

Tips for Parents

Real to me: Girls and Reality TV/ Girl Scout Research Institute

Reality TV is a popular form of entertainment for young people today. While this may seem like a benign phenomenon, our research suggests that girls who view reality TV on a regular basis are impacted significantly on personal and social levels. Regular viewers seem to have more extreme expectations of how the world works and relate to their peers differently than do those who don't watch as much. Reality TV can also serve as a learning tool, inspire families to explore new interests and activities, and encourage young people to get involved in social causes.

Tip #1: TV watching is the number-one activity for girls, but they don't necessarily want it to be this way. Use this opportunity to create alternatives for your entire family.

Watching TV takes up more time than any other activity for the group—girls ages 11 through 17—we studied. On average these girls spend 12 hours a week in front of the screen, which outpaces the time they spend doing homework (9 hours), on a social networking site (8 hours), and with friends outside of school (8 hours). And be mindful that these days not all TV viewing involves an actual TV set. Oftentimes, girls watch shows on their computers or mobile devices. Also, viewing may take place in the background of other activities—while doing homework, eating meals, social networking, hanging out with friends, etc.

The good news is that girls would like to spend their time differently. Ninety percent of girls would rather spend an hour hanging out with friends than an hour watching their favorite TV show, and 84% would rather spend an hour doing a fun activity. This finding is similar to one from the GSRI study on social media, which found that even though girls today communicate profusely through the computer and/or their mobile devices, most prefer in-person time with friends.

The takeaway here is the value of encouraging friend time and alternative activities to TV. What are some activities that your daughter enjoys doing that don't involve television? And remember: parents have an important role in modeling healthy TV consumption. Are you a parent with an excessive viewing habit? Are you part of a family that has the TV on during dinner or in the background while having conversations with other family members? How often do you model alternative family or individual activities and hobbies?

You can even think about ways you can use what you see on TV to get the family interested in other things. For instance:

- o Try out a recipe seen on a cooking program.
- o Explore a place—through books or the computer, or in person—inhabited or visited by characters in a program you like.
- o Engage in a fun family activity seen on a favorite show.

Put effort into demonstrating that face-to-face communication and enjoyable activities are important in your family, and you'll create a healthier balance between TV and other things family members like to do.

Tip #2: Reality TV is here to stay, but not all shows are created equal. Be mindful of the type of reality TV your daughter is consuming, consider watching with her, and use the shows as learning tools and conversation starters.

In our study only 53% of 11- to 13-year-old and 8% of 14- to 17-year-old girls say that their parents regularly monitor what they watch. And despite parental limitations and concerns, most girls watch reality TV, and almost half watch it regularly. Fully 41% of girls say their parents don't approve of them watching reality TV but 71% do it anyway.

There are many types of reality TV, and you might be more comfortable with your daughter watching certain genres over others. A large part of the reason girls watch reality TV is to stay current with their friends and family, so it might not be realistic (or necessary) to set limitations on all reality TV. But you can do your homework. What are the shows that you feel are appropriate for your entire family and which don't you think children or adolescents should be watching? What types of shows do you watch?

Our study suggests that competition-based shows (American Idol, Project Runway, etc.) and makeover shows (The Biggest Loser, Extreme Home Makeover, etc.) have the most potential for inspiring conversations with parents and friends, making girls feel like anything is possible, and helping girls realize that there are people out there like them. These shows have an educational and awareness-based component, portraying new ideas and perspectives; increasing girls' exposure to people with different backgrounds, values, and beliefs; and teaching girls things they might not have learned otherwise. Makeover shows in particular raise awareness about important social issues and causes.

Be on the lookout for "teachable moments" and consider ways to initiate potentially challenging conversations, using reality TV as a prompt. Think about watching reality TV programs together as a family and talking about them afterwards. For instance:

- o Did your daughter relate to the characters or scenarios?
- o What did she think about the situations portrayed? Does she have any questions?
- o What did she agree or disagree with? What is the most valuable thing she came away with?
- o Is she inspired by what she saw? What inspires her?
- o Does x-show encourage new passions or thoughts about what she wants to be when she grows up?

If there are elements of a given reality show that concern you, strike up a conversation about them. Try not to restrict viewing without giving a reason: talk about what concerns you and if/why you think certain shows are a bad influence. (Read on for more information on the specific impact of reality TV on girls, including tips for responding.) Have conversations with your daughter about the messages these shows send and try to understand what's attracting her to them. Does she take them seriously? What does she think of the characters?

