



Positive body confidence

– how social media can affect body image

In the dazzling world of social media, today's youth are often living their lives in full view of an online audience. For those from a different generation, the idea of 'checking in' online or sharing a selfie to let people know where you are and what you're up to might seem bizarre. But for young people today, getting 'likes' on photos, posts or comments in the virtual world can bring a powerful sense of accomplishment and community acceptance.

But could this constant search for validation trigger negative thoughts about body image? Might the endless comparison with other people's photos online cause a young person to feel dissatisfied with their own looks? Here's how to help your child avoid the pitfalls of body obsession while using social media.

The impact of social media on body image

[A study conducted by Florida State University](#) and published by the International Journal of Eating Disorders found that a group of women who were asked to browse Facebook for 20 minutes experienced greater body dissatisfaction than those who spent 20 minutes researching rainforest cats online.

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Claire Mysko

Claire Mysko, an award-winning author and expert on body image, leadership and media literacy, explains: “While social media is not the cause of low self-esteem, it has all the right elements to contribute to it. Social media creates an environment where disordered thoughts and behaviours really thrive.”

For young people who have a tendency towards perfectionism, anxiety or disordered eating, the (often digitally enhanced) images of thin girls or women they see online can lead them to equate slimness with happiness. Validation of their own photos from other social media users (“you look great!” “have you lost weight?”) may falsely fulfil their need for acceptance – further distorting their body image.

Mysko warns that, while social media gives young people– especially girls – the feedback and validation they crave, it can also “serve as a catalyst for more insecurity.”



How can parents help with young people's body image issues

It's important that parents understand and embrace how social media affects young people, because it is young people's accepted currency of communication today.

Johanna Kandel, founder of The Alliance for Eating Disorders Awareness, stresses the value of having two-way discussions with your child about social media use. "Having these types of conversations is an opportunity to teach your daughter how to build her self-worth from the inside out," she says.

Her advice is not to judge your child but instead ask questions about the impact social media has on them. How does it feel when someone approves of your picture? Why does it feel important to stay connected to your friends online? How many times a day do you compare yourself to someone else? Have you ever felt worse about yourself after scrolling through a social media site? This kind of empowered awareness can help inform a young person's choices.

The social media impact on young people needn't be negative. While acknowledging its downsides, Kandel believes social media can also be positive and inspiring for young people. "You can help your daughter harness that perspective, too, by encouraging her to post inspirational quotes or uplifting messages," she suggests. "This may not only feel empowering for her, but it can also help inspire her friends."

Author: Jess Weiner, Dove Global Self-Esteem Expert

Action checklist Starting conversations about body image and social media

Remind your child that they're more than the way they look

Tell them, and tell them often, what you value in them. While this seems simple, and may elicit eye-rolls, it can help counteract the never-ending slew of perfect images directed at your child

Talk about what their body can DO

As women we are prone to talking about the things that are wrong with our bodies. Instead, ask your child what their body did well this week. Was it running, dancing or playing an instrument? Help them see why their body is amazing, no matter how it looks