



Self-esteem strategies

You play a crucial role in developing your daughter's self-esteem, writes Anea Bogue.

Research from New York University's Child Study Center shows that the average American girl's self-esteem peaks at the age of nine and then plummets. Yes, you read that correctly: nine! The reasons they report are varied, ranging from hormonal shifts to media influence, specifically the sexualisation of girls and the setting of unrealistic physical standards.

The impact of low self-esteem in girls often leads to behaviours that can be life-altering. According to another national study, 75 per cent of girls with low self-esteem reported engaging in negative activities such as disordered eating, cutting, bullying, smoking, drinking and using drugs. Low self-esteem can also lead to risky sexual behaviour.

We have our work cut out for us. Societal messages that work against girls' self-esteem are powerful and pervasive. But, there are steps we can take to build and protect their self-esteem – and, their future.

1 Build a strong foundation. Every day, remind your daughter, through words and actions, that she is strong, smart and beautiful. Research confirms that girls with low self-esteem most commonly receive less praise and more criticism from a parent.

2 Limit her access to media early. The messages you work diligently to instil will quickly be challenged if you don't filter media that blatantly contradict them. A great deal of television and print media set unrealistic physical standards and portray over-sexualised, disempowered girls and women. Unchecked, it will shape your daughter's sense of reality, self and the standard she is expected to meet for acceptance, "desirability" and "success".

3 Create open lines of communication. Hormonal shifts that begin the transition into adolescence can begin as early as eight or nine years old. The further down the adolescent path she is, the more difficult it will become to establish lines of communication that will essentially become lifelines in your efforts to guide and protect her throughout her teen years.

4 Encourage her to find and use her voice. Think of your daughter's voice as a muscle – the more she uses it, the stronger it will be. Speaking on behalf of your daughter limits her "workout" time.

5 Seize the power of organised sports. The opportunity to develop strong relationships with other girls while working towards a common goal and to develop confidence related to something she does rather than simply how she looks, talks and acts is essential to building self-esteem. Research also shows a significant

decrease in participation in risky sexual behaviour among girls who play sports.

6 Remember that knowledge is power. It's especially important that your daughter understands her own body – that she has a solid understanding of the powerful and changing cyclical role hormones play in the female body, and the impact they have physically, emotionally and psychologically.

7 Make no subject taboo. From sex to drugs, making any subject off-limits to your daughter (whether stated or implied) will only ensure her journey down a path of shame, ignorance and, ultimately, danger. If she can't get open, honest and accurate information from her parents, she will get it from less-educated sources.

8 Dad, be aware of the power of your words and actions. The way a father expresses his value and respect for women directly impacts the way his daughter sees herself and the degree of respect and overall value she will expect to receive from boys and men.

9 Mum, never forget that you are her most important role model. It is imperative that we do whatever is necessary to get ourselves to a place of knowing and understanding our value as women if we have any hope that our daughters will do the same. 

Anea Bogue, an acclaimed self-esteem expert who specialises in working with women of all ages, including adolescent girls, will be visiting Hong Kong this month to speak to various schools and community groups. To learn more, visit www.mindquestgroup.com.

