

Seven tips for parents with a selfie-obsessed child

October 22 2014, by Nora Plunkett

Hollywood starlets, heads of state and just about every tween, teen and young adult has snapped a selfie at one time or another.

While self-portraits have been around since the 1800s, the phenomenon of "[selfies](#)" has taken on a life of its own in recent years. Oxford Dictionaries named "selfie" the word of the year for 2013.

Theodote K. Pontikes, MD, who is a Loyola University Health System child and adolescent psychiatrist, weighs in on the rampant proliferation of this technique and the psychology behind the selfie.

"The rise in selfies can likely be attributed to increased access to technology, our instant-gratification society, a need for positive attention and constant validation and a desire to feel worthy or beautiful," said Pontikes, who also is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Neurosciences and the Department of Pediatrics at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

"Narcissistic and self-indulgent tendencies also can contribute. This behavior is normal to a degree in adolescence, but ongoing individualistic behavior, without regard for others, can be concerning. If we aren't able to think beyond ourselves, it becomes very difficult to function as a society."

Pontikes cautioned parents that selfies can lead to safety risks and unhealthy addictive behavior. She warned that young girls and children

with intellectual impairments are particularly vulnerable.

"If a child takes and posts an excessive amount of selfies, this behavior can contribute to brain activity and wiring that is similar to what happens when there is abuse of alcohol and other drugs or over-engagement in playing video games," Pontikes said.

Other concerns include:

- Falling prey to predators. Selfies can objectify children and contribute to early sexualization, making [kids](#) vulnerable to predators.
- Cyberbullying. Children are vulnerable to what is posted on [social media](#). Rejection can be devastating and can lead to volatile behavior, self-injury or suicide.
- Body dysmorphia. We live in a society obsessed with appearance and youthfulness. Hollywood perpetuates this and leaves young girls especially feeling inadequate and at risk for eating disorders and other self-destructive behavior.
- Mental health issues. Selfies and social media in general may be a way to hide from human contact. This withdrawal from society may be a sign of underlying difficulties, including depression, anxiety or obsessive compulsive disorder.

So what can parents do if they are concerned about their child?

- Get involved. Be an authoritative, loving and consistent presence in your child's life. Check in with your kids throughout the day. When it comes to matters of safety, parents have the final word regarding non-negotiable matters.
- Set boundaries. Limit their cell phone plan, for example, to restrict image sending and access to the Internet. Gradually provide more privileges as kids demonstrate good judgment and

don't be punitive when a child wants to exercise some freedom in a safe manner.

- Focus on character building. Instill values in your children and encourage your kids to become involved in community service or other healthy activities. This will help them to see beyond themselves.
- Teach kids to value relationships. Selfies and social media often don't allow children to develop real, meaningful relationships. Help kids understand the value of human contact by spending time as a family and encouraging them to engage with other kids you trust.
- Keep them occupied. Boredom can breed dangerous behavior, so create structure in your child's day through a schedule of chores, after-school activities, homework, free time and family time.
- Promote balance. There is limited opportunity for self-reflection if kids constantly post on social media and inundate themselves with technology. Information overload and excessive stimulation can contribute to impulsive and unsafe behavior. Look at how your children are functioning overall. Are they responsible in school, are they shutting off their phone and getting enough sleep at night? If not, encourage kids to exercise balance and unplug from technology.
- Seek professional help. If you notice your child is irritable or not meeting developmental milestones, talk to your pediatrician or a psychiatrist.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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