

what you see in me



OVERVIEW: Students discuss pressures related to physical appearance and write about an aspect of their own appearance that they feel good about. In small groups, each student hears characteristics unrelated to appearance that the others admire in him or her.

OBJECTIVES: To enable students to describe how cultural pressures related to appearance affect their self-esteem; to increase their awareness of their own positive qualities (both related and unrelated to their appearance); to enhance their sensitivity toward their peers.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1 Open discussion, using the following guiding questions:
 - Many factors influence how we feel about our bodies. Is our body strong and healthy? Do the larger society and the media depict all kinds of body types as attractive? How do you feel when you have to get used to a lot of changes in your body over a fairly short time? Is too much emphasis placed on appearance and not enough on our other qualities? We will explore some of these questions today.
 - Think about when you were nine years old. How do most nine-year-olds feel about their bodies and how they look? Do most children worry a lot about their looks? *[You may want to ask students to express their answers as a number between 1 and 10, where 1 = they don't worry at all, and 10 = they worry about it a lot/most of the time.]*

- What happens during adolescence? Do most adolescents feel carefree and comfortable about their appearance, or do they worry about how they look? *[Again, answers may be expressed in a 1–10 range.]*
- What kinds of messages and images do adolescents receive from movies and advertisements about how they should look and what their bodies should be like? Is this pressure more intense for girls or for boys?
- Are adolescents often judged by their appearance? Do most people want to be judged on this basis? What other positive qualities do people want to have others appreciate? *[Call on girls as well as boys. Probe for: intelligent, honest, good sense of humor, hardworking, courageous, kind, artistic, musical, athletic, generous, fair, good listener, loyal, and other such qualities of character. Generate at least eight to ten qualities and write them on the board. Point out that girls as well as boys want to be appreciated for these qualities.]*

DURATION:

45 minutes

MATERIALS:

Board+chalk; one blank sheet of paper per student (if possible, use paper that is colored, poster-weight, large, or otherwise special).

TO PREPARE:

If you are aware of students who have a hostile relationship, form the small groups (Step 3) so that those students are not grouped together. It is crucial to watch your time flow, including during Step 3, so that each student has a turn to be praised before the session ends. If you wish to explore further the influence of advertising on body image, also see Activity 9.

2 Ask students to take out pen and paper. Tell them:

- Think of something about your own appearance or body that you feel good about. It could be your smile, your eyes, the way you walk, your muscles, your hair, or your height. It could be your body shape, your nose, the way you dance or move, the shape of your face, your arms or legs, your hands, your skin, your dimples, or your lips. Or it could be something else.
- Just for yourself — you will not be asked to share this — write it down. Write a poetic sentence describing that characteristic, such as “My smile brightens up a whole room.” Or “My eyes are deep like the ocean.”
- You have ten minutes. When you finish, put your writing away in a private place.

3 After students put away their writing, divide them into groups of five. Pass out five blank sheets of paper and one marker to each group. Explain:

- Remember that we all want to be appreciated for qualities beyond our appearance.
- Starting with one person in your group, someone will write the person’s name at the top of a blank sheet. Then one at a time, each of you in the group will take a turn to tell that person something that you admire about him or her that is not related to the person’s physical appearance. It could be any of the qualities that you

mentioned earlier [*refer to the board*] or another positive trait. It may be something immediately obvious to you, or you may want to consider something about the person that you might not have paid much attention to before today.

- When you name this quality, write it on the sheet with the person’s name.
- After you write down your word, pass the sheet to another person in your group. Continue until the sheet has gone around the circle.
- Then repeat this process for each of the remaining group members. Be sure to offer your praise both verbally and in writing. Take just a couple of minutes to go around the circle for each person. I will help you keep time so that everyone has a turn. [*Be sure to divide the remaining time into five equal segments. Circulate to keep the groups progressing in a timely — and respectful — fashion.*]
- Before we start, what are some rules that we should all observe in carrying out this activity? [*Probe for: be respectful; think of new comments rather than repeating what others have said; do not skip your turn. Even if you have someone in your group whom you do not like much, remember that everyone has good qualities. Treat others the way you would like to be treated.*]
- When you are done, you may keep your “page of praise.” You earned it!