

3 Critical Components to Help Teens Understand Their Physical Identity

Today I continue the blog series about helping children develop a complete identity with a look at the physical self. I've already written about the importance of several others. When you think about children having an identity related to their physical selves, what do you think of?

Three Components of This Identity

- **Physical Health:** I remember when I was in sixth grade, and a boy named Jay tripped me while we were ice-skating. He used a broom that we were supposed to be using for a fun game. His choice resulted in my right arm breaking. For weeks, all people seemed to notice about me was that I was in a cast and had a broken arm. That's all they wanted to talk about. And I bet I enjoyed talking about it, too.
- Children and teens with ongoing health issues can perhaps put too much of their identity in this component. Or, they might be forced to if that's all people ask about or talk about when with them. People might not know about their intellectual, emotional and social identities and which character qualities they highly value. This is definitely limiting.
- **Physical Abilities:** a second component of the physical self. This certainly includes athletics. Teenagers who value this part of themselves, when asked who they are, will tell you first that they are a starter on the basketball team or that they enjoy playing soccer. Drama is also associated with physical ability, because if you're good at drama, you can make your whole body look old even though you are young, you can laugh with your

whole body to exaggerate when you are on stage and you can stand as still as a statue if your role requires it for a while. Working with your hands with clay or having the small-motor coordination to do science experiments carefully is also part of the physical-ability self.

- **Appearance Self:** This is the part of the physical self that most people think of first. Tall, short, overweight, slender, beautiful blue eyes, fair skin, naturally curly hair ... you get the idea.

How Can We Talk To Our Kids About Their Physical Selves?

In 1 Samuel 16:7, we read that God looks at the heart. He would want us to also. I enjoy telling children that there are very few people described by physical appearance in the Bible. When we do know something about the physical identity, it is because it is relevant to the purpose for which they were created. For example, we know Esther was beautiful because it is relevant to her story. We know Sampson had long hair because it's relevant to his story.

If you don't want your children and teens to over-emphasize their physical appearance selves, don't talk about that aspect often. If they hear you talk with others about their beauty or if you compliment them more about that than anything else, they'll start to prioritize it. They might think it's the basis of their security with you. They may think, *My dad doesn't know much about me, but he sure thinks it's important that I'm pretty.*

Would you want your children to talk about all three components of a physical identity if you were talking with them about their physical selves? Why or why not? What would you prefer them to say or value? How do you want them to prioritize this identity in relation to their social, emotional, character qualities and intellectual identities?

What I Thought Teens Would Say

Those of you who have been reading my blogs know that earlier this summer, I spoke with several hundred seventh-graders about who they were created to be. I asked them to identify a high compliment they could receive about their physical identity. I was stunned and very encouraged by some of the responses. These were what I thought many teens would list:

- Strong, athletic
- Fast, good-looking, athletic
- Strong, beautiful
- Sexy, fast, strong
- Strong, fast
- Pretty, athletic, fit
- Beautiful, strong
- Athletic, strong, in shape
- Good at sports
- Handsome, muscular, athletic
- Physically fit, strong
- Athletic

Check out these responses. What do they indicate? I think these young people are mature and were able to think of others and respond with maturity. How I wish that schools and church groups would be full of kids wanting these physical identities and looking for these identities in others.

- Diverse
- Beautiful in their own way
- Comfortable, different, unique
- Comfortable with yourself
- Confident
- Naturally healthy

What Do You Think?

Again, what would you prefer your teens or children value regarding their physical selves? Are you strategically parenting so they will? What are you talking about? Not

talking about? What do you affirm? Do you criticize something over and over again?

Also, when we find out what children and teens value, what can we do to help them either achieve their preferences or change them if we believe they're unhealthy or unrealistic? Think about this, too, and maybe talk with your children. For instance, seven groups of my seventh-graders value "strong." I wonder what they mean by that and why it's important to them. Would they like to work to become strong or do they just hope it will happen? What about "beautiful in their own way"? (I love this one!) What thinking patterns do they need so they can believe this of themselves and others? What difference might it make? This would be such a great discussion!

As always, thanks for reading my words. I praise God for your interest and teachability. Now, invest in your children because you took the time to read this. Oh—what if we invested in ourselves and our thoughts regarding our physical self? Yes, that might be worth it, too. For sure!

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