Your child and social media.

Are they being true to themselves?

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How does what your child sees and does on social media make them feel?

Take a minute to consider your feelings, as an adult, when you see some of the comments and images posted about themselves by other people on social media.

"*Why don't I look that good?*"

"*They're slimmer/more toned/have a better tan than me.*"

"*How can they afford that new car?*"

"*Why haven't we had a holiday for three years.*"

"*She always seems to be having such a great time.*"

Now, think about how your child might deal with and react to what they see on social media, bearing in mind their limited life experience and innate trust that what others say is true and balanced. They may feel dissatisfied, frustrated, envious or even angry, which could in turn affect their behaviour, mental wellbeing and even physical health.

It shouldn't come as a surprise. The people your child sees on their social media platforms are their own friends, relatives and classmates, bands or, increasingly, influencers who specifically target your child's age group. What they post are edited highlights of their lives, often aided by image filters.

For a young person, the need for validation, conformity and popularity can be very strong, leading to vulnerability in the face of what they encounter every day on social media, often unbeknown to their parents.

Often, the person posting about what a fantastic time they're having, how good their exam results are or how wonderful they look may be pushing their own negative feelings and experiences to one side. *Behind the screen, who can tell?* But this won't help your child's wellbeing, nor will it stop them feeling they need to behave in the same way online.

How to help your child be true to themselves on social media

This advice applies equally to platforms like video streaming and photo sharing sites, gaming platforms and chatrooms.

• Take social media seriously and **never underestimate** the part it plays in your child's life. Remember that most children did not know the world pre social media.

• Remember that **images are very strong** and can therefore be more believable – and memorable – to your child.

• **Take time to talk with your child**, ensuring you really listen to what they're telling you. Don't marginalise their experiences. Ask how certain things they see online make them feel. Ask why 'likes' or 'shares' are important. Always be there to listen and be **supportive and non-judgemental**.

• Suggest to your child that they think about social media **more critically**, such as whether they think images have been modified, and what was the real motive for posting the image or comment.

• Explain that it's better for your child to be **accepted for their true self** rather than a glorified or retouched version. Lead by example on your own social sites, especially if your child has access to your social posts.

• Explain why it's important to **think before they post**, and that what goes online, stays online.

• Ask if people that your child follows or befriends share their **interests and values**, or if they just want more followers or friends than everybody else. Ask if they actually like those people.

• We learn by our mistakes. Explain that **it's OK to fail or be not perfect**, and it's also good to accept and be honest about it, including on social media. Talk about this in the context of your own failures or imperfections, but also your successes to provide motivation.

• **Praise your child**, not only for successes but doing their best. This will help to increase their confidence and self-esteem and be true to themselves on social media.

• Sometimes, it's good for your child to **take a break from social media**. This isn't (and shouldn't be positioned as) a punishment, but an opportunity to recharge. It can also provide a great chance to engage with friends in the real world again, especially as this has been so restricted during respective lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic.

• **Practise what you preach**. Consider your own social media activity and whether it sets a good or poor example. Minimise your own use when in the presence of your child … you'll both love the quality time.

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