

client handout

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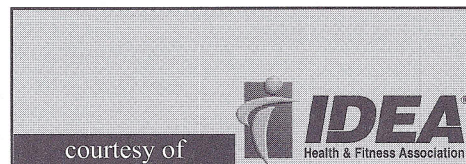
Kimberly A. Searl
www.mindbodybalance.com
By Appointment Only

Phone: 734 - 241 - 7457
Fax: 734 - 241 - 7457
kim@mindbodybalance.com

Girl Power

Many preteen and teen girls struggle with negative body image, eating disorders and inactivity. How can you foster self-esteem in girls and encourage them to lead healthy lives? Fitness writer April Durrett suggests ways you can help girls incorporate fitness and self-esteem-building activities into their lives.

- 1. Recognize That Many Girls Have Low Self-Esteem.** According to a study conducted by the online Vagisil Women's Health Center, teen girls who seem to know it all may actually be struggling with low self-esteem. In the study, health educators working with teenage girls reported that while they were more independent than their baby boomer parents were as teens, today's girls had less self-confidence and a weaker self-image.
- 2. Realize That Fitness and Sports Can Improve Self-Esteem.** Authors of a report commissioned by the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports found that exercise and sports participation can enhance girls' mental health. How? By engendering a positive body image; improving self-esteem; offering tangible experiences of competency and success; and increasing self-confidence. Also cited in the report were research findings indicating that physical activity is an effective tool for reducing symptoms of stress and depression among girls.
- 3. Encourage Girls to Get Active.** If girls show any interest in sports, do what you can to help them participate. They will benefit from being part of a team, learning to be good winners and losers, and taking risks. If they don't like sports, steer them toward other empowering fitness activities. Ask them about their interests and suggest ideas such as kickboxing, circuit training, stepping, hip hop and Nia.
- 4. Look for Girls' Programming.** Search for girls-only exercise classes or fitness clubs within local fitness facilities. Girls may feel more comfortable sweating when boys are not present! If nearby facilities don't offer girls' programming, invite your daughter(s)—or girls you know—to attend fitness classes with you.
- 5. Focus on Wellness Behaviors.** Share information on topics like healthy eating and nutrition, smoking prevention and healthy body image. Discussion of these issues works in tandem with exercise.
- 6. Encourage Girls to Talk.** Many girls learn to be quiet because they get the message that their words are not as highly valued as those of boys, explains Catherine Dee, author of *The Girls' Guide to Life* (Little Brown & Co. 1997). "Help girls move forward on this front by conveying that . . . their unique viewpoints should be shared."
- 7. Help Girls Criticize the Media.** Young people often think media images represent perfection. To help girls view ads with a critical eye, use this exercise from Kristen DeLeo, creator of *ElectriKids* in Los Angeles: Give a group of girls a pile of magazines. Ask the participants to tear out ads that promote negative body image, talk about why those ads make them mad and then rip up the ads. Next, tell the girls to look for positive ads in publications such as *Jump*, *Sports Illustrated for Women* and *Women's Sports and Fitness*. Suggest the group make a "girl power" collage with the positive images.
- 8. Focus on Achievements, Not Appearance.** "Girls are harshly judged by other girls, as well as written off by boys, if they don't fit within the bounds of our society's narrow definition of beauty," says Dee. "To help a girl develop a healthier self-image, compliment her for her achievements, thoughts and actions."
- 9. Give Sports- and Fitness-Related Presents.** Buy girls sports equipment or passes to fitness classes. Also, take girls to women's sporting events, to provide exposure to active female role models.
- 10. Look for Further Resources.** Check out organizations such as the Melpomene Institute (www.melpomene.org), which features sports and fitness resources for girls; and the Women's Sports Foundation (www.womenssportsfoundation.org), which offers a quiz to help girls find a sport that will be a good fit for them.



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