



# Mott Poll Report

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## Parents' Perception of their Child's Body Image

How children view their body and feel about their appearance can impact their mental and emotional well-being and influence their interactions with others. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children 8-18 years of age about issues related their child's self-perception of their appearance.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of parents say their child is self-conscious about some aspect of their appearance, including acne/skin condition (32%), weight (31%), hair (27%), teeth (18%), height (17%), facial features (12%), and for girls, self-conscious about their breasts (20%). Parents of teens 13-18 are more likely than parents of younger children 8-12 to report their child is self-conscious about at least one aspect of their appearance (teen girls 73%, teen boys 69%, younger girls 57%, younger boys 49%).

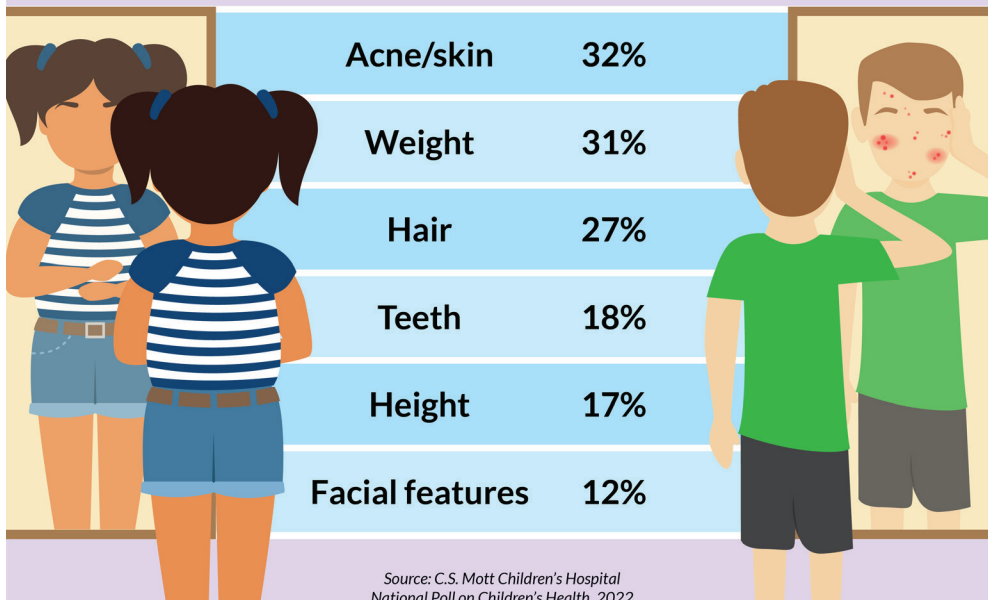
Among parents who say that their child is self-conscious about their appearance, 27% feel it has a negative impact on their child's self-esteem and 20% on their child's willingness to participate in activities. Nearly one-third of parents (31%) say they notice their child making negative comments about their own appearance. Other parents say their child avoids being in photos (18%), tries to hide their appearance with clothing (17%), or restricts what they eat (8%) due to being self-conscious about how they look. Parents of teens are more likely to report these actions than parents of younger children 8-12 years.

Parents indicate that their child has been treated unkindly due to their appearance by other children (28%), strangers (12%), other family members (12%), teachers (5%), and health care providers (5%). Two-thirds of these parents believe their child was aware of the unkind treatment. Parents' most common action in response to their child being treated unkindly is talking with their child about the incident (63%). Less often, parents keep their child away from the person making unkind statements (33%) or speak to the person who made the unkind comments (27%).

While 41% of parents say their child's view of themselves is affected equally by in-person interactions and by social media, 43% say their child is *more* affected by in-person interactions and 16% *more* affected by social media. Parents who report their child is self-conscious about their appearance are twice as likely to say their child is more affected by social media.

### Seeing themselves in a negative light

Percent of parents saying their child is self-conscious about the following



### Report Highlights

2 out of 3 parents say their child is self-conscious about some aspect of their appearance.

1 in 5 parents say their teens avoid things like being in photos due to being self-conscious about their appearance.

1 in 3 parents say their child has been treated unkindly because of their appearance.

## Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in April 2022 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 3-18 years living in their household (n=2,002). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 59% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 1,653 parents with at least one child age 8-18. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±1 to 6 percentage points.

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## C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health

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## Implications

Body image encompasses the way you see yourself and how you feel about your appearance, as well as the things you do in relation to how you look. Having a negative body image has been linked to decreased mental health and emotional well-being. Being self-conscious about one or more aspects of your appearance is relatively common, but an undue level of concern can have negative implications.

Negative body image is often viewed as a concern of teenage girls, related to their desire to conform to unrealistic perceptions of beauty. However, findings from this Mott Poll suggest the issue is much broader. Parent report of their child being self-conscious about their appearance was only slightly higher for teen girls than teen boys. In addition, roughly half of parents of girls and boys age 8-12 reported that their child was self-conscious about their appearance. And while concerns about body image often focus on weight, parents in this poll pointed to a much broader array of characteristics.

Many parents in this Mott Poll recognized that negative feelings about appearance were affecting their child's self-esteem and interactions with peers. This is a key reason for parents to take action to encourage self-acceptance and to model behaviors that support positive self-esteem. For example, parents should avoid making negative comments about their own appearance. They can show photos of their own youth and mention times when they felt uncertain about how they looked. It also may be helpful to talk with children about the "normal" developmental changes that can happen around and after puberty (e.g., temporary weight gain).

If a child asks for help in changing their appearance, parents may offer assistance, such as making an appointment with a dermatologist for a child concerned about acne, choosing healthier options for family meals if a child is worried about weight, or encouraging the child to try a different hairstyle. In these interactions, parents should emphasize the goal of being healthy and happy. Including children in planning the changes gives them an increased sense of control while helping to build self-esteem and self-worth.

However, if a child does not express a desire to change their appearance, then parents should tread lightly. A parent's well-meaning suggestion could be misinterpreted by their child as a message that there is something wrong with them. Instead, parents can try to remain open to listening to their child and express their willingness to help in any way.

A difficult challenge for parents occurs when they witness unkind treatment related to their child's appearance. Most parents in this Mott Poll chose to discuss the situation with their child, which offers a chance for the child to express their feelings and for the parent to gauge the extent that their child was hurt or embarrassed. Before confronting a person who makes a hurtful comment, parents need to weigh the benefits of their child seeing them speak up for them at that moment vs the downsides of drawing attention to an embarrassing situation. Ideally, the parent and child decide together on the best course of action.

Overall parents in this poll felt that in-person interactions had a greater affect than social media on their child's view of themselves. However, the impact of social media was greater for parents who reported that their child is self-conscious about their appearance. Social media is created to drive users to engage with and share content as much as possible, often by using images that are unnatural or false. Parents should actively engage with their child about the images they see on social media, including identifying how images are altered or enhanced. Social media is also used to promote potentially harmful "fixes" related to appearance; parents may want to monitor trends on social media. Ultimately, limiting the amount of time children spend with social media may be warranted.