

Chapter One

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You Are Who You Are

BEAUTY AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE

*It is hard to let your personality flourish when you are pointlessly paralyzed by insecurities about your physique. Both boys and girls can be horribly cruel and childishly thoughtless. Character and personality are much more important and ultimately win out. For time passes and youthful beauty with it.*

—HELEN MIRREN

*Pretty . . . skinny . . . perfect.*

These were the words I kept hearing over and over again as I spoke with teenage girls across the country. What did they love about themselves? What would they change? What image were they trying to live up to? Whether they lived on the East Coast or the West, in the Midwest or the South, their voices seemed to speak in unison: “I want to be pretty. I want to be skinny. I want perfection like I see on TV and in the magazines.” These girls created a beautiful rainbow of skin tones, hair textures, and figures, from curvaceous to boyish. They were tall like basketball players, small like gymnasts, and in between like the girl next door. I found them all uniquely beautiful, but they all admitted to feeling pressure to somehow look better than they did. And it was also clear

that their idea of beauty was all about being pretty and thin and perfect. What an impossible standard to live up to!

Though I could fill an entire book with stories and quotes from girls who desperately wished they looked different, here are just a few of the things they told me:

*You can never be skinny enough. It makes you feel like you're never perfect because you never reach your destination.*

—AMANDA, FOURTEEN

*I don't have enough time to tell you all the things I would change about my body. I feel I should work out more and get fit. I'm nineteen, so I'm not so young anymore.*

—TARA, NINETEEN

*My friends who are light-skinned always get more attention than I do because my skin is very dark and I don't have straight hair. It makes me feel like I'm not worth as much as they are.*

—LAILA, FIFTEEN

*I asked my mom for a new pair of jeans for my birthday, but I want her to get them a size two because I'm going on this new diet I read about.*

—SOPHIA, SEVENTEEN

*Super-skinny is in vogue. Girls get that from the media and celebrities. I would do just about anything to be just as skinny.*

—LINDSEY, SIXTEEN

*Boys really like long hair, and I want to get extensions because my hair is so short. My mom told me I have to wait, but some of my friends got extensions in middle school.*

—MARISA, FIFTEEN

This pressure to be and feel beautiful is not new. I am sure all of you reading now have experienced it—that sense of

looking in the mirror and wishing you looked different, a bit better, thinner, more beautiful . . . something closer to perfect. But what does perfect really mean, anyway? We are all vulnerable to the images of beauty all around us. These images are ubiquitous and send the unfortunate message that in order to be considered acceptable, we have to look a certain way—almost always some other way than we actually do.

### *Girls Inc. Link: We All Feel It*

Everyone else secretly feels it, too. If you're among the young women who feel anxious about your weight or appearance as it compares with the "ideal," you're not alone. According to the Girls Inc. "Supergirl Dilemma" study\*:

- 69 percent of girls interviewed are concerned about their appearance;
- 55 percent of girls actively worry about how they look;
- 34 percent believe they are too fat.

### *Stars in Our Eyes*

Most of the girls I talked to were crystal clear on the role celebrities play in reinforcing these ideals and the so-called myth of perfection. As seventeen-year-old Carrie from New York told me, "I think there are a lot of girls who want to mimic the image of celebrities. They want to change themselves—they don't want to be their own person."

\**The Supergirl Dilemma: Girls Grapple with Mounting Pressure of Expectations*, a nationwide survey of school-age children conducted for Girls Incorporated by Harris Interactive, 2006.

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