

Talking to Your Teen About Plastic Surgery

Growing up has never been easy. Even before the Internet, the teenage years came with changes, insecurity, and a list of "flaws" to correct. Comparison has always been the killer, but gone are the days when it was just you vs. the token pretty girl squad in your high school. Today it's your child vs. the whole World Wide Web of airbrushed, filtered, plastic surgery-d teen beauties. Think Kylie Jenner who started experimenting with fillers at age 16, Ellie Goulding, who recently debuted a dramatic new look, Bella Hadid whose before and after pictures are incredibly different, plus the thousands of #instagramfamous girls with clearly "fixed" features.

With this onslaught of "perfection" constantly in their faces, teens have started to look at plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures as the only path towards confidence and peer approval. This leads to a whole new challenge in parenting: your child wants to go under the knife or alter their appearance in some way. So what should you do?

From a medical standpoint there are a few things to consider. According to board certified plastic surgeon and best selling author **Dr. John Zannis**, it's important that the young patient has realistic expectations of the outcomes and valid motives for wanting it. "The parent and doctor must assess the level of maturity of the child and their level of understanding of the procedure," he says. Dr. Zannis also cautions that some procedures are not possible for patients of a certain age; to achieve optimal results in some surgeries it is necessary for the patient to finish growing and developing.

But what about psychologically? How can you encourage a teen to love their appearance without having to change it? How do you say no without alienating them? If you say yes, does that imply you think your own child is "ugly"?

"Teenagers are just trying to find themselves, they have an onslaught of insecurities on a daily basis. Telling a teenager "you're pretty" or "you're not fat" is not enough, and sounds generic and fake to them," says neuropsychologist Dr. Sanam Hafeez Psy.D, faculty member at the Columbia University Psychology department. "Teaching a teen that their flaws are part of their character, to embrace them, is far more effective than clichéd phrases that they will tune out," says Dr. Hafeez.

One way to approach the situation is making a compromise. "Say 'If in two years you still want this surgery, I'll take you for a consult myself'. Chances are that in two years, with positive feedback, maturation, and therapy for extreme cases, they may view themselves differently" says Hafeez.

In some teens the insecurity can be crippling. What if you feel plastic surgery may help your child's self esteem and mental health? "For teens with severe self-esteem issues parents should look into therapeutic services to help them cope," explains Hafeez, "Plastic surgery can only go skin deep. Changing one's physical appearance does not necessarily fix what they feel on the inside".

What about parents who are considering letting their child go under? "It's all about having candid conversations," says Hafeez. The key is letting them know that you think they are beautiful **DESPITE** and in fact, **BECAUSE OF** what they perceive as flaws, but that you won't think different of them if this is their desire. Make sure your child feels accepted, loved and supported either way.

Regardless of your answer to the question, **HOW** you handle the conversation is important. Communicating in a way that is non-judgmental, but also educational about the consequences and implications is key. Ultimately, what truly matters is raising your child to be happy, confident and an individual.