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Session 4

The Real Me

SEL FOCUS: SELF-AWARENESS

Story: “Real Women Don’t Always Have Curves” by Isaura Abreu

Story Summary: Isaura compares her body to those of her curvier classmates. She then begins to fixate on her appearance, and loses the confidence she once gained from her academic abilities. When she makes the choice to replace her negative inner voice with positive self-talk, she re-discovers the “real” Isaura.

Learning Objectives

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Reflecting on their sense of self and identity
- Increasing empathy for other youths’ experiences

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Making meaning of text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Using active reading strategies to support comprehension
- Expressing ideas clearly, and actively listening during collaborative discussions

Materials

- Group Agreements and agenda, posted
- Real Talk* anthologies, one for each group member
- Chart paper, markers
- Scrap paper, pencils
- Drawing paper, pencils
- Waste basket, large box, bin, etc.

Preparation

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Write and post the Toss One, Take One prompts (**in bold**) on chart paper.
- For the Explore the Ideas Activity, copy the Teen Talk handout (p. 54)—one for each group.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: The Real Me

- Review Group Agreements
- Opening Activity: Toss One, Take One
- Read and Discuss: “Real Women Don’t Always Have Curves” by Isaura Abreu
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Teen Talk
- Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — TOSS ONE, TAKE ONE

(8 minutes)

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell the group that they are going to do an activity that gathers everyone’s ideas and allows them to hear multiple perspectives.
2. Pass out pieces of scrap paper and pencils. Tell group members *not* to write their name on the paper. This is an anonymous activity.
3. Ask group members to write a response on their paper to these questions posted on chart paper:
 - **What are some of the messages you’ve noticed in mainstream media or on social media about how girls should look?**
 - **How could these messages make teen girls feel about themselves?**
4. Give group members three minutes to think and then write their responses. (If some group members are struggling, ask them to write down why they find it difficult to answer these questions.)
5. After group members have written their responses, tell them to crumple them into paper balls and toss them into the large container in the middle of the circle.

6. Then, tell them that they should each take a ball from the container and return to their seats. As an alternative, walk around the circle with the container and have each group member randomly pick a paper ball. (If a group member happens to choose their own response, it's OK because no one will know.)
7. Go around the circle, or ask for volunteers to read aloud the response from the paper.
8. Invite group members to comment on what they heard, such as similarities, differences, or personal connections they had to their peers' responses.
9. Thank group members for sharing.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY (20 minutes)

By practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing as a group, group members build comprehension and make meaning of the story.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that they are going to read a story by a young woman who struggles to feel confident in her body.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 22 in their anthologies. (See the leader's version in this guide for stories with discussion questions included.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.



Real Women Don't Always Have Curves

By Isaura Abreu

My family has always considered education more important than appearance. Back in the Dominican Republic where I grew up, I enjoyed studying English, history, and science. I felt good about myself because I did well in these subjects and I was interested in learning. My family encouraged me to study hard. They told me that I could do whatever I set my mind to.

No one in my family cared much about the shape of our bodies. But when I was about 13 and my friends started getting curves, I began noticing that my body—compared with my friends' bodies—was a toothpick. No matter what I ate, I stayed that way. I started to obsess about it.

Sometimes I looked at myself in the mirror and I didn't find anything beautiful. Instead, I felt awful about myself. My friends told me, "Isaura, you look beautiful! Why don't you want to go out with us?" I'd tell them I was tired, but I was lying. The truth was that I wasn't feeling pretty enough to go out with them.

I worried that people would laugh at me for trying to look attractive when I was not as pretty as my friends, or that my friends might get embarrassed hanging out with me. I knew that my friends would never say that to me directly, but still I was scared and I couldn't get the idea out of my mind. I was self-conscious and felt like the skinny, ugly one in the group.

**READ-ALoud
QUESTION**

["Why do you think Isaura can't get the idea that she's ugly out of her mind?" *Pause and wait for responses.*

Then ask: **"Where do you think this idea is coming from?"**]

My oldest friend always dressed sexy. She wore mini-skirts and T-shirts showing her belly, or tight, skinny jeans. Meanwhile, I wore wide jeans and long shirts. My father did not like me to dress sexy because he said that I was too young. But since my friends dressed in a way that really showed their bodies, I noticed they were bigger than me. They had guitar bodies—wide hips, large breasts, small waists—and they looked older than they were.

At school, I thought some of the popular girls were ugly, but guys considered them pretty because of their expensive clothes and their full butts. Meanwhile, I was neither curvy nor rich enough to buy the cool clothes that would distract from my skinny body.

