MEDIA Literacy
Self-esteem in a broadcast world.

by Nicole Clark

For the first time in history, the media has more face time with children than teachers have with them at school. The average tween spends approximately 75 hours with media — TV, movies, magazines, the Web, etc. — a week but only 35 to 40 hours in school.

It's clear that a new "educator" has taken power, and it's up to us as parents to pay close attention and ensure our children are getting stronger, more valuable messages and lessons at home and school.

While filming the documentary *Cover Girl Culture* (Zen Pen Films), I discovered how powerful the media's influence is on a girl's self-esteem and body image. Girls who have parents, namely mothers, with healthy body images have a greater immunity to the media's infectious messages about the "ideal" body.

When it comes to self-esteem, girls can really struggle. Many of the reasons for this were shared in *Cover Girl Culture* with statements like: "It's hard to be yourself," "Boys expect us to be like the celebrities," "The pressure to be sexy is everywhere we look," and "People get famous for doing shocking things." With such ideas paramount, why bother with school if success is all about looks and misbehaving?

Children are experiencing mental health issues such as depression, self-harm, and eating disorders at alarming rates. Studies show this is partly a result of the pressure on them to conform to a beauty ideal that is unattainable and unrealistic, as well as the pressure to be famous. Many children today associate fame with success. When they cannot achieve the level of fame that is shown to them on a daily basis, they can internalize this as failure.
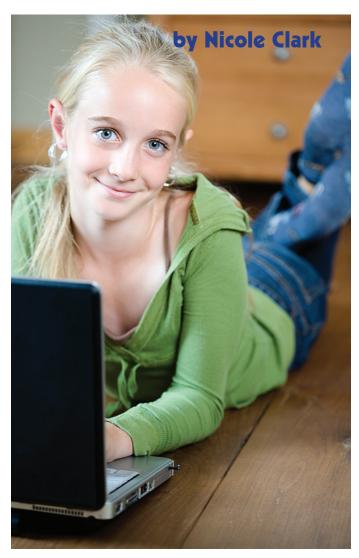
Just as you have parent-teacher meetings, you can also periodically check on the media your child is consuming. Having a TV in your child's bedroom is the equivalent of letting a stranger sit with your child and teach him his values about body image, self-worth, and what is important in life.

Media literacy is a parent's power tool to level the playing field and help children navigate a message-saturated world. Those of us who are old enough to remember first getting a TV in our homes know that the only media literacy we learned was, "Don't sit too close!" So we grew up trusting what we viewed as long as we sat far enough away.

Today, entertainment producers craft precise commercials and messages that speak directly to a child's subconscious mind. Advertisers are manipulating children's emotional centers in the brain to sell products, and it's become easier for them to create a generation of mindless consumers to fuel their business.

The good news is that media literacy can begin when your child is an infant. Your words and actions teach children what to value in yourself and others. There are countless resources available for parents to help build a child's media literacy skills and critical thinking.

Limiting media exposure when your child is young is one vital component to prevent unwanted messages from being planted in your child's mind.

Role-modeling healthy body image and self-esteem are two more essential tools parents can use on a daily basis to help override the media's messaging. Negative self-talk in front of your child only reinforces the media's messages. Connie Sobczak of The Body Positive initiative tells parents in her healthy body image program to say kind, empowering things about their own bodies in front of their kids even if they don't like their own bodies.

The same thing goes for how your child perceives your self-esteem. You do have the power to encourage your child's healthy self-esteem and values. It costs you nothing to do this, but it can cost your child's mental and emotional health if you don't.

Nicole Clark is the director of Cover Girl Culture and a spokesperson for the 4 Every Girl Campaign. She teaches media literacy via workshops in schools across North America. Learn more at www.covergirlculture.com.