

Counselor's Corner
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Social Media and Kids: How to Help **Part 1**

Parents can help kids resist the pressure created by artfully curated social media feeds, but it's important that they understand the lens of vulnerability through which their children are viewing the seemingly perfect images on a daily basis. On the surface, it may seem that everyone else's life is much more exciting. Magazines and advertising have long been criticized for upholding dangerously unrealistic standards of success and beauty, but at least it's acknowledged that they are idealized.

These days, however, the impossible standards are set much closer to home, not by celebrities and models, but by classmates and friends. With social media, teens can curate their lives, and the resulting feeds read like highlight reels, showing only the best and most enviable moments while concealing efforts, struggles, and the merely ordinary aspects of day-to-day life. And there's evidence that those images are causing distress for many kids. Donna Wick, Ed.D., founder of Mind-to-Mind Parenting, says that for teenagers, the combined weight of vulnerability, the need for validation, and a desire to compare themselves with peers, forms what she describes as a "perfect storm of self-doubt."

Struggling to stay afloat

The fallout from these unrealistic standards becomes more dangerous once kids are in high school and college, where they face higher stakes, harder work, and a less parental oversight. After a recent spate of college suicides, researchers at Stanford University coined the phrase "duck syndrome." The term refers to the way a duck appears to glide effortlessly across a pond while below the surface its feet work frantically, invisibly struggling to stay afloat. Several students who have died had projected a perfect image on social media—their feeds packed with inspirational quotes and filtered images showing attractive, happy kids who seemed to excel with minimal effort. But behind the digital curtain they were struggling emotionally.

Hiding imperfection

For kids experiencing anxiety or depression, carefully edited feeds can act as a smoke screen, masking serious issues behind pretend perfection and making it harder for parents or friends to see that they need help. "It's important to remember that just posting edited pictures online or pretending your life is a little more glamorous than it is, is not in itself a problem," says Jill Emanuele, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. "Social media alone is unlikely to be at the heart of the issue, but it can make a difficult situation even harder." Teens who have created idealized online personas may feel frustrated and depressed at the gap between who they pretend to be online and who they truly are.

Other people's perfection

Another, more prevalent problem, says Dr. Emanuele, is that for some teens, their social feeds can become fuel for negative feelings they have about themselves. Kids struggling with self-doubt read into their friends' images what they feel they are lacking. "Kids view social media through the lens of their own lives," says Dr. Emanuele. "If they're struggling to stay on top of things or suffering from low self-

esteem, they're more likely to interpret images of peers having fun as confirmation that they're doing badly compared to their friends."

Social media and teenagers: How to help

What can parents do to help kids build a safe and reasonable relationship with social media before they're out on their own? Stay tuned for next week's article for ways parents can keep their kids from falling into the social media trap.

Source: Rae Jacobson for The Child Mind Institute