At that time, I was best friends with one of the popular girls, Ruby. She was pretty; tall and fair-skinned, with brown eyes, long brown hair, and a perfect body. I felt terrible when I compared myself to Ruby, because boys always called her sexy and “rubia,” meaning “blondie,” a compliment in my country) but they said none of these things to me. But I did better than her in school because I had something that she didn't: intelligence and ability in class. That was my small consolation for being less attractive to boys than she was.

Sometimes Ruby wasn't so nice to me. She called me names, and when she was with other popular girls, she didn't talk to me. To be truthful, I wasn't hanging out with Ruby because I liked her; I thought that by hanging out with her I might become as popular as she was.

I never told anyone about my insecurities because I felt I'd look weak and lonely. Maybe I did not say anything because I was scared to hear how they would respond. If they said, “Yes, you're right—you are ugly,” I would feel worse. So I stayed quiet about it and kept my insecurity inside.

When I moved to New York, however, my insecurities only increased. I already worried about my body; now I was also nervous about new people, a new culture, and a new language to learn.

In 8th grade, my teachers were good and they helped me to overcome struggles with my homework and new vocabulary. Once I became better at English, my insecurities started to fade away. For that first year in the U.S. I was hanging out with girls who didn't care too much about what others said when it came to clothes, hair, and body type.

But when I started high school the following year, everything changed. I saw that the girls were into sexy clothes, makeup, and dyeing their hair. I also saw that the boys responded to those things, so I started to wear makeup and tight jeans, and got my hair blow-dried at the salon so that it would be straight instead of curly. I wanted to look prettier and I wanted boys to notice me, too.

The girls at my school all criticized one another. I'd hear comments like, "That girl does not have any curves, she is so ugly," or "Why doesn't that girl put a little makeup on her cheeks—she looks so pale." Usually the girls who criticized were the popular girls who seemed not to have anything else to do. The popular girls wore the latest styles. They also used makeup and had guitar bodies.

I hated the way they criticized people and how they excluded girls who did not look a certain way. If you were skinny with no fancy clothes or curves or makeup, it's like you were lower class. You could never be their friend or hang out with them.

Boys didn't help, either. They'd say things about girls' bodies like "You have a good body, you have big boobs," or "You're so ugly, you look like a flat table." Then, after criticizing girls for not being perfect, they'd turn around and call girls "dummies" for spending so much time worrying about how they looked, asking why they were always in the bathroom fixing their hair and makeup.

**READ-ALoud
QUESTION**

["Let's pause in our reading of Isaura's story and share our thinking in pairs. What are you noticing about the ways boys and girls at her schools talk about appearances? Pause. What personal connections can you make? Turn and talk with the person next to you."]

Over time, I started to question why it was so important to have the approval of people who made such superficial judgments. I wanted to be comfortable with who I was, instead of trying to be an Isaura who was not real. So when I was 15, I started to search for the real me.

**READ-ALoud
QUESTION**

["Isaura's going to search for the real her. What do you think she'll learn on her search?"]

I thought about the advantages and disadvantages of being popular versus just being myself. I often saw girls running to the bathroom to put on makeup and perfume, and brush their hair. I was following their example, but then I asked myself, "What is the point of all of this?"

These girls' actions had a consequence: They were late to class every day because they spent at least five minutes in the bathroom between classes, which meant they lost 50% of their class participation points for being tardy. It didn't seem worth it.

I thought, "Why do I want to be in the stinky bathroom, carrying a bag of makeup? Hell no, I am all right without that." I made the decision that I want people to love me for who I am, and not for what I look like. I am no Miss Universe, and I don't care.

I started to be more confident and to be myself, to smile and not be scared of what others said. My strategy worked: I got a boyfriend, who said I was pretty and he liked the way I was. He tells me that he loves me because I am not fake; I am just like God made me.

What he said made me feel different and self-confident because I knew that what I was doing was something I should feel proud of. When I acted like myself, I no longer let anyone put me down. Even without makeup, I felt like the most beautiful girl in the world.

["How is Isaura feeling about herself now?" Pause and wait for responses. Then ask: "How has her thinking about appearances changed?"]

READ-ALoud
QUESTION

It wasn't just because of my boyfriend that I wanted to change, though. I chose to change because I was not getting any benefit out of trying to be someone that I was not. Now that I've stopped paying so much attention to what other people say about me, I feel like a new Isaura.

