

Common Sense on Boys, Girls, and Media Messages

What's the Issue?

Imagine a teen girl clicking through her friend's profile pictures, wishing she could look just as slender. Or imagine a teen boy purposefully waiting an hour before texting a girl back, to make himself appear more independent and detached. Teens are keenly aware of what it means to be popular, and how others perceive them. They turn not only to mass media for hints about how teen girls and boys should look and act, but also to their peers online. The problem is that the media often popularize narrow definitions of boys' and girls' roles. And these narrow definitions can then make their way into peer-to-peer interactions online, making it that much harder for a teen to keep perspective on media messages.

Why Does It Matter?

Consider reality television: It blurs the lines between truth and fiction, and it transforms ordinary people into celebrities. Social media can provide a similar framework for teens' social lives. For example, most teens on social network sites know that there are invisible audiences to address and perform for. They text, upload, and post with the expectation that their friends will give feedback, almost instantaneously. And when it comes to real celebrity interaction, teens can follow stars on sites such as Twitter and see glimpses into their daily lives. Teens can even become overnight Web celebs themselves via YouTube. And while this level of connecting, sharing, and networking is exciting on many levels, the price of Internet fame can be great, especially regarding gender. Thus, the pressure that girls face to look good or even "sexy" online can get magnified. And the pressure that boys face to look and act "like a man" can increase too.

What Families Can Do

In this digital age, it's important for teens to develop and practice media-literacy skills. Parents, relatives, teachers, and other adult mentors are well positioned to help kids analyze the gender messages they see on TV, at the movies, in ads, in games, and online – and to encourage them not to perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

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Find out what's behind kids' behavior. Often, the impulse to broadcast personal information (or sexy photos) is driven by the desire for attention. Ask your teens whether they want to get attention by being provocative, or by being themselves. Help them understand how certain choices will make them feel.

Discuss the humor in stereotypes. Stereotypes can be humorous, even ones that describe our own friends and families. But sexist and other derogatory comments online can do serious damage. Remind kids that it's difficult to recognize the tone or intention of comments online, so their jokes and quips may be misinterpreted.

Be an adult role model online. Social network sites can magnify our desire to feel photogenic and "camera ready." If you have a social network profile, keep tabs on how often you compliment your friends' appearances in photos. Also, if your teens show you photos of their friends, be careful not to make remarks on how they look. Encourage your family to focus on accomplishments and attitudes, rather than appearances.