Report Highlights

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

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

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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.