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Know! - Social Media and Negative Body Image

Talking regularly with youth about the dangers of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs reduces their risk of using in the first place.

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As spring fades into summer, everyday attire tends to become more revealing, especially among youth. Your students will see those picture-perfect swimsuit models splashed all over grocery store magazines, on billboards and in TV ads, and chances are, they will feel pressure to look like them. While exposure to such images is nothing new, today, social media has taken that level of exposure and pressure to new heights.

Images of “perfect” bodies are literally in young people’s faces countless times a day, regardless of the season. In the past, it was mainly fashion models and celebrities promoting “perfection,” but now it hits much closer to home – it’s students within your school community posting selfies that feature them looking their best – and the pressure for other students to measure up has increased significantly.

Most teenagers in general feel a little self-conscious about their appearance. But imagine having to be camera-ready at any given moment. In the teen world, there seems to always be someone pulling out a cell phone and taking pics. And the likelihood of that picture being posted for all the world to see and critique is high. Now add the websites and apps where teens rate each other, post photos of themselves and get votes for being ‘Hot or Not,’ and share videos on YouTube that beg for opinions on their appearance. If they’re told they are not pretty enough, not muscular enough, too skinny or too overweight, they may turn to one of the many online tutorials giving advice on how to improve their appearance – many of which are far from healthy.

Studies have shown traditional mainstream media (magazines, movies, TV, etc.) to have a negative impact on the body image of many adolescents – which is one’s perceptions, feelings and behaviors toward his/her body. The new question being posed: “Is social media’s ‘camera-ready’ pressure bad for teen body image?”

While researchers have not yet answered that question, there are some points you can discuss in the classroom to counteract the negative messages your students may receive.

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Drug Free Action Alliance
6155 Huntley Road, Suite H
Columbus, Ohio 43229
PH: (614) 540-9985
FX: (614) 540-9990

Talk early and often about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Even when it gets tough.



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Do a reality check: Emphasize the fact that athletes and other celebrities have personal trainers to work them out, chefs to make them special meals, and a team of people to make them look good. Also, remind them that many of the photos they see on magazine covers and online have been altered to make people (including their friends) look flawless. One glance at the real men and women in their lives is sure to drive this point home.

Talk about health hazards: Students may desire to bulk up, slim down or make other changes to their appearance. There are many sites and apps that will assist them in doing so, but many promote risky behaviors to achieve such results. Talk to them about the potential dangers of things like extreme exercising and taking pills or supplements in an attempt to look a certain way.

Help put it in perspective: The majority of students are likely, at some point, to receive criticism on a picture or comment they post. Talk to students about what they're putting out there in the first place, then help put negative feedback in perspective.

Remind them that less is not more: Reinforce to boys and girls that less – as in clothes – is not more, and that it opens the door to any number of negative consequences. Stress the importance of not posting pictures of themselves or others that are provocative or otherwise inappropriate.

When youth succumb to the unrealistic pressure for perfection, they are more likely to experience low self-esteem and low self-confidence, which in turn can lead to depression, poor school performance and risky choices. Be aware of the extreme pressure social media may place on your students and begin the conversation toward healthy body image today.

Sources: Caroline Knorr for TODAY: Is social media's 'camera-ready' pressure bad for teen body image? Common Sense Media: Boys and Body Image. Common Sense Media: Girls and Body Image