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Peers and adults can either help or hurt a teen's self-image

By [Katie Murdoch](#), Herald writer



Weekly Herald/CHRIS GOODENOW Edmonds-Woodway High School senior Frank Djoko (from left), 17, of Edmonds; senior Travon Redick, 16, of Lynnwood; junior Joe Alexander, 17, of Edmonds; senior Malik Fulson (background), 18, of Lynnwood; and junior Marquice Parker, 16, of Edmonds, talk on the way to visit a friend at Mountlake Terrace High School. Marquice says friends and family play the most influential role in his life.



Weekly Herald/CHRIS GOODENOW Jamie Quach, 12, of Lynnwood, an Alderwood Middle School seventh-grader, performs pull-down exercises, March 1 during the Lynnwood Recreation Center's Move 60 Teens! program. The program encourages 60 minutes of movement, including skateboarding, rock climbing, breakdancing and traditional sports.

A casual comment or a sarcastic remark aimed at a teenager can cut deep during the turbulent time when teenagers say they are their own worst critic.

Compounding their insecurities are airbrushed models and celebrities in magazines and on television, influencing them to strive for unattainable goals to look and dress a certain way.

"It's a terrible whirlwind of self-esteem issues," said Brianah Drubay, 17.

What people think of you sticks at this age, said Amelia Dahlen, 18.

“Their words hurt the most,” she said.

Teenagers and the adults who work with them agree that peers, family and the media play huge roles in how teens perceive themselves. Fortunately, it's those same relationships that can play a positive role in helping young people accept themselves.

The media mirage

Reality TV shows such as “Jersey Shore,” showing girls in tight outfits, and “Teen Mom,” sending mixed signals about teen pregnancy, can leave teens with a negative message.

There are teenagers who want to look like the girls on TV and think they need to behave like them, said Raven Powers, 18.

Actors and models prompt teens to set unrealistic goals of how their body should look.

“Someone with a poor self-esteem is more influenced by that,” said Julie Hill, a registered nurse.

Even social media sites, like Facebook, can place undue pressure. Girls who post photos of themselves scantily clad or guys showing off their muscles can influence young people to think they need to compete.

Some of the photos people post shock Elizabeth Kovar, fitness coordinator in Lynnwood.

“What would your mom say if she saw those?” Kovar asked.

Teens do listen

In fact, sometimes it's what loved ones like Mom say that packs the most punch.

A group of Scriber High School girls agreed listening to their mothers knock their own looks has taught them how to treat themselves with the same critical eye.

Relatives who playfully poke their bellies and ask if they're really going to have another slice of pizza aren't as funny or harmless as they think, the girls added.

“Body image issues come from family,” Powers said. “Things people say to you will stay with you for years.”

Friends and family also have the biggest role in 16-year-old Marquice Parker's life.

Some people in his life are more accepting of how he looks compared with others. But he doesn't let negative comments get to him.

“If I know it's fresh and looks good, I'll wear it,” he said.

He also listens to advice, including that of his grandmother, who tells him to not sag his jeans and to dress appropriately to show respect.

Listen, don't judge

It would help if parents and other adult role models would be there to listen without judgment, while giving teens the option to sort through their own problems, the girls agreed.

Adults don't even have to fully understand or relate to what the teen is going through, so long as they listen, said Nina Hogan, 17.

“We should be able to come up to somebody and talk about our problems and not be judged,” Hogan said.

Realize everyone is different, teens urge. Someone with a tougher shell will have a snappy comeback to those harmless weight comments while someone else could crumble.

Respect is important too. Teenagers will act like adults if they're treated as such rather than having adults make assumptions about their personality based off the way they look.

Hill, the nurse, recommends adults focus on other attributes, such as kindness or a great sense of humor, to help teens accept themselves.

Like yourself, hurt less

Kovar reminds young people they can let a hurtful comment bother them or

recognize why someone put them down.

“You have a choice to process what they said and learn to move on from it,” she said.

Strong, positive relationships that focus on praise and trust are key, said Kelly Anderson, a youth and teen programmer in Lynnwood.

“When someone shares with you, you can help them cope,” she said.

Sarah Weaver came to learn those lessons. A former boyfriend told the 16-year-old she is fat. The petite teen starved herself for about a year before realizing she deserved to be treated better.

“When you find the right group of friends you feel good about yourself,” Weaver said.

“I don't need a guy to tell me I'm pretty; I need myself, my friends and family for that.”