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INFORMATION FROM YOUR PEDIATRICIAN

Social media can pressure teens to seek perfect body

The desire to have a perfect body is nothing new. For centuries, people have gone to extreme lengths seeking physical perfection. Today, social media bring body image challenges to a new audience: children.

A recent study found that nearly 60% of children use social media by age 10. This might mean posting pictures of a new puppy on Instagram or following a few friends on Twitter. But access to social media also means that 10-year-olds can scroll through Pinterest looking for “thinspiration,” click through pages in Tumblr dedicated to the “thigh gap” or surf the Web for discussion forums that encourage unhealthy dieting. This content can strongly affect kids’ emotional development.

As children mature, they become aware of how they compare to others, explained pediatrician Marjorie Hogan, M.D., FAAP. Social media allow adolescents to compare themselves not only to their peers but also to millions of other teens who are online. Digitally altered photos of flawless faces and sculpted bodies set impossible standards for both girls and boys.

While girls tend to go on diets, boys are more likely to try and bulk up muscle with protein supplements or steroids. If taken to the extreme, these behaviors can be dangerous.

“Parents should not talk about appearance but should emphasize the importance of healthy eating and daily exercise in order to be strong and fit,” said Dr. Hogan.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) urges parents to be aware of what their children view on social media. Watch for search phrases such as:

- Thinspiration: Images of “perfect” bodies meant to inspire weight loss
- Thigh gap: Space between the upper thighs when people stand with their feet together, a beauty fad
- Pro-ana/pro-mia: Content that encourages eating disorders (anorexia nervosa and bulimia)

The AAP advises parents who suspect their child is overly concerned about body image to talk with their pediatrician about screening and ways to guide children in a healthy direction.

— Mary McGrath

