



LESSON PLAN: BEAUTY IS SKIN DEEP

OVERVIEW: Students reflect on the ways in which they have experienced or participated in name-calling based on physical appearance, and the ways in which expectations about appearance in our society affect us. They learn about media literacy and examine media images for “attractiveness messages” that consciously and unconsciously impact our attitudes and behavior toward others. Students learn about *Turn Beauty Inside Out Day*, write essays about people in their lives who are beautiful “inside and out,” and think about other ways to get beyond appearance as a dominant force in their social lives.

OBJECTIVES:

- Students will be able to explain how conscious and unconscious expectations regarding appearance impact us in negative ways
- Students will be able to think critically about “attractiveness messages” in the media
- Students will be able to identify specific actions they can take to move beyond appearance as a dominant force in their social lives

AGE/EXPERIENCE LEVEL: Grades 6-8

TIME: At least 90 minutes or two class periods

MATERIALS: Media images (from magazines, the internet, television, movies, or music); chart paper/markers; pens; Student handouts: *Messages from the Media*, *Media Investigation: Physical Appearance and Attractiveness*, and *Turn Beauty Inside Out Day Winning Essays*

PROCEDURE:

PART 1—INTRODUCING THE ACTIVITY (10-15 MINUTES)

Post the following questions on the board or read them aloud. Ask students to silently reflect on them:

- Have you ever been on the receiving end of a cruel comment about your physical appearance?
- Have others let you know, in some way, that you’re not good looking enough?
- Do you find clothes shopping unpleasant because of fears about how others will judge you?
- Have you ever skipped an activity to avoid comments about your appearance?



- Do you think often about dieting because of comments about your weight?
- Have you considered changing your hair or other aspects of your appearance to look better to others?
- Have you ever made cruel comments to others about their appearance?

Point out that, unfortunately, most of us would answer yes to at least one of the questions above. Name-calling about physical appearance—such as body size or shape, skin complexion, or facial features—is terribly cruel, yet all too common. Ask students why they think it is that we are so quick to judge others by their appearance and without getting to know them. Challenge students to articulate how we get our ideas about what others are “supposed” to look like in our society.

PART 2— MESSAGES FROM THE MEDIA (TIME WILL VARY)

If it has not already come up, point out to students that one way in which we get our ideas about what is attractive is through the media. Movies, magazines, television, and even video games often communicate unrealistic ideas about body image, and put pressure on us—even if we aren’t aware of it—to look a certain way. Distribute the handout, *Messages from the Media*, or use an overhead projector to display it at the front of the room. The handout includes the following statistics:

- A study of over 4,000 television commercials revealed that 1 out of every 3 to 4 commercials sends some sort of “attractiveness message,” telling viewers what is or is not attractive. The average teenager sees over 5,000 “attractiveness messages” each year.
- One study found that teens who watch soaps and TV shows that emphasize the ideal body type report a higher sense of body dissatisfaction than other teens. This was also true for girls who watched music videos.
- Another study found that identification with television stars (for girls and boys), models (for girls) and athletes (for boys), is related to their unhappiness with their bodies.
- In a study of fifth graders, 10-year-old girls and boys told researchers they were unhappy with their own bodies after watching a music video by Britney Spears or a clip from the TV show, *Friends*.
- A psychological study in 1995 found that three minutes spent looking at models in a fashion magazine caused 70% of women to feel depressed, guilty and shameful.



Ask students to respond to these statistics and to comment on the extent to which they think they are affected by “attractiveness messages” they receive on a daily basis. Tell students that one way to resist some of the media’s false messages about appearance—and their effect on our self-esteem and behavior toward others—is to become *media literate*. This means thinking about the values behind media images, raising critical questions about them, and being aware of who created them and for what purpose.

Tell students that they will be practicing media literacy by selecting up to three media representations to study. This investigation can be assigned as homework or done in class if the media representations are collected in advance. Students can select magazines, websites, TV shows or commercials, movies or music videos that are popular with their peers. Give each student a copy of the chart, *Media Investigation: Physical Appearance and Attractiveness*, which they can use to take notes as they research. For each item that they study, have students write and discuss their answers to one or more of the following questions:

1. Who created the magazine (or show, video, movie, etc.) and for what purpose?
2. How many and what type of “attractiveness messages” were communicated? (These can be verbal, types of people or characters, gestures or expressions, types of clothing, etc.)
3. Do these messages reflect real life and real people in your community?
4. What are the values or beliefs behind these messages? Do you agree with them?
5. What techniques are being used to get you to buy into the messages?
6. How might these messages affect your own or others’ attitudes about physical appearance?
7. What important images or messages have been left out?

