

"HE SAID WHAT?!"

I actually choked on my soda the other night as I surfed through status updates on Facebook. One of the girls from my group had just posted, "I hate when my coach says 'C'mon, you can beat them. You're bigger than half their team!' Like is that really supposed to be a positive thing?"

Wow.

There's a not-so-subtle difference between guys and girls and body image. If one of my high school coaches ever said that to me, I would've taken it as a compliment. It would have pumped me up, boosted my confidence—and it certainly wouldn't have made me feel like I was being called "fat." Words carry so much weight. But it doesn't always seem as though enough guys get it. I've heard too many male youth workers cracking fat jokes, uttering insensitive remarks, and even making some innocent-but-damaging comments. One of my volunteers told me about the time he was talking about two girls in our group with the same name, but very different heights, so he distinguished them by using the word big before the taller girl's name. He was startled when the girls at youth group within earshot all reacted so strongly!

We live in a culture that puts way too much value on impossible-to-attain images—especially where it concerns females. Our girls are bombarded on a daily basis, and social media has brought that to a whole new level. With the immense popularity of texting among teens, there are those "trolling," anonymous kids who feel comfortable tearing down their peers via texting (and other social networks) in ways they'd never do in person, shredding fragile body images in the process. On the other side of the equation, it also seems as though teens get praise for all the wrong visuals—they affirm each others' provocative photos, encourage each other to post semi-pornographic (even pornographic) images, and spread them like wildfire with their cell phones.

All that to say, youth leaders play a vital role in reinforcing a healthy body image that views them as the dwelling places of a holy and perfect God—temples that are beautiful, sacred, and encompass measureless worth.

In my mind, Jesus' warning about causing children to stumble is lived out in this area as well—we must choose our words carefully! Again, for male youth workers, this seems to be particularly challenging. Let's be honest: Women know what words, jokes, nicknames, and phrases push a young girl's body-image buttons—and they know to avoid them.

You should have seen the look of horror on two of my female youth leaders' faces last week when one teen jokingly told one of the girls in our group that she "looked fat." I thought they were going to give him the beat down of the year!

Here are a few guidelines I try to follow in my interactions with girls in my group:

- *Never, never—never ever—joke about weight or use any kind of wording that could remotely come across as saying your girls are big, heavy, or large.* Never. It doesn't matter if you're positive she won't take it badly—because you're mistaken (she will). To say



nothing about how other kids present are listening to and imitating your words.

- *Don't make fun of hair, braces, or outfits.* Sure, it might look as though she "just threw it on," but she probably spent significantly more time than any of the guys in the room, just agonizing over the perfect look. Instead the church needs to be a safe place, an environment where people aren't self-conscious about their image.
- *Find ways to affirm and complement girls.* I love Heather Flies' advice from her seminar on ministry to high school girls at the National Youth Workers Convention: If a girl looks remotely different to you, ask her if she did something different to her hair—and let her know it looks great! You wouldn't think this would work, but teenage girls are doing something different to their hair all the time, and the glow they feel after being noticed is great for their self-confidence.

At the end of the day, as with so many areas of our ministries, we must be careful and intentional with the words we use. And male leaders—ask the female leaders in your group to give you ideas on how to build up and communicate more effectively with the girls in your program. Let your words be an effective tool in empowering teens to view their bodies the way that God does (and not the way the world views their bodies).



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