

# 13 Ways to Boost Your Daughter's Self-Esteem

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How to help girls build confidence based on what they can do, not what they look like

Juliann Garey

In a culture saturated with digitally altered images of impossibly thin women, raising girls with high self-esteem can be daunting indeed. But as parents, you have great influence—both by what you say and what you do. Here's some advice from experts [Catherine Steiner-Adair, EdD](#), a clinical psychologist,

school consultant and creator of the "[Full of Ourselves](#)," a social-emotional program for girls, [Anea Bogue, MA](#), author (*9 Ways We Are Screwing Up Our Girls and How We Can Stop*), and the creator of [REALgirl, an empowerment program for girls](#), and Mary Rooney, PhD, a clinical psychologist who specializes in adolescents.

## 1. Model body acceptance

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Moms have a huge impact on their daughters' [body image](#). Don't ask, "Do these jeans make me look fat?" or obsess out loud about food or put your appearance down. Avoid what Dr. Steiner-Adair calls the "morality of orality"—talking about food and yourself as "good" or "bad." As in: I was bad today: I had pizza. So I'm not going to have dessert.

## 2. Make your daughter media literate

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"Watch TV with her and talk about what you see," says Dr. Steiner-Adair. "Help her develop a critical eye through which to [decode and filter media messages](#)."

## 3. Don't raise her as a "pleaser"

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Encourage her to stand up for what she needs and wants. "Create opportunities for her to use her voice," Bogue advises. "Ask 'What do *you* want?' Let her make a choice and then honor that choice."

## 4. Start team sports early

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Research shows girls who play on teams have higher self-esteem. "There's a very common correlation, in my experience," says Bogue, "between girls who play team sports and girls who suffer less with low self-esteem because they are looking to other girls for their value, and within, as opposed to looking to boys for validation."

## 5. Moms, don't borrow your daughter's clothes

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“You want to let her have her own style, her own look,” says Dr. Steiner-Adair. “Especially, and this is a really hard thing, if you have a mom who by society’s standards is prettier or thinner than her daughter.”

## **6. Direct your praise away from appearance**

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“I think that we need to make a very conscious effort to balance our compliments about a girl’s appearance with compliments about who she is and what she DOES in the world,” says Bogue. “Challenge yourself to match every compliment you give about your daughter’s appearance with at least two compliments about something non-appearance based, and do the same for other girls who cross your path — your daughter’s friends, nieces, etc.”

## **7. Help her build skills that are independent of appearance**

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“Get her involved in activities that build a sense of confidence, rather than focusing on looking good and acquiring things,” Dr. Rooney suggests. “Sports, theater, music, art. Anything really that can help girls express themselves through words or creativity or activity rather than through their appearance or what they’re carrying around.”

## **8. Speak up about your daughter’s school curriculum**

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Does it include a female perspective? “Imagine if you were putting together a family history,” Bogue says, “and you only asked the men about their memories, about their perspective. Think about all of the information that would be lost.”

## **9. Praise your daughter for her efforts rather than her performance**

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“Focus less on the outcome and more on efforts and the development of new skills,” says Dr. Rooney. Mastery is what builds confidence, and learning to tolerate failure fosters resilience.

## **10. Be careful about what magazines you have in the house**

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“Research suggests,” says Steiner-Adair, “that after 15 minutes of looking at a fashion magazine, mood shifts from curiosity and enthusiasm to comparing yourself and putting yourself down.”

## **11. Don’t trash talk other women**

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“And don’t let the boys and men in your household do it either,” adds Dr. Steiner-Adair. “Don’t let kids tease each other around food or looks. Do not let that go down in your house. It’s really harmful.”

## **12. Dads: Don't treat your daughter like a damsel in distress**

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“When fathers treat girls as though they are these fragile, helpless, little beings, ” Bogue says, “the message is, ‘Your role is to look good so a man will sweep in and save you.’ Instead, give her the opportunity and the tools—to change her own tire, to use her voice and speak up for herself, to play sports, to be able to brush herself off and get back up. I think it’s a good measure to say, ‘If I would do it with my son, I should be prepared to do it with my daughter.’”

## **13. Make sure she knows you love her no matter what**

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She needs to know that you'll love her “no matter how her appearance might change or how she dresses or how she might perform at something,” says Dr. Rooney. “Because even though kids are so reliant on their peers for feedback when they're in their teens, what her parents think of her matters just as much as it ever did.”