PART 3— TURNING BEAUTY INSIDE OUT (TIME WILL VARY)

Suggest to students that expressions like “beauty is only skin deep” and “don’t judge a book by its cover” seem to be empty clichés in our culture today. Ask them if they agree and whether or not they believe that most people reflect such values in their behavior toward others. Challenge students to think about concrete ways that they can change the culture in their own class or school around this issue. Ask what can they do to get beyond appearance as a dominant force in the way they relate to one another. List their ideas on a sheet of chart paper so that they can be discussed and followed up on at a later time.

Tell students that girls around the country are putting this way of thinking to action each year on *Turn Beauty Inside Out Day*, which encourages people to submit essays about girls in their lives who are beautiful inside and out (see <http://www.newmoon.org>). The handout, *Turn Beauty Inside Out Day Winning Essays*, includes some of the 2003 entries, which you can share with your students.



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Ask students to write an essay about someone “beautiful” in their lives (emphasize that it doesn’t have to be a girl). This can be assigned as homework or completed as an in-class writing activity. When students have completed their essays, ask for a few volunteers to share their pieces with the class and to receive feedback from their peers. Extend this activity by revisiting the ideas brainstormed earlier about ways to get beyond appearance, and by making plans to put one or more of these ideas into action.



MESSAGES FROM THE MEDIA

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- **Another study found that identification with television stars (for girls and boys), models (for girls) and athletes (for boys), is related to their unhappiness with their bodies.**
- **In a study of fifth graders, 10-year-old girls and boys told researchers they were unhappy with their own bodies after watching a music video by Britney Spears or a clip from the TV show, *Friends*.**
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**MEDIA INVESTIGATION:
PHYSICAL APPEARANCE AND ATTRACTIVENESS**

Title of magazine, TV show, movie, video, commercial, etc.	Number of “attractiveness messages”	Description of “attractiveness messages”	Techniques used to get buy-in to messages



TURN BEAUTY INSIDE OUT DAY: WINNING ESSAYS

LILY GONZALEZ: AGE 13, ILLINOIS (SUBMITTED BY MONICA BROWN)

The most beautiful girl I know is my best friend in the whole wide world. She's the best person to hang out with because she knows how to make you laugh no matter what the circumstances are.

Lily is strong emotionally. She gets teased because she is one of the shortest people in our grade, but she doesn't let anyone get to her. She just tells them what's on her mind and then walks away. I like that about her. Once when two kids were mean to me, she stepped right up and told them off. Then she said, with a self-satisfied air, "Thank me later." I cracked up. Another time she was sent to the principal's office for no reason. When she got there, she stood up for herself, and they worked it out. She walked away with a hurt ego but an innocent heart.

At school, I tend to use a lot of big words like "procrastination," "melancholy," and "devastation." Lily always says, "And in English, that would mean...?" She calls me her "walking, talking dictionary." She has a great sense of humor.

Lily is the best friend a girl could have. She's funny, strong, energetic, and friendly. If she doesn't fit the definition of beautiful, I don't know who does.

"A beautiful person speaks from the heart and has a positive attitude and strong feelings. Stand up for your rights and be proud that you're one of the many beautiful girls in this world."—Lily Gonzalez, Beautiful Girl

MICHAELA SHAW: AGE 13, MASSACHUSETTS (SUBMITTED BY KYLE AHLERS)

What makes a girl beautiful? Long blonde hair? The latest fashions? A steady boyfriend? No. To me, she has to be a good, understanding friend. She has to be honest and supportive. A beautiful girl makes a difference in the lives of those she meets. This describes my best friend, Michaela.

She's the most supportive friend I've ever met. I have lesbian mothers, and Michaela is always the first to denounce hurtful gay jokes, slurs or comments at school or on the bus. She recognizes that it's sometimes hard for me to speak out against gay put-downs, so she intervenes. Once, when a man realized my mom was gay, he told me I lived in a bad family. When my mom got teary-eyed, Michaela grabbed her hand and told her the man was wrong. She also comes yearly to the Gay Pride parade with my family.

