieting. (6,3) As evidenced by the fact that the diet industry is a \$33 billion a year industry with a 98% failure rate, dieting to meet standards set by the media is a perpetually vicious cycle that leads to little more than frustration and disappointment. (5)

Dieting is certainly not the only issue that results from exposure to the media's beauty ideal. Research suggests that stringent dieting to achieve an ideal figure often plays a key role in triggering eating disorders, which affect 5 to 10 million American girls and women. (10) Early signs of bulimia and anorexia nervosa are appearing in girls of surprisingly young ages.

According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, as many as 10 out of 100 young women suffer from an eating disorder. (1) Approximately 5% of adolescent girls meet the criteria for bulimia nervosa, an eating disorder characterized by regular binge eating followed by self-induced vomiting, water pills, laxatives, fasting, or extreme exercising. (11) The occurrence of eating disorders among college women is even more startling. One in five college women struggles with an eating disorder, and one in three displays borderline eating disorder behavior. (6) The prevalence of eating disorders in America poses a serious problem involving long-term and sometimes irreversible health effects for many. Consequences of disordered eating behavior include hair loss, a weakened heart, early-onset osteoporosis, stomach and intestinal problems, destruction of the teeth and throat, and infertility. (4) In severe cases, eating disorders lead to death.

Cosmetic surgery is yet another extreme measure that young women take in a desperate attempt to achieve the unrealistic beauty ideal that is portrayed by the media. The five years between 1997 and 2002 experienced a 228% increase in the number of cosmetic procedures performed. (7) More and more girls as young as fourteen are going under the knife to perfect

their noses or augment their breasts. According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 3.5% of all cosmetic procedures in 2001 were performed on people aged 18 or younger, the large majority of which were females. (2) Clearly, some young women are willing to go to dangerous extremes to achieve the unrealistic beauty ideal that is driven by the media.

Although distorted body image has widely been known to affect women and girls, females are definitely not the only ones influenced by the media's portrayal of physical perfection. More and more males are becoming insecure about their physical appearance as advertising and other media images idealize muscular men. In a magazine targeted at teen boys, one will likely find articles about eliminating flab and building muscle accompanied by pictures of tall, sculpted men with chiseled features and very little body fat. Like pictures of females in magazines and on billboards, the majority of these images are fabrications that have been retouched or altered using lighting techniques and camera filters. Also, many male models and celebrities use steroids and seek cosmetic surgery to perfect their bodies. Even GI Joe toy action figures have transformed in shape over the years to conform to physical ideals as dictated by the media. Thirty years ago, Joe resembled an average man, but today, with 26-inch biceps, a rounded chest, and "8-pack" abs, Joe is far from average (8).

With such an apparent emphasis on maintaining a strong, well-defined physique, it's no surprise that a growing number of young boys experience insecurity about their bodies and feel inclined to build muscle to promote their masculine image. Researchers have observed in young men an alarming increase in obsessive weight training and the use of anabolic steroids and dietary supplements that promise larger muscles or greater stamina for weight lifting. Though steroid use helps young men to more closely resemble the muscular physiques that the media glorifies, it comes with dangerous side effects. Steroids can cause irreversible changes including soaring cholesterol levels, increased hair loss, stunted growth in adolescents, and infertility. (4)

Sadly for many, the importance of short-term physical perfection outweighs that of maintaining long-term health.

Severe body insecurity from exposure to the media's portrayal of physical perfection drives some young men to restrict their dietary behaviors to dangerous levels. Though only 10% of reported teenagers with eating disorders are male, experts believe that the number of boys affected is increasing and that many cases are not reported due to male reluctance to acknowledge an illness that is primarily associated with females. (3) Evidently, young women are not the only ones pressured to mold themselves to fit the media's grossly unrealistic conception of ideal beauty.

The media's portrayal of ideal beauty poses many ethical issues. The main issue at stake is whether it is justifiable for the media industry to capitalize profits by intentionally deceiving the public and targeting harmful messages to children and young adults. Many proponents of the media industry argue that as a profit-seeking industry, the sole purpose of the media is to maximize profits, and it has absolutely no social obligations beyond making a profit. Whether right or wrong, ideal beauty and sex appeal sell, and some claim that the media has little choice but to exploit a certain image in order to survive in a competitive market. Other proponents insist that regulation of the media's ability to alter images would directly violate their freedom of expression. Both of these arguments are lacking adequate justification of the media's additional profit gain at the cost of our children's health and safety. While the media is entitled to some degree of freedom of expression, it is unavoidably involved in social matters and therefore must balance its rights and responsibilities. Ultimately, its profit-seeking nature does not excuse the media industry from its civil duty to promote the wellbeing of the public and evaluate the repercussions of its actions.

