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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