This Isaura is no longer overly concerned about her body. She is involved in programs at school like photography and writing. She gets extra help in her classes when she needs it, she is focused on graduating so that she can go to college and become an elementary school teacher. She doesn't care if other people like her the way she is or not, because now she is independent.

We have to stop being insecure. We need to grow and show one another, and ourselves, who we really are—with curves or without.

READ-ALoud
QUESTION

["Turn to a partner and share your thinking in pairs: Isaura reflected on her self-image and changed her thinking about her body. What stands out to you, or what personal connections can you make to her experiences?"]

*Isaura was 16 when she wrote this story.
She later graduated from high school and got a job in retail.*

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — TEEN TALK

(20 minutes)

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce this activity by saying to the group:
 - “Now that we’ve read the story, we’re going to participate in small group discussions where we share our personal connections to the issues explored by Isaura in her story.”

Remind group members that it is important that everyone agrees that what is said during this discussion is not shared outside of the group.
2. While the group is still seated, review the directions. Tell them:
 - “I will divide you into small groups of three or four.”
 - “Each group will find a comfortable place to sit together and form a small circle, so everyone can easily listen to one another.”
 - “Once groups are formed and seated, I will give each group a handout with questions to guide discussion.”
 - “One member of each group will volunteer to facilitate the discussion. She will read a question aloud and make sure everyone has an opportunity to respond before reading the next question.”
 - “You do not need to discuss every question. You should move on to another question whenever your group feels ready.”
 - “All groups should discuss question #5 and be ready to share out their ideas with the larger group. You don’t have to share anything else except for your group’s idea for #5.”
3. After checking for understanding, have group members form small groups and find spaces in the room to talk.
4. When all groups are seated in circles, pass out the question handout (p. 54).
5. Help each group choose a facilitator and get started.
6. As groups discuss, move around the room as a silent observer. Do not join in the discussion. If you notice that a group needs support, guide them back to the questions.

7. After about 10 minutes, and with a one-minute time check beforehand, ask everyone to come back together as a large group.
8. Have each small group share the hashtag they created for question #5 in the handout.
9. Close by inviting group members to share what the experience was like and what stood out for them.

CLOSING CIRCLE (3 minutes)

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

1. "What stands out for you in Isaura's story, 'Real Women Don't Always Have Curves,' and our activities today?"
2. Finish this sentence: "In addition to positive self-talk, I'm going to have people in my life who tell me I'm..."

 **SUPPLEMENTAL**

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives group members the opportunity to share their point of view and provides additional literacy practice.

Write a letter to a person who created or produced a show, movie, or any visual form of media that has displayed negative messages about women. Tell the creator or producer what impact you think they are having on women. Include the specific images you saw that are negative, what impact those have on women, and suggestions for how their messages about women and their bodies could be more positive. Include a greeting (i.e., "Dear [Producer/Creator],") and a closing (i.e., "Sincerely, [Your Name]").

LEADER REFLECTION

4

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- In this story, Isaura is insecure about the way she looks. She feels that girls overvalue hair, makeup, and clothing. It is important to remember that people of all genders can be concerned about this and feel insecure about their looks. Does this seem to be true among your group members? How do you respond when group members are overly focused on their physical appearance?
- Thinking of yourself as a teenager, do you relate to Isaura's experience? What strategies helped you to become "the real you?" How can you use your experiences to inform how you support your group members?



Teen Talk Handout

Questions for Isaura Abreu's "Real Women Don't Always Have Curves"

Read and discuss the questions below with your group. Feel free to skip around but have an idea to share with the larger group. **Remember:** All responses to questions stay within the group.

1. Isaura notices that the girls in her high school criticize one another's looks and sometimes exclude those who don't look a certain way. Often, this is based on stereotypes that negatively shape the perception of girls and young women. Have you ever observed or experienced something like this? How have these stereotypes affected the perception of girls and young women in your community?
2. Isaura talks about how the boys in her school criticize girls' bodies and appearance but then complain that they spend too much time worrying about how they look. This is called a double standard. Have you ever observed this happening or experienced this firsthand? What do you notice about the way girls' bodies are looked at and talked about?
3. Isaura's boyfriend boosts her confidence because he sees and appreciates the "real" her. What are the benefits of dating someone who builds your confidence? What are the risks of depending on a dating partner to make you feel good about yourself?
4. In the beginning of the story, Isaura thinks she isn't pretty enough. This idea is part of her negative self-talk, or the stream of negative thoughts that can run through one's head. Have you ever had thoughts similar to Isaura's or heard other people say negative things about themselves? Where do you think this type of self-talk comes from? How can we replace it with positive self-talk?