

Tips for Parents: The Beauty Bias

The eye of the beholder

They say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but this is not altogether true. Usually there is a broad agreement among people about who is attractive and who is not.

This doesn't mean that what is beautiful in one society will be beautiful in another. The idea of beauty, to a large degree, is learned. Television, magazines, and movies tend to teach us what is beautiful. And social standards of beauty can be passed down from generation to generation. These standards can also change. Consider, for example, how much more "beautiful" it is now to be very thin than it was fifty years ago.

We also tend to think of beauty in terms of what is familiar, and even in terms of what is most like ourselves. We appreciate what is familiar because it makes us feel comfortable, and we can accept people who are like ourselves more easily because we're confident they will accept us. These feelings also feed into what we think of as "beautiful."

More than skin deep

How do these notions of beauty affect our children? Unfortunately, what we think of as attractive involves many other qualities that have nothing to do with appearance.

What is beautiful is good. Over the years, studies have demonstrated the existence of a stereotype about physically attractive individuals, namely, *what is beautiful is good*. The beauty bias affects juror decisions, employment opportunities, job evaluations, and even parents' attitudes toward their own children. Regrettably, this beauty bias is also present in our educational system.

Unequal opportunity. In theory, school is designed to give everyone an equal opportunity at a good education. The truth is that many teachers unknowingly link their expectations of student performance to physical attractiveness. A recent study found that "attractive" students were viewed by teachers as being more intelligent, having higher academic potential, and coming from families with a higher interest in education.

Social skills. Physical attractiveness has even been shown to positively influence teachers' judgments about a student's personality and social skills. Teachers viewed "good looking" students as being more friendly, attentive, popular, and outgoing than "unattractive" students.

Higher grades. Studies also show that "better looking" students receive higher grades and score higher on standardized tests. It seems unlikely that higher grades and higher test scores are simply the result of grading biases by teachers. Experts suggest that positive expectations on the

part of teachers initiates a self-fulfilling prophecy that tends to result in a genuine performance improvement for attractive students.

Special education. Studies also indicate that teachers are often more likely to recommend students they consider unattractive for special or remedial services when these students do not meet academic expectations. However, “attractive” students with the same academic performance category are given the benefit of the doubt.

How to keep beauty in perspective

Parental attitudes. Our notions about beauty can be so overwhelming that even parents seem to have more positive expectations for children who meet their ideas of attractiveness. And because norms regarding beauty are often consistent throughout the society, positive parental expectations for “attractive children” will often be reinforced by teachers who share the same ideas about beauty.

Be sure your children understand that, in your eyes, they are beautiful because they are loved. Avoid making beauty and appearance a basis for approval. Give your child positive feedback based on accomplishments and, in particular, effort. .

Self-esteem. Confidence, a sense of purpose, and a belief in one’s own abilities are more important to any child than his or her appearance. Giving your children a strong sense of self-esteem is the best way to help them feel good about themselves and succeed—regardless of other people’s opinions.

Show your child that he or she is loved. You won’t spoil your child by demonstrating that your love isn’t based on whether children get good grades, are good athletes, or are good looking. Self-esteem and knowing that they are loved unconditionally will give your children a strong value system; one that is less vulnerable to the “beauty syndrome”.

Best foot forward

Always help your children put their best foot forward. Good grooming and a positive outlook will do wonders for your children, inside and out. Taking good care of themselves will enhance their self-esteem, make them feel better about themselves, and allow them to project a better image to others.

For more information:

Saderman Hall, Nadia. “Creative Resources for the Anti-Bias Classroom”. 1999.

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