


# Selfies and Self-Esteem | Child Mind Institute

---

 [childmind.org/article/what-selfies-are-doing-to-girls-self-esteem/](https://childmind.org/article/what-selfies-are-doing-to-girls-self-esteem/)

Rachel Ehmke is managing editor at the Child Mind Institute.

In case you've ever wondered how much time your daughter spends taking selfies, [a poll in 2015](#) found that the average woman between 16 and 25 years old spends over five hours a week. It sounds like a lot, unless you've tried to take selfies yourself and know what an elaborate process it can be. Women take an average of seven shots to get one image, according to the poll; [Kim Kardashian said](#) it takes about 15 to 20. Then there are the filters, not to mention real-life alterations like changing lighting or touching up makeup. There are also apps you can use for more drastic procedures like changing your bone structure, slimming your waistline, erasing pimples, and more.

Selfies can be silly and lighthearted, of course, notes Alexandra Hamlet, PsyD, a psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. But she also recognizes the darker side, when photos become a measure of self-worth. "With makeup, with retouch, with filters, with multiple, multiple attempts, it's almost like you're never going to stack up," says Dr. Hamlet, "And that is where I think it gets dangerous."

We're used to worrying about how girls will be affected by seeing too many air-brushed images of models in magazines or movies. But now young people themselves are the models and they're wielding their own image-editing software. This leads to a lot of self-scrutiny as they try to perfect their own images, and comparisons to the pictures their peers are posting. Experts are understandably worried about what this means for kids' self-esteem.

## Seeking perfection

---

If you've been telling your daughter that she's beautiful just the way she is, she's getting a different message when she opens up Snapchat and sees filters and lenses that alter appearances. Pictures used to be final; now we have post-production.

Dr. Hamlet acknowledges that some of the filters are fun and distort in amusing ways, but also points out there's a so-called "pretty filter" on Instagram and Snapchat. Beautifying filters are used almost reflexively by many, which means that girls are getting used to seeing their peers effectively airbrushed every single day online. There are also image altering apps that teens can download for more substantial changes. Facetune is one popular one, but there are many, and they can be used to do everything from erase pimples to change the structure of your face or make you look taller. One app called RetouchMe gives your photo a "professional retouch" using a photo editing team for under a dollar.

The possibilities can be overwhelming, particularly since girls know they are scrutinized on their appearance — as, of course, they are scrutinizing their peers.

## Too much comparison

---

Self-esteem often takes a hit when you start comparing yourself too much to other people, which is something social media seems to be made for. One study found that frequently viewing selfies led to decreased self-esteem and decreased life satisfaction. Another study found that girls who spend more time looking at pictures on Facebook reported higher weight dissatisfaction and self-objectification.

In her book *Enough As She Is*, Rachel Simmons writes about pressures facing girls, including comparing themselves to peers on social media and feeling that they were coming up short. One 18-year-old girl told her, “I don’t hate myself when I’m alone. I just hate myself in comparison to other people.”

Thanks to social media, that time alone in your head that most adults grew up with has been eroded. Any spare moment she has, a young woman now might easily open up Instagram or Snapchat, which means that she starts playing the comparison game.

Even if the pictures a girl posts on social media get plenty of likes, she might still feel insecure — especially if she’s an adolescent who is already feeling insecure and trying to make herself feel better, Dr. Hamlet notes. That’s because humans tend to be very “mood consistent,” she says. “It can feel icky to do something on the outside that is inconsistent with how we feel on the inside.” That’s why if you’re feeling sad, you might be more likely to want to listen to sad music instead of watch a comedy. And in the same way, if you are feeling judgmental and negative about yourself, it generally takes more than a good selfie to pull yourself out of that trap.

## Mental health consequences

---

While social media might not be causing a mental health disorder, it can pull some kids closer into a diagnosable range if they are already struggling. “If you’re depressed or anxious, you’re probably going to be comparing yourself to others more, or devaluing yourself more,” explains Dr. Hamlet. “Maybe you’ll be striving even harder to try and ‘catch up,’ which is basically an impossible feat.”

The problem of selfies has even attracted the attention of various professional journals for plastic surgeons, which have been posting articles about increasing requests for plastic surgery coming from young people. A poll from the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons found that 42% of surgeons were asked to perform procedures for improved selfies and pictures on social media platforms. The journal *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* published an article called “When Is Teenage Plastic Surgery Versus Cosmetic Surgery Okay?” exploring the safety and ethical considerations of performing different procedures and providing “cosmetic medication” like Botox and fillers to adolescent clients.

There is even a term for kids who are fixating on their appearance because of social media — selfie dysmorphia, which is also sometimes called Snapchat dysmorphia. While this isn't a real diagnosis, it is a term that recognizes that more people are experiencing a dysmorphia, or idea that there is something fundamentally flawed in their appearance.

It also gestures to a diagnosis that *is* real: body dysmorphic disorder, which is a mental health disorder related to OCD. People with body dysmorphic disorder are obsessed with what they perceive to be a disfiguring flaw, like a large nose or ears, a blemish on the skin, or underdeveloped muscles. These flaws might be imagined or very minor and blown out of proportion.

While most children won't develop body dysmorphic disorder, or even so-called selfie dysmorphia, they can still exist somewhere on the spectrum of fixating on their appearance, just as they might be struggling with anxiety and depression, whether or not they are at a clinical level.

## Being more mindful about social media

---

Parents who want to provide a healthy counterbalance to the pressures of social media can start by evaluating how they use social media themselves. Make sure you aren't talking too much about the pictures you post or see, or ask your children to take too many pictures. The occasional photo is fine, of course, but make a point of prioritizing being in the moment, too. "If you're taking your kid to a concert, don't allow them to film the whole thing and see it only through the eyes of the camera," says Dr. Hamlet. "That's reinforcing this concept that just being here is not good enough."

Dr. Hamlet also recommends that parents encourage teens to become more mindful about how they use their phones — and model doing this, too. "Before you pick up your device, understand why you're picking it up. What emotional state are you in? Are you anxious? Picking up that phone to check to see what's on social media is probably going to heighten that anxiety. The same with sadness. It's just going to make it worse."

Try having a plan for what you're going to do on Instagram or Snapchat. This might include how long you'll be using it and what you want to see. And while you are using social media, observe how it makes you feel, and be ready to put it down if it starts making you feel bad.

## Building self-esteem

---

Prioritizing a girl's appearance is nothing new in society, but with selfies girls are getting inundated with the feedback that how they look is important. That's why it is up to parents to make sure girls are getting the message that what women think and do is even more important. Don't hold back from complimenting your daughter on her appearance, but make an effort to compliment her at least as much for the things she does and how hard she works.

While it is good for anyone's self-esteem to like the way they look, it is crucial to have many sources of self-esteem. For a young woman's long-term happiness, it will be more deeply rewarding for her to find things that she cares about and practice doing them. Dr. Hamlet calls this "developing mastery and accumulating positives in your life."

Having a personal interest in something and seeing how your skills grow with time and effort makes you feel proud of what you can do, and takes the focus away from achieving perfection, which is impossible. It also encourages girls to look inside themselves for their self-esteem (and not just to compliments from others) which is an important part of growing into a happy, confident woman.