

## Having "The Talk": Body Image

by Paula Silverman

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*This is the first in a series of articles in which experts will advise grandparents on talking about serious issues with their grandchildren. Upcoming articles will focus on issues including drug use and dating.*

"My grandchildren are absolutely perfect," says Marie DeGuara, 69, of Bay Shore, N.Y., the grandmother of 19-year-old Amanda and 16-year-old Anthony. "There's nothing wrong with them." It's not unusual, of course, for grandparents to believe their grandchildren are perfect. Most wouldn't change a hair on their grandkids' heads — which is why it can be so upsetting when a grandchild says he or she wants a nose job as a high-school graduation present, or another wishes she could get breast implants.

### An Epidemic of Insecurity

Several recent reports have found that the widespread availability of plastic surgery and the pervasive influence of reality shows focused on surgical makeovers may be having a profound effect on the self-esteem of young people, especially girls. According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, the number of cosmetic surgeries performed on people 18 and younger rose from 59,890 in 1997 to 205,119 in 2007. The most common procedure was rhinoplasty (a nose job), but there were also 9,295 liposuction procedures in the age group in 2007, and 7,882 breast augmentations; the latter procedure was being performed on teens six times more often than in 1997.

A recent survey of more than 1,000 girls in the United States, ages 8 to 17, sponsored by the [Dove Self-Esteem Fund](#) — which has a partnership with the [Girl Scouts of the USA](#) — found that 70 percent of the girls felt that their appearance did not "measure up"; only 10 percent said they believed they were "pretty enough."

## How You Can Help Them

Experts say it can be easier for grandparents — who are not caught up in the daily stresses of teens' lives, and whose opinions teens may respect more than those of other adults — to step in and bolster their grandchildren's self-esteem and even talk them out of plans for plastic surgery. Encouraging, well-timed words from a grandparent can give a grandchild more confidence than plastic surgery ever could. Here are some tips to help navigate the rocky terrain of body image with your teenage grandchildren:

**Know what's happening.** To be an effective influence, you must be informed about your grandchildren's lives, the challenges they face, and the influences on them. Don't assume that things are the same as when your kids were teens — in the 1970s and 1980s, there were no TV shows like MTV's *I Want a Famous Face*, which follows 12 young people seeking plastic surgery to look more like their celebrity idols.

There are many reasons why teens feel the need to change their appearance, but it often boils down to low self-esteem and poor body image. For that reason, the most effective steps grandparents can take are simply devoting more time and positive attention to their grandchildren. "You can develop a trusting relationship by quietly observing their likes and dislikes and noting their favorite TV shows, celebrities, and music — without critiquing," advises psychologist Erik Fisher, author of [The Art of Empowered Parenting: The Manual You Wish Your Kids Came With](#) (Ovation, 2007). "Then ask your grandchildren, 'What attracts you to those people? Do you like the way they dress? The way they look?' Ask your grandkids how they feel about the way that they look. If they shy away, don't push. They may come to you later when they feel more comfortable. Let them know that you realize that growing up in today's world can be tough, and you want to be someone they can talk to."

**Slow them down.** If grandchildren confide in you that they are considering radical cosmetic procedures, discuss with them how this is not a decision that they should make impulsively. By encouraging them to sit down and think it through, you can play a major role in helping them make informed choices. "Hormonally, teens are all over the map — their brain development is not at a place where they can evaluate themselves and do a good job of predicting outcomes of choices," says Annie Fox, an online advisor for teens and the author of [Middle School Confidential: Be Confident in Who You Are](#) (Free Spirit, 2008). "Therefore, they're more likely to make choices they'll later regret, from their need for peer approval. Grandparents can be a wonderful antidote to the stresses of peer group, school, and home, as they are less likely to have 'carved-in-stone' expectations of the child. Grandparents also have fewer short-term expectations than parents, so it's easier for the child to just 'be' with a grandparent."

**Be an oasis of acceptance.** "Your response to a teen is vital," says Alice Aspen March, author of [Attention: It's the Problem. It's the Solution](#). March, who helped her own granddaughter as she struggled with weight fluctuations, says, "If people think that they're not loved because of how they look, it's a serious problem. My granddaughter was very thin. Then she put on considerable weight and didn't know what to do. She'd discuss her insecurities with me, saying 'I'm so fat,' and I'd respond very low key. I'd ask, 'What would you like to hear from me? How can I help?'"

"I know I helped," March says, "because she kept coming back. She needed to be in my space, because she felt she was accepted. A grandmother can talk about her own body, and what she went through as a teen, so she connects with her grandchild on the inside. My own grandmother played a huge role in helping me feel good about myself, by giving unconditional love."

## When They Still Want Surgery

But how do you respond when a healthy, normal-size grandchild insists that she needs liposuction because she thinks she's too fat? "It's important to realize that you can't argue with an adolescent's reality," says Dr. David Elkind, author of [The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon](#) (Da Capo, 2001). "Present your position in a nonconfrontational way — *You may be right, but that's not the way I see it; What makes you think that?; Tell me more about your thoughts on the issue.* Help them think through their reality and in the process, help them gain a more objective perspective."

When a tween feels insecure about looks, athletic ability, or school performance, says Fox, you don't need to talk about it directly. Simply work to create an ongoing, positive relationship in which your grandchildren can feel good about themselves. "Catch a child in the act of doing something right," Fox advises. "Offer realistic and specific feedback like, 'I really liked how you helped your sister do her homework.' Don't just say, 'You're a great kid.' Young adults become self-confident when they're given a task and responsibility. Show appreciation. Give them the opportunity to try something and do it well and be acknowledged for it."

## More Ways to Help Granddaughters

Other ways you can help a granddaughter build self-confidence include sharing books with her like [Our Bodies, Ourselves](#) (Touchstone, 2005); encouraging her to exercise and eat a healthy diet, which should make her feel better about herself from head to toe; and shopping with her for a new outfit or taking her on a salon trip for a new hairstyle — making relatively minor improvements and adjustments to one's appearance can have a great impact on self-esteem.

Find more expert advice on teens and body image from the [Center for Young Women's Health](#), [The InSite](#), [Girls Inc.](#), [Uniquely Me](#), and [breastimplantinfo.org](#).

Elsewhere on Grandparents.com, find advice on how to respond [when a teenage grandchild becomes pregnant](#), learn what to do if your grandchild is being [cyberbullied](#), discover how to get "[alone time](#)" with your grandchildren, and join the discussion about whether your grandchildren should take a "[gap year](#)."

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