

## Social Media and Body Image

How do teens' experiences on social media influence their body image? Today's teens not only have the ability to share their thoughts, their photos, and their videos, they also have 24-hour-a-day access to feedback from others. On social media, teens also have access to an unending stream of other people's pictures and posts — and let's not forget, often the most carefully selected and flattering snapshots of their peers. Developmentally, it's no surprise that teens are lured by the appeal of peer feedback and the opportunity for social approval. But social media create unique challenges for parenting, particularly related to body image.

- **Ask your teens how they decide which photos of themselves to share.**

A perfectly curated online identity looks effortless. But in reality, people are intentional about what they share, and quite a bit of thought and effort goes into portraying a certain image. Invite your teens to think about a difficult day or day they felt unattractive — did they share it online? Why or why not? Can they recall a time when a friend shared a less-than-perfect photo? Consider opening up about your own process about what you post or don't post. What motivates all of us to share, or not to share, certain snapshots of our lives online?

- **Encourage your teens to view photos and comments online with a critical eye.**

There are two major ways social media can impact body image for teens. First, because teens see so many flattering pictures of others online, they may start to believe that everyone else always looks beautiful and perfect. The second way is through the feedback that teens individually receive about their photos. They may begin to believe what people say about them, or even develop insecurity when no one comments. Counter the perception that everyone else is always camera-ready by explaining how photos don't tell the whole story, may have been digitally altered, or simply may be taken out of context. Help your teens deal with online comments by asking questions about both the photos that they view and the feedback that they receive.

- **Praise your teen for things other than his or her looks.**

It may seem obvious, but you need to help balance the feedback teens receive online. It can be intoxicating to receive likes and positive reinforcement in response to a flattering picture. Try to focus your feedback on other aspects of your teen's identity — skills, hobbies, and interests. Encourage them to curate a positive digital footprint online by presenting an identity that is balanced and highlights their whole character.

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Digital Dilemmas are brief hypothetical situations and corresponding questions designed to foster cross-generational conversations about different aspects of adolescents' digital lives. Use this fictitious scenario, based on real-life stories, to spark a conversation at home with your children and open up the discussion about these very important topics.

### 4-3-2-1

Josh clicked open his Instagram app and saw the latest version of his grade's new favorite game. Someone would post pictures of four different girls on Instagram and others would vote for the most attractive by "liking" her picture. The girl whose picture received the fewest number of likes would be eliminated and pictures of the other three girls were reposted for another round of voting. The sharing and voting process would continue until there was a winner. Josh said that one of the 'worst' parts of the game was that the girls who lost might actually initiate another round of the game with a fresh set of girls, in the hopes of winning a separate version. Still, he didn't want to get involved. He knew that games like "Hot or Not" were popular in other schools, so he figured this was just his grade's version.

- 1 ? What is your gut reaction to this story?
- 2 ? How do the people whom you follow use Instagram?
- 3 ? Have you ever heard of anything like this happening on social media?
- 4 ? Do you think there is a difference between the kinds of pictures girls share of themselves and the kinds of pictures boys share?
- 5 ? What would you have done if you were in this situation?