Mippy, as my 4-year-old brother, Tucker, calls her, is great with kids. While I'm quick to snap at Tucker, she's patient with him. And she can make everyone laugh with her perfect imitation of his silly behavior.



Kayla's a straight-A student who excels in basketball, skiing, and kayaking. She's a beautiful dancer and flute player. Her entire personality is strong, and she strives to be the best she can be. But mostly, Michaela is my supporter, playmate, and best friend. She makes a difference in my life. Isn't that what a beautiful girl should do?

Becoming Beautiful the Michaela Way: "The less judgmental you are toward others, the more beautiful you become."

SOPHIE VIZZA HINES, AGE 13, MASSACHUSETTS (SUBMITTED BY SARAFINA MIDZIK)

Her densely freckled nose wrinkles mischievously. "Come on, Sarah," she pleads. "Let's go switch the salt and sugar." It's 11:00 p.m. the night before April Fool's Day, and my friend Sophie and I are pulling one of our usual pranks.

Sophie doesn't conform to what others think she should be. She doesn't follow fashion trends—she prefers baggy clothes to the popular tight fitting jeans and tops. She's comfortable with who she is. She skateboards, backpacks, and spends many lazy summer days catching frogs in her pond.

Sophie believes the world would be a better place for girls if people didn't tell them how to act and look.

Never one to back down and let others run the show, Sophie speaks her mind and voices her opinions. Once when she was skateboarding in the park, five high-school guys remarked, "Girls can't skateboard!" Sophie said, "I can!" and convinced them by landing two ollies. We left the park laughing.

Her friendship is the strongest and most loyal one I've ever had. We share, joke, and even fight like real sisters. A truly amazing gal, Sophie is one of the most bee-yoo-ti-ful girls I've ever known.

"My goal is to invent something to help our environment."— Sophie Vizza Hines

ELAISE BUSH, AGE 11, CALIFORNIA (SUBMITTED BY VALERIE JEAN BUSH)

Geek. Weirdo. Stupid. Loser. Teacher's Pet.

Some kids try to put each other into imaginary boxes, but my sister, Elaise (also known as Lacie), doesn't play those games. She brushes off the heaviest peer pressure and insults. I think she's really brave. And I think it helps that she has interests outside of school and supportive



parents who encourage her to think for herself.

Lacie and I have been performing together since she was old enough to memorize a simple song. Our mom is a music teacher and always encourages us. At our grandparents' 50th anniversary, in front of hundreds of people, Lacie stole the microphone from me! I didn't resist because she was only 4 and very cute.

We like finding new ways to be creative and sharing these experiences keeps us very busy! We've done plays and musical puppet shows, complete with homemade theaters and puppets. We've performed vocal and instrumental solos and duets at church, schools, and the local Moose lodge. We've choreographed dances to perform in community talent shows, and we make movies with our video camera. One movie was so good that the local elementary school put it in their library!

Because we do these things together, it's easier to do what we want—even if other kids don't think it's cool. We're closer than most sisters because we work as a team and share the sense of accomplishment.

DREW DAKESSIAN, AGE 13, OREGON (SUBMITTED BY PAULA BUTTERFIELD)

The most beautiful part of my daughter is her mind. Drew has Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), which makes it difficult for her to focus and concentrate. She has to work longer and harder than most other kids to get the A's she demands of herself. On top of that, she usually adds a little something extra to her assignments. I'm in awe of her determination!

Like many kids with ADD, Drew is creative. She's uninhibited and thinks "outside the box." She acts, sings, dances and writes amazing stories. At her recent piano recital, she performed an original composition.

Because she was teased for being different, Drew learned from an early age to seek her self-worth within. She says, "It's hard to be teased, and I'd be lying to say it doesn't hurt. But in a few years those bullies will see girls like me doing something great for the world."

Drew is determined to be the first woman U.S. president. She says, "I've been collecting future votes from my classmates and teachers for two years. I have a whole path planned out." If we're lucky, one day this vibrant, funny, loving girl will lead our nation!

Turn Beauty Inside Out Day essays reprinted with permission from the May/June 2003 issue of New Moon Magazine (<http://www.newmoon.org>)