

## 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 write 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 away from appearance as a dominant force in their social lives.



### AGE/EXPERIENCE LEVEL

Grade 3-5.



### THINGS TO PREP & TOOLS NEEDED

Media images (from magazines, the internet, television, movies, or music), chart paper/markers, pens, student handout: messages from the media.



### TIME

90 minutes.

### 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 an unkind comment about your physical appearance, how you look, your clothes, your body shape?
- Do you find clothes shopping unpleasant because of difficulty finding fitting and flattering

clothes, or from fears about how others will judge you?

- Have you ever skipped an activity to avoid comments about your appearance?
- Have you considered changing your hair or other aspects of your appearance to look better to others?
- Have you ever made unkind 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, and consider what identities are represented in those ideas.

### **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, social media, 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 youth who watched music videos.
- Another study found that identification with television stars, models (mainly for girls) and athletes (mainly for boys), is related to their unhappiness with their bodies.
- In a study of fifth graders, 10-year-olds told researchers they were unhappy with their own bodies after watching a music video by top pop artists or a clip from popular TV shows.
- A psychological study 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 analyzing media representations. This investigation can be done in groups with media representation examples collected in advance. Students can select magazines, websites, TV shows or commercials, movies or music videos that are popular at the time. 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)**

Tell students about expressions like “beauty is only skin deep” and “don’t judge a book by its cover”. Ask them whether or not they believe that most people show these ideas in their behavior toward others. Challenge students to think about concrete ways that they can change the perspective in their own class or school around these ideas. Ask what can they do to get beyond appearance as valuable way they relate to one another. How else can you feel important and valued? What are ways we can appreciate all different types of appearances and styles? List their ideas on a sheet of chart paper so that they can be discussed and followed up on at a later time.

Ask students to write a story 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 stories, ask for a few volunteers to share their pieces with the class and to receive feedback from their peers.



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### HANDOUT

#### MESSAGES FROM THE MEDIA

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### OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIFFERENTIATION

For younger grades and students who need more support, previewing the material and the big ideas can help them to better participate in the lesson. Groups can be created intentionally to pair students who have a stronger understanding of the concept with students who may need more support. When selecting the media images for the group work in part 2, choose images or videos that are familiar to students who need more support, and have them focus on just questions 1, 3, and 7 for the reflection. For older students or students who need more of a challenge, have them find additional media images, pair them with students who need more support, and ask them to write an additional report with a reflection and action plan for addressing this problem.

### OTHER LESSONS TO EXPLORE

Blow the Whistle on Name Calling, Building a Bully-Free Building, Garden of Kindness.

### FOLLOW-UP/EXTENSIONS

Extend this activity by revisiting the ideas brainstormed during the lesson about ways to get beyond appearance, and by making plans to put one or more of these ideas into action.

### TAGS

No Name-Calling Week, Kindness, identity, anti-bullying.

DID YOU PARTICIPATE IN THIS ACTIVITY? TELL US HOW IT WENT AND WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN BETTER!  
EMAIL US AT [EDUCATORS@GLSEN.ORG](mailto:EDUCATORS@GLSEN.ORG).