By being mindful of the variety of reality programs that exists and monitoring/participating in what your daughter is watching, you are in a better place to inspire conversation and learning.

Tip #3: Talk about the differences between reality TV and actual reality.

This is especially true of girls who watch reality TV regularly. These girls are more likely to be comfortable with gossiping, feel that girls have to compete for a boy's attention, and say it's natural for girls to be catty and competitive with one another than are girls who watch reality TV less frequently. They are also less likely to trust other girls and to place more value on being mean and/or lying to get ahead.

What girls don't often recognize is that much of what they consider "real" is actually scripted. In the Girl Scout Leadership Journey MEdia, TV producer Melissa Freeman Fuller shares that crew members often feed lines to participants, set up situations, and edit shots to make things seem more dramatic and interesting.* As an adult, you may be able to distinguish between reality and scripted TV and to take the latter with a grain of salt, but young people are more impressionable and perhaps believing in and mimicking these behaviors.

When talking about reality TV with your daughter, ask her what she thinks is real and if she thinks any of a given program might be scripted or "fake" and why/why not. Posing further questions—*did you like how she/he reacted to that situation? what would you have done? why do you think that way?*—can offer you a glimpse into how your child is processing what she's viewing. Some additional inquiries:

- o Does your daughter find herself mimicking the negative behaviors depicted or is she totally turned off by them?
- o Does she assume this is just the way the world works?
- o Does she know a lot of people who depict these behaviors?
- o What are some ways she might react differently that could produce a better outcome?

Also think about ways in which you might be inadvertently blurring the lines between reality and reality TV yourself. Do you find that you talk about reality show characters as though they are your real friends? Do you do this in front of or with your children?

Because girls so often think that what they see in reality TV programs is an accurate portrait of real life, it is imperative that you discuss the differences between the two. If shows don't reflect your daughter's reality, encourage her to create media that does.*

Tip #4: Encourage your daughter to look beyond the mirror.

Girls who regularly view reality TV are focused on the importance of physical appearance and more likely to think that a girl's value is based on this, and it's a shame, because of course girls have so much more to offer the world than their looks. Make sure your daughter knows this. Compliment her on her talents and praise her for her values or willingness to try new things. Encourage her to pursue interests that are not based on improving her looks.

Particularly for mothers, it is critical to be aware of what is said and done around daughters with regard to one's own physical appearance. In a recent study, the GSRI found a substantial link between how a mother feels about her body and how a girl feels about hers. Girls look to their mothers for advice on healthy living



and positive self-esteem, and you may be unwittingly sending the wrong message.

Tip #5: Model healthy relationships.

One of the more troubling findings of this study is that reality TV shows seem to promote questionable behavior, appearing to compel girls to act out stereotypes like being catty and competitive and fighting among themselves for guys' attention. Girls understand that reality shows depict unhealthy relationships, but they don't always understand that these kinds of behaviors aren't and don't need to be the norm. As long as girls think that other girls can't be trusted and that it's necessary to fight and beat out others in order to "win" the affection of a romantic interest, they will continue to engage in actions like those above.

Girls need to believe that they can trust one another and that not all girls are out there to hurt others through relational aggression, bullying, and other detrimental behaviors. As a parent, keep your eye out for potential harmful behaviors between your daughter and her friends/peers. Promote healthy relationships and prevent gossiping in your own life so that your daughter has a model of healthy relating to look to. Think about groups or places in which your daughter can build positive relationships, such as Girl Scouts, and encourage her to develop these relationships with her peers.

Tip #6: Keep girls grounded.

Some reality shows feature characters competing for a prize, be it fame, fortune, or status, and in some cases these characters choose to lie, cheat, or be mean along the way. Regular reality TV viewers are more likely than their non-viewing counterparts to internalize this and believe that one has to do these things in order to get ahead in life.

As well, many girls want to become famous—more so now than in years past. While it's encouraging that girls have high hopes for their futures, it's important they don't go overboard to become noticed and recognized. Becoming famous often means focusing on external beauty and acting out; it's critical that girls remain grounded and in possession of the positive values instilled in them by family and other healthy influences. Continue to encourage your daughter to cultivate such internal assets as assertiveness, confidence, individuality, and creativity; she'll go far.

More information on the research cited here can be found at www.girlscouts.org/research.

**The Leadership Journey MEdia helps girls think critically about the media they consume. This Journey experience is designed for middle school girls and encourages participants to take a closer look at all media (television, movies, songs, video games, etc.) and to remake what they see, putting their "real me" in media. For more information on Girl Scout programming, please visit www.girlscouts.org/program/journeys.*