





## Should you ever criticise teenagers for what they wear?

Elizabeth Lauten – a Congressional PR spinner - lost her job in November 2014 for questioning the dress sense of President Obama's daughters.

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Lauten wrote in a post that Malia, 16, and Sasha, 13, should have shown more “class” at November’s annual White House turkey pardoning ceremony.

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“Act like being in the White House matters to you,” Lauten wrote. “Dress like you deserve respect, not a spot at a bar. And certainly don’t make faces during televised public events.”

### Franklyn Addo: What kind of 'class' was Lauten referring to?

Young people disproportionately receive the kind of criticism Elizabeth Lauten offered of Sasha and Malia Obama. What we do, how we speak and how we dress are always the objects of scrutiny. Lauten's comments are part of a tradition of youth being caricatured as deviant. But they also contain problematic implications about race, gender and class. When Lauten urged the girls to "try showing a little class", precisely which sort of "class" does she refer to?

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Unfortunately society is based overwhelmingly on white, male, middle-class values which have conferred supremacy and formed a consensus. Every departure from what has been asserted as "proper" and "fitting" from that very specific standpoint is dismissed as aberrant, and is ridiculed and subordinated.

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Peggy McIntosh described one of the facets of white privilege as being able to dress and behave however she wanted without her individual conduct being seen as reflective of her entire race. Indeed, Lauten's commentary brought forth the narrative that black and ethnic minority people aren't able to dress and behave "properly" when finally given prestigious opportunities like presidency.

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Ultimately, teenagers should not be criticised for the way they dress. Universal impositions about what is "respectable" attire or "appropriate" conduct compromise individual autonomy. It places people in difficult positions: they must forfeit their personal convictions and desires in order to appease society or choose to defy the status quo and unrepentantly be themselves at the risk of being misjudged and even mistreated. I firmly choose the latter.

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The policing of the attire of young people also leads to problematic situations. What young women wear becomes more important than teaching men that they are not entitled to women's bodies, for instance. Another example is the disproportionate suspicion given to and police targeting of black men in tracksuits, whereas their white counterparts are more likely to be seen as joggers.

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Making hasty judgments about people is learned in society together with imposed "universal" values. We must strive to decondition ourselves from this damaging habit.

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# Maintaining a Healthy Body Image

A short fact sheet from First Steps

## What is body image?

Appearance plays an important part in our self-worth. How you see yourself, and who you think you are develop from a very young age, and is particularly sensitive in adolescence when you begin to build an identity. We base a large proportion of our self-worth on our appearance. If we are dissatisfied with how we look this can have a powerful impact on our self-esteem and self-confidence.

Symptoms of low body image can include: having a distorted view of what you actually look like; changes in eating patterns; being highly critical of yourself or your actions/abilities; having high self-doubt or only seeing yourself to blame if things go wrong; ignoring positive qualities or finding it hard to accept compliments; predicting that things will not turn out well; feeling depressed, anxious, guilty, ashamed or frustrated.

These thoughts and feelings may then make life more difficult. For example, a person may become consumed with their appearance and look for evidence that confirms their negative beliefs; avoid places or situations that remind them of their appearance; try to change their appearance or self-harm through harsh dieting and exercise regimes; place unrealistic expectations on themselves, which leaves them vulnerable to failure which in turn reinforces feelings of low self-worth.

## Techniques to help

- Identify any negative thinking patterns by looking at the way that you think. Challenge any unhelpful thoughts and look for alternative ways of thinking. Asking yourself what you would say to a friend can be helpful. It can take time to believe these alternative ways of thinking. By regularly reminding ourselves that our unhelpful thoughts may not be true, eventually our core beliefs can be altered and our self-esteem improved.
- Accepting and developing compassion for ourselves. Try to focus on being kind to yourself rather than hard and critical. Accept who you are rather than wishing to be someone else. Being forgiving of your mistakes and learning from them, allowing us to change rather than criticise ourselves.
- Genetics. It's important to remember that many parts of our bodies cannot be changed. 25% to 70% is determined by our genes. While there are many aspects that can't be changed, you can change your beliefs and attitudes which will positively influence how you feel.
- Write a list of all your good qualities. Then use this list to write down 3 things that you've done everyday that show these qualities.
- Unhelpful rituals can worsen your negative body image because you are magnifying the things your unhappy with. Using distraction techniques can help give you some relief from these compulsions. These are not long-term solutions but can be helpful in the short term.
- Look after yourself. Part of being emotionally well is being physically well so make sure you are active, eat well and get enough sleep.

## Further help

First Steps  
0808 801 0325

[www.firststeps-surrey.nhs.uk](http://www.firststeps-surrey.nhs.uk)

Beat  
0845 634 1414

[www.b-eat.co.uk](http://www.b-eat.co.uk)

Living Life to the Full  
(free online courses)

[www.lltff.com](http://www.lltff.com)

# Questions

Re-read extract 1. Answer the questions below.

1. Summarise in your own words Lauten's views on the Obama girls' outfits, from lines 0 – 12. (2)
2. Identify an example of negative language used to describe teenagers from lines 14 - 21 (1)
3. Explain the values by which teenagers are often judged lines 19 – 22. (1)
4. In your own words, explain Peggy MacIntosh's view of 'white privilege'. (2)
5. Analyse how the writer uses language and structure to convey her views on teen fashion. (8)  
Support your views with detailed reference to the text.



We are beautiful



Re-read extract 2. Answer the questions below.

7. Identify the reason for teenagers being sensitive to appearance and body image from lines 0 – 7 (1)
8. Identify two symptoms of a low body image from lines 8 – 9 . (2)
9. Analyse how the writer uses language and structure to inform the reader. (8)  
Support your views with detailed reference to the text.



8. Compare how the writers of Extract 1 and Extract 2 present ideas on the body image and appearance  
Support your answer with detailed references to the texts. (12)

9. Write a conversation between two teenage friends discussing the criticism Obama girls' fashion sense. You could include details on:
  - attitudes to teenage fashion
  - issues of body image and appearance
  - wider issues of health(25)

OR

10. Write an informal article for a magazine discussing teen views on fashion and body image. You could include details on:
  - teen fashion issues
  - issues of body image and appearance
  - ideas for creating a positive image for teenagers(25)