

CPYU Trend Alert: "When What They See Is What They Are"

by Walt Mueller

Fifteen-year-old Kami doesn't like what she sees in the mirror. She isn't alone. Adolescence is a time when our kids need to be encouraged and built up. But by setting standards for beauty and body image that are largely unattainable, the media can mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually rip our kids apart.

Consider television. Let's face it, ugly and overweight people don't make it on TV unless they are cast as ugly and overweight people. Unfortunately, our definition of what is ugly and overweight has been defined, in many ways, by television. TV is overloaded with "beautiful people" who don't look much like anything most of us see when we look in the mirror. The women are slim and trim. The men are slim and muscular. And everyone is "good-looking." Today's shows are engaging, but they provide our kids with more than a half hour or hour of entertainment. They are full of spoken and unspoken lessons on life that powerfully shape impressionable young hearts and minds. One of TV's most powerful lessons is that of body image and appearance. Kids learn that teenagers who have fun with friends have nice bodies, beautiful hair, and clear complexions. While these messages are no doubt life-shaping for males too, it is girls who pay the highest price.

A few years ago a middle-school-aged girl came to me in tears over her looks: "I'm too short. I don't like the color of my hair. And my face looks funny." When I asked her why she wasn't happy with the way she looked, she began to describe each feature that she would like to change and gave me an example of someone who had the particular characteristic she coveted. Sadly, each person she mentioned was one of the "beautiful people" she had seen on TV, in videos, on the movie screen, or in any number of magazines. She wanted to become them because she hated herself. In reality, she hated herself because she believed they had become what she saw on paper and film. In later conversations I learned that she had been trying to build herself up by telling her friends that she had just signed a modeling contract. She also told me she was thinking seriously about plastic surgery.

All the images our kids see combine to define a culturally-created standard of beauty that few people ever reach. You may wonder why your children are so consumed with spending time in front of the mirror. The answer is simple. They are trying to measure up to the images they've seen plastered on TV, the printed page, the big screen, and billboards. They balance perilously between trying to measure up and the frustration of never measuring up. My two daughters have grown up in a world where they're led to believe that they have to look like a supermodel to be acceptable to guys. Sadly, my sons have grown up in a world where they're led to believe that this is what any girl worth your time and attention looks like. Guys spend their time trying to develop big biceps, ripped abs, and the look of the handsome guys who, in the ads, seem to be getting all the attention of one or more girls.

As time passes, the standards change, becoming increasingly unrealistic and more difficult to attain. Mary Pipher, author of *Reviving Ophelia*, reports that in 1950, the White Rock mineral-water girl was 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighed 140 pounds. Today, she stands 5 feet 10 inches tall and weighs only 110.¹ These same unrealistic standards pummel our kids through daily media portrayals.

¹ Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 184.

Just when you thought it couldn't get any worse, the Internet has become a place where young people struggling with their own body image can go to be encouraged – yes, that's right, *encouraged* – to celebrate eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia as fashionable. These pro-anorexia websites have become online communities and support groups for those who worship the goddess "Ana" (short for "anorexia"), offering tips, tricks, quotes, images, and creeds (that summarize the ideological/doctrinal beliefs of disordered eaters).

Media's unhealthy obsession with body image and the resulting pressure on kids yield two results. First, they sell a slew of products designed to make us more attractive, and to slow and stop the inevitable process of aging. And second, they sell an image that 99.9 percent of the people in this world will never attain. As a result, kids and adults waste terrible amounts of time, energy, and money in idolatrous pursuit of the dream, only to be let down over and over again.

We are raising a generation of kids – both girls and boys – who have been hammered by images of culturally-defined beauty and perfect body-types since the day they were born. Consequently, they believe they are nothing unless they look and are shaped a certain way. Never are they told by the media that if they have nothing in this world but a relationship with God through Christ, they will have everything.

As parents, youth workers, and caregivers, we must do everything in our power to steer our kids away from pursuing these unhealthy and unrealistic idols of appearance. But how?

First, we must pray for our kids. Ask God to fill them with a desire to conform to the *who we are* image of Christ, rather than to the *what we look like* images thrown at them by the world.

Second, watch what appearance messages you send through your words and actions. Our comments about their weight, shape, etc. hit them hard. Be sure to love kids for *who* they are, not *what* they look like.

Third, deal with your own body image issues. Let's face it, we have grown up in and continue to live in a world that's sent the same flood of messages our way. Have you given in? If so, that's sending messages out loud and clear to kids.

Finally, help kids identify media's lies and stereotypes. Consciously and thoughtfully process them together in a way that leads kids to realize how these images stray from God's design for those created in his image.

Kami and her friends have been fearfully and wonderfully made. Let's make sure we're doing everything we can to remind them of that fact.

**For more information on today's youth culture, visit the website of the
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