

APPEARANCE OVERVIEW

How important is appearance to teenagers? Pick up a magazine produced specifically for teens? Typical lead cover stories include: "75 Great Looks Now" and "Fashion's Top Five Trendsetters." Virtually every teen magazine blatantly and subtly emphasizes physical appearance.

How important is appearance to young people? Marketers, who know more about the intimate fears, hopes, and aspirations of teenagers than anyone else, promote products and commercials dealing with the way adolescents look more than any other life factor.

How important is their appearance to teenagers themselves? Read their comments and humor. "Who threw away that shirt—or did you find it at the thriftshop?" "Your mother dresses you funny." "Hey, pizza face (or zit face)!" "You're too short or flat-chested to be a junior." Negative remarks about teenage appearance do more damage than sender or receiver admits.

Interviews and studies continue to affirm that popularity in high schools tends to be based, in order, on personality, appearance, and athletic ability. Any good looking person with money and taste for appropriate and distinctive clothes, who is fun to get along with and not conceited, should make it into the popular set.

The media powerfully reflect and excite this crucial aspect of adolescent life. Fragile egos fear the results of foolish or inappropriate appearance. Groups that rebel against this culture of appearance usually end up demanding its peer members a particular style of non-conformity.

Our bodies and appearance are an important part of who we are. Theology refers to human beings as body, soul, and spirit. Psychology sees a person with a body and nervous system that gives rise to emotions on the one hand and rational thought on the other. Depth psychology explores the vast realms of subconscious manifested in dreams and many aspects of healthy and unhealthy behavior.

The primary developmental task of a teenager is self-definition. With (in a sense) a brand new body, emotions and mind, the teenager must develop a new and healthy self-image. This is done primarily in reference to peers, and much of the emphasis is on appearance.

If a person is to be whole, he or she must accept and care for the way they look. Certainly the way we look strongly affects those around us. In our culture, appearance especially influences initial impressions. Society reveals its own narcissistic insecurities when it looks down upon a person with a physical disability or abnormality. Such persons must accept this unfair pathology of society, perhaps work to correct it, but primarily find self-acceptance and reassurance out of the resilience of the human spirit—with whatever spiritual and community support is available.

Diet ads play into a growing interest and perhaps mania for physical fitness. Their bottom line tends to be two-fold: look good and feel good. Both are important, but can obviously be blown out of proportion. The selling of clothes, cosmetics, and good looks in our society goes far beyond helpfulness—most struggle with self-esteem; anorexia and other self-destructive patterns are increasingly prevalent.

It seems that we do not correct the overemphasis on physical appearance by minimizing it. It is an important aspect of our lives that must be kept in proper perspective.

CRITIQUE OF MEDIA

To what extent do the media merely reflect the ills of our society, and to what extent do they cause them? That is the big debate. Careful consideration of this issue usually produces agreement that to some degree the media both reflect and influence our strengths and weaknesses. We want news, drama, and commercials to encourage good physical health, good feelings, and a better lifestyle. When the more vulnerable consumers are so affected as to become anorexics, narcissistic, or sexually addicted, some kind of restraint either from within or outside the industry must emerge.

One aspect of youth work, education, and parenting ought to be the empowerment of young media critics so they can withstand unfair pressures upon their developing egos.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. To what extent do you think concern for one's own appearance to be healthy?
2. Can we and should we consider the physical appearance of others to be totally irrelevant? Can looks be a non-factor in romance?
3. What do you think about media's emphasis upon physical appearance?
4. What damage are attitudes and comments about appearance causing in a high school you know?

IMPLICATIONS

1. To the extent that teenagers are negatively affected by family, peer, school, or media pressures about appearance, the subject needs to be discussed. Young people need good opportunity to deal with this issue.
2. Parents may be undercutting the self-image of a teenager without even knowing it. Other family members contribute to the damage as well. The family needs to be a nurturing haven in a critical storm concerning the subject of appearance.
3. Youth work, with its primary objective as a strong, supportive peer group and its affirming, significant leader(s), is an opportune setting for the clarification of the appearance issue. Those working with kids should work through three basic questions: What place does appearance play in our society? How is does the emphasis on appearance affect you? How, in terms of appearance, do you want to relate to others?

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