You Are Not Your Hair

Mental health experts agree that it's a huge problem when hair texture determines black women and girls' sense of self-esteem.

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A bad hair day can be a source of anguish for almost anyone. But for many African-American women and girls, a bad hair day begins when they're born. Why? Because hair texture and length are a yardstick that others often use to judge them.

"Young children, especially [black] girls, have an image problem that's relatable to dolls," says Mary Pender Greene, a psychotherapist in New York City. "Keep in mind that a Barbie [doll] is the example of what a beautiful person looks like. Barbie is white, she's blond, she's thin, and she's privileged in that she gets all the goodies."

When black girls receive their first doll (in most cases a white doll which may or may not be Barbie), the image-making begins. As Pender Greene observes: "Children get their self-image through dolls."

For many black girls, white dolls with long, silky hair and European features translate into the traits black girls think will gain them acceptance by their family, friends and classmates.

One study conducted in the 1950s showed just how deeply affected black girls are by this pervasive social and cultural standard of beauty, Pender Greene says. When researchers gave the children black dolls, they didn't want them. Instead, the girls preferred white dolls.

Recently, researchers conducted the same study. The result? "Surprise, surprise, even parents who were perceived as Afrocentric had children who wanted white dolls with blond hair because they thought of them as [more] beautiful," Pender Greene says.

But problems with how people perceive themselves are not just a black thing. As Pender Greene explains, "Regardless of the [ethnic group] or culture, whether people are of Asian, Japanese or Chinese culture, they also have the same issues: The lighter the child or the person, the more desirable they are."

Why? Because they get the spotlight, they get the friends, they get attention for being beautiful, and they get the men, Pender Greene says.

Factor in black girls' experiences enduring giggles from classmates for wearing natural hairstyles or having a parent who stresses the need to chemically straighten the hair so it's more manageable—that "good hair" quality—and it's no wonder that these hair issues cause children's self-esteem to crumble.

As a result, young girls start thinking they aren't good enough and wish to be someone else, Pender Greene says, and that weakens a child's ability to be her best self.

As young black girls become young black women, ultimately the need to measure up and to attain a successful career often means imitating their white counterparts and straightening their hair.

When you get older and start working, you may start noticing that everybody who's promoted in an organization has a certain kind of look, Pender Greene observes. "In essence, that says there is something wrong with you [if you don't have that look]," she adds. "And whether or not that's ever verbalized, it's still visible when you look around and you don't see people who look like you. That's when these dynamics may translate into saying something about who you are and what your abilities might be."

But there is a way for black parents to counteract the negative influences that dominant beauty standards have on their children's self-esteem and self-image.

Breaking the cycle begins with black parents becoming conscious of the influences that surround their children. "Beyond dolls, children need to see images of African Americans on anything from a birthday card to characters in a children's book and even artwork," Pender Greene advises. "Most importantly, where your child spends a lot of time should be a setting where they see people who look like them doing positive things. This helps reinforce the idea that they are beautiful and are capable of doing great thing."

But before black parents embark on this process, Pender Greene suggests that they delve into their subconscious to see how they feel about themselves.

"It's a parallel process because parents need to work on themselves, too," Pender Greene says. "They have to ask themselves how the world has affected their self-esteem, because this is something that's passed on."

From the time African Americans began to press, perm and process their hair and to use bleaching creams, these actions also began to influence how black folks see themselves, Pender Greene says.

"It's important to recognize that this issue does not start with young black girls," Pender Greene says. "They have parents and grandparents and great-grandparents. How often have we looked behind babies' ears to see if they're going to be light-skinned. Or we've looked at their hair and said, 'Oh, they've got good hair, how long will it be before it changes?'"

These questions and messages—even if they're not spoken aloud—reflect how we feel about ourselves as adults and as a culture. And that, in turn, influences how our children think about themselves. "So it doesn't start with the child," Pender Greene reiterates. "That's the real issue: Parents help fuel the problem, not solve it."

But there is hope. Self-aware parents do have the power to improve their children's self-esteem. Pender Greene suggests parents create a self-esteem plan. The plan would teach children how to accept their African-American heritage and culture including their physical appearance.

But African-Americans' fixation on "good hair" versus "bad hair," and other related misconceptions and stereotyping, won't disappear anytime soon, Pender Greene says. "It isn't only all about African American people, because we don't live in total isolation," she says. "The media plays a big role in this."

Pender Greene believes that eventually, it is possible for these negative cultural views to change. As an example, she cautiously cites Michelle Obama as a role model for black women and girls. The first lady is a defining presence who shakes up the status quo.

"The fact that Obama has a dark-skinned black woman is definitely an image booster for black people, especially black women," Pender Greene says. "But she doesn't have an Afro or natural hair. She has a certain look, and since she's been in the White House, she's gotten more of that look."

But Pender Greene also believes that all it takes to make a difference is one person at a time challenging social standards.

The key to continued change, she says, is for blacks to constantly guard themselves against internalizing any negativity that targets African Americans—and that includes hair issues.

"People have to be conscious [about it]," Pender Greene says, "or they feed into it."

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