Smart + Strong: Building Self-Esteem in Young Black Girls

A recent study conducted by the Dove Self-Esteem Fund found that African-American teens are struggling with issues of low self-image. The culprits? Social conditioning and daily interactions with family, friends and peers.

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Despite popular belief, teenage African-American girls are not invincible Superwomen impervious to pain and totally secure 24/7. Like girls of different racial backgrounds, they too struggle with issues such as low self-esteem, distorted body image and disordered eating. Dove's recent national study, "Real Girls, Real Pressure: A National Report on the State of Self-Esteem," explored these issues by analyzing online data taken from 1,029 girls between the ages of 8 and 17. Here's what they found:

- 68 percent of teenage African-American girls feel they do not measure up in some way regarding their looks, performance in school and relationships with family and friends.
- 41 percent of teenage African-American girls report engaging in negative activities, such as disordered eating, cutting, bullying, smoking or drinking, when feeling bad about themselves (compared with 50 percent of teenage Caucasian girls).
- 28 percent of teenage African-American girls admit to talking badly about themselves (compared with 40 percent of teenage Caucasian girls).
- 95 percent of teenage African-American girls with low self-esteem want their parents to change their behavior toward them in at least one way, such as understanding them more, listening to them more and spending more time with them.
- 42 percent of teenage African-American girls with low self-esteem have mothers who criticize their own looks; 53 percent of African-American girls ages 13 to 17 turn to their mothers as a resource when feeling bad about themselves compared with 86 percent of African-American girls ages 8 to 12.

- Only 22 percent of African-American girls ages 13 to 17 will turn to their fathers for help when feeling bad about themselves compared with 28 percent of African-American girls ages 8 to 12. At 16, girls become more likely to seek support from male peers rather than their own dads.
- Regardless of age, teenage African-American girls are significantly less likely than their Caucasian counterparts to turn to their parents as a resource when feeling bad. This is perhaps related to teenage African-American girls' heightened wish for their parents to listen to them more.

Dove's Self Esteem Fund is the largest national effort to bring self-esteem awareness to girls across the country and to encourage everyone to make a difference in the lives of girls. The fund just finished a nationwide 20-city workshop tour to promote its new report. The goal of this new initiative, a part of the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, is to bring self-awareness to 5 million girls globally by 2010.

Real Health sat down with Jess Weiner, a best-selling author and the global ambassador for the Dove Self-Esteem Fund, to discuss the report and how people can get involved.

For you, which statistics stood out the most?
One of the most important ones to me was that seven out of 10 girls didn't feel like they measured up in school and in their looks or in their relationships. Another key stat was that 75 percent of girls who identified as having low self-esteem had already reported engaging in behaviors like cutting, eating disorders, drug and alcohol use, smoking and bullying. It was eye-opening that they weren't just thinking about it but had already engaged in that behavior because of how they feel about their looks and how they measure up. That to me is a big number to take away. That's 75 percent of our girls, and that is an immensely high number of young ladies who are already feeling disconnected and are certainly putting themselves in dangerous situations.

When looking at the numbers, I really wasn't surprised given all of the mixed messages and disempowering images that young people see. What is your opinion?
When we're talking about beauty stereotypes and self-esteem, you have to look at our daughters or the girls in our lives. I think this was an opportunity to really focus on how every woman can make a difference in the life of a girl, even if you're not a mom. But first you need to have an understanding of where things are. Even though you weren't surprised by the numbers and I wasn't as surprised by the numbers, I was really glad that we had the numbers there to tell the story in a way that most people don't understand. Seven in 10 girls are a lot of young women. We can really do something about this.

When our society talks about self-esteem, it's generally about girls. This report was racially specific, which is important because there is a misconception that black girls don't have eating disorders and that black girls do have strong self-esteem. This report

says something different.
Too many researchers exclude women of color from surveys like this typically because of that cultural stereotype. Therefore, [they] aren't going into African-American communities to ask these questions. I believe this oversight helps fuel these cultural stereotypes. There's also a stereotype that African-American girls have a certain relationship with their mothers or maternal figures that influences them to feel positive and confident about how they look—which isn't necessarily true.

But there's one great equalizer in this issue: mainstream media. We took these findings and created in our workshop series online tools for girls of all races to use to look at the media with a critical eye. We want them to begin to critically think about the images that are presented to them and to be especially engaged in conversations about what it is like to be excluded from mainstream media.

When you are a woman of color and you are surrounded by images of people who do not look like you—who don't have your skin tone, your hair texture, your facial structure, your body type, who represent only a Caucasian view of beauty—you tend to look at your own beauty through that lens, even if it's unrealistic. For some of the girls in the workshops, this was the first time ever they had been exposed to a concept like that. They didn't even realize that they had only seen a few African-American women in the media. When they dissected [media images] a little further, they realized that the women they were seeing all tended to be very tall, lean, light-skinned people with long, light hair and light-colored eyes. All of sudden, these little girls with these gorgeously curvy bodies and dark skin were looking at these pictures and going, "Oh my gosh, I didn't even realize I was trying to be this way—and that's not me." It's getting teenage African-American girls to go one step deeper, and that's what I really appreciate about the inclusion of this kind of work. The bottom line is: If we don't call it what it is, we can't change it.

How can our readers get involved?
There are free resources, interactive tools and activities and training manuals available free online that people can access. While our tour has ended, it's definitely not over. It was a kickoff to support the survey and bring awareness to the media and other institutions that there is a problem—whether they were aware of it or not—here's what it is. It's one thing for Dove to do a survey and for me to go on a 20-city tour, but now we need every teacher, coach, grassroots organization, mentor, parent, grandma and cousin. Anybody who wants to make a difference needs to go to that website and download these tools and start to have this conversation in their community.

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