The question that we face now is how to cope with the media's damaging portrayal of ideal beauty to protect the health and safety of our children. The most obvious answer is to limit media exposure to children. While this solution is the perfect cure-all in theory, it is relatively unrealistic in practice because messages from the media lurk everywhere we turn. Instead of avoiding the problem entirely, a technique not only ineffective for most but also neglectful of the children of the future who will likely face an even more pervasive media, we need to take action now to promote positive change. The first step in doing this is to increase overall awareness of the media's damaging effects on children. To do so, children must be educated about the fabricated images the media produces and encouraged to question what they see. By being forced to consider that beauty is a subjective and learned perception, children may learn to define themselves by their abilities and their unique character instead of how they compare to the media's beauty ideal.

Many are already taking the initiative to educate the public about the problem that we face with the media. For example, Camille Cooper, who worked professionally in film and television for fourteen years, travels across the nation delivering lectures to inform people of deceptive practices in the media industry and how this influences the body image of people worldwide. (5) Stacey Kole, author of *Satisfying the Starving Soul*, also travels throughout the country to share the tragic account of her struggle with anorexia nervosa. (9) Though it is impossible for either of these women to reach out to every child and young adult in the nation, they make a big difference in the lives of some, which is a good place start. By promoting increased awareness of the effects of media exposure to children, we can facilitate open discussion about what beauty ideals and body image represent to different individuals. This is precisely the goal of a recent exhibition at the Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford. The exhibition, entitled "The Ideal Figure," features art and media to question the way that most

Americans define physical beauty. “The Ideal Figure” exhibition is particularly unique because it challenges its attendants to consider and respond to the visual and intellectual experience of the exhibit; Post-it Notes are provided for viewers to comment on what they see and feel. (12)

Informative programs and exhibitions like this encourage people to question why the body types glorified by the media have set the standard for the beauty ideal.

Beyond providing educational resources that the youth must seek for itself, some argue that the influential people in our children’s lives need to take a more active role in understanding the challenges children face in overcoming the temptation to mold their bodies to the media’s rigid standards. Health care providers, parents, teachers, school officials, and other professionals should be aware of the content of the messages that young people are exposed to and the media-associated health risks of such exposure so that they can offer sources of help. There are a number of different interventions that can reduce health risks to children before their long-term effects set in. Media education programs, which combine media activism and media literacy, have proven to be particularly effective in Canada, where they are included in the curricula at many schools. (11) Media literacy training not only helps young adults to evaluate messages from the media more critically, but it educates and empowers parents to evaluate media content and act as powerful advocates for the promotion of healthy behaviors by their children. Health communication campaigns also increase general awareness of the importance of maintaining a healthy body. By educating the public about the magnitude of the problem we face with the media, more people will challenge the public conception of ideal beauty that is damaging our children.

Perhaps the largest opportunity for positive change lies within the media industry itself. If enough people challenge the modern standards of beauty by providing alternatives to the single, rigid ideal, then those who work in the mainstream media will be pressured to change

their behaviors and begin to portray men and women more realistically. In some cases, the media has already begun to make changes. One such example is the recent emergence of plus-sized models. There is still much progress to be made, however, so we can't give up on this battle just yet.

So what should I say to my eleven-year-old sister then when she tells me she dreams of becoming a model someday? Should I warn her that the modeling industry is highly selective and often encourages unhealthy weight-control methods that have damaging, long-term health effects? I suppose I ought to remind her that most people aren't naturally blessed with bodies that satisfy the rigid ideals portrayed by the media. Perhaps I should even reveal that I had the same dream when I was a young adolescent. Unfortunately, my hopes were shattered when every modeling agency I had contacted returned my pictures with a blunt rejection letter explaining that I did not have the "image" they were looking for at the time. It was then that I let go of that particular childhood dream, for having a healthy body was more important to me than making it big in the modeling industry. I think the most important thing I can tell my sister at this challenging time in her life is that I love her just the way she is, and I would never want to see her change her body and sacrifice her health to fit someone else's concept of perfection.

The media poses an enormous threat to children because it disguises dangerous and irrational messages in attractive packages. Portrayal of ideal beauty by the media continues to affect millions of children and young adults every year, but there are many things we can do to reduce this problem. Together, by educating one person at a time and voicing our opinions, we can eventually transform the media industry and promote a healthy environment where our children will stop starving themselves and start learning to love and accept themselves for who they are inside.

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