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Looking for their “future selves”: Daughters look up to mothers as role models

A GirlGuiding New Zealand survey has found that one in four girls cite their mother as their most important female role model. Sisters, aunts and grandmothers were also commonly named as females to look up to, followed by teachers, activists and celebrities. In fact, mothers were six times more likely to be named as a role model than Beyoncé.

The *What Matters?* survey of more than 4,300 guiding and non-guiding New Zealand girls aged 7-17 found that they admire hard work and self-confidence in their role models. On the other hand, being pretty or beautiful was among those traits considered the least important for female role models.

In terms of qualities girls think are desirable in other girls, only 1% feel that being popular is important, 2% think that being good at sport matters and 3% value being pretty. In contrast, the number one quality that girls aspire to is being accepting of others (53%), followed by standing up for what they believe in (51%). Being happy (40%), hard working (33%) and kind (31%) were also considered important.

In an interview on New Zealand’s Newshub program, Professor Renée Spencer of Boston University — a theoretical and applied expert in youth mentoring who is currently a visiting fellow at the University of Auckland — said that it is “very encouraging” that so many girls named their mothers as role models in the GirlGuiding survey because of the room it gives mothers to deliver positive messages to their daughters. However, she said, the role of fathers is also “critically important”.

“Girls are looking to their mothers to look for their future selves,” argues Spencer, but they are also looking to their fathers as a “template” for what their future interactions with men might look like. “So how much,” she asks, “does their father convey that he respects girls and women? What are the messages that he delivers about what a girl is supposed to be like and what makes her acceptable?”

Professor Spencer says that when parents are the ones to send positive messages it is a “real opportunity” to connect with their daughters, especially with the GirlGuiding survey reflecting international studies showing that girls are increasingly stressed about schoolwork, body image and the pressures of social media. Nearly 40% of girls taking part in the survey strongly believe that there is a lot of pressure to succeed at school. The pressure increases as girls get older, with 60% of girls aged 16-17 naming doing well at school as their number one concern and 47% agreeing there is a lot of pressure to do well.

The survey also found that girls start to worry about how they look in primary school, with 13% of nine-year-olds believing there is a lot of pressure on girls to look good, rising to 49% of girls aged 16. Not surprisingly, nearly two-thirds of girls aged 7-17 feel there should be a better mixture of body types in the media and 52% believe that other girls try to make themselves look “too perfect” on social media.

Research summary for principals

Professor Spencer says that while the age that girls start to worry about how they look is getting younger, it is not surprising given that today's girls are inundated with a barrage of social media images about what is pretty and what is supposed to look good. In addition, the age at which girls experience puberty is also getting younger.

Developmentally, puberty brings with it the capacity to think about the wider world, says Spencer, and this is positive — “we want our young people to become more aware and think about the wider world around them” — but, she argues, “one of the risks that comes with that is that other people's opinions can start to matter”.

Asked about the impact of celebrities and their “perfect”, but often fake, lives on social media, Spencer said that it is crucial for girls to have “counter messages”. Girls, she says, need to “hear that there are other lives to aspire to”. That “lives with meaning, with purpose, where they are connected to things that they care about and ways that they can make a difference in the world are much more important than fame, celebrity, status”.

The results of the Girlguiding survey showing that so many girls value their mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, teachers and activists as female role models over celebrities, combined with so few believing that being pretty or beautiful are important traits for role models, is extremely positive. It is also heartening, says Professor Spencer, that so many girls think that it is important to stand up for what they believe in. The fact that girls want to make a positive difference, she says, “coupled with concrete ideas about how they can do that, I think, is encouraging for all of us for a brighter future”.

References

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