

# Selfie Culture

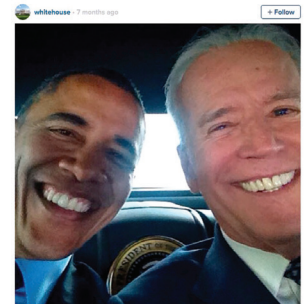


In 2013, selfie was Oxford Dictionaries' word of the year:

**selfie** *noun, informal* (also selfy; plural selfies)

A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website (Oxford University Press, 2014)

The word — and the practice of snapping pictures of one's self — seems like it's everywhere: President Obama and Vice President Biden recently paused to take a selfie while they were riding in the back of a White House limousine; Ellen DeGeneres took a selfie in the midst of hosting the 2014 Oscars, capturing an impromptu snapshot of stars, including Julia Roberts, Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Lawrence, Brad Pitt, and Kevin Spacey (DeGeneres shared the photo on Twitter and it was retweeted 779,295 times *within 30 minutes*); brides pause to take selfies as they walk down the aisle; modern-day adaptations of baby mobiles even allow infants to take and send selfies from their cribs.



Many parents have caught their kids in the act of a selfie photo shoot, using cell phones to take pictures of themselves. Kids speed through a series of facial expressions, snapping and then studying dozens of digital self-portraits as parents stand by, puzzled, wondering whether or not to comment. Although it's easy to shake our heads over kids' fascination with selfies, the practice has clearly been embraced by all age groups. Part 1 of today's case invites you to consider whether selfies are a harmless practice or a concerning symptom of narcissism. In Part 2, you will watch the clip "Secret Lives of Teens: Selfie Generation." In the video, two teens and a teen development specialist join the show's hosts to discuss questions about selfie culture.



## Key Vocabulary

### retweet

Refers to the practice of reposting another person's Tweet on Twitter. Retweeting allows you to share the tweet with your followers.

### duckface

A popular facial expression for selfies, the "duckface" involves pursing one's lips together in a pout-like expression that resembles a duckbill.

### narcissism

An obsession or extreme interest in oneself and physical appearance.

### digital footprint

All of the information online about a person either posted by that person or others, intentionally or unintentionally.

## The Case: Part 1

Read through the two excerpts below, which present different perspectives on the importance, meaning, and implications of selfies.

### “Why Selfies Matter.” Alexandra Sifferlin, *Time Magazine*

Whether it’s the **duckface** smirk or the coyly suggestive close-up, selfies are a mainstay of Twitter and Instagram and have parents and psychologists wringing their hands over what they “mean.”

(...)

**Developmentally, selfies make sense for children and teens.** And for the most part, they are simply reflections of their self-exploration and nothing more. “Self captured images allow young adults and teens to express their mood states and share important experiences,” says Dr. Andrea Letamendi, a clinical psychologist and research fellow at UCLA. As tweens and teens try to form their identity, selfies serve as a way to test how they look, and therefore feel, in certain outfits, make-up, poses and places. And because they live in a digital world, self-portraits provide a way of participating and affiliating with that world.

But even though taking selfies is a part of growing up digital, that doesn’t mean all self-portraits are okay. Like all behaviors that children and teens test out, **parents should help them to learn the limits and guidelines for which types of pictures are acceptable and which are not.** It’s not likely that pre-teens and even adolescents think beyond seeing the images as a type of developmental skin that they try on and shed, for example, but they do need to be aware that their actions may have consequences. “Kids only have awareness within the context of their experience. Expecting teens to understand what something “means” to an adult is about as reasonable as expecting an adult to understand what it means to the teen,” says Rutledge.

That includes whether others will perceive the pictures as suggestive or too indulgent. Rutledge says that **it’s important for mom and dad to remember that finding and establishing this threshold of appropriateness may be particularly challenging since it could be different for each adolescent. But such discussions are likely the most positive way to solve the issue — explaining to a child what “questionable” selfies are — why it’s not acceptable to send out a sexually suggestive picture — is more constructive than blocking their Facebook account or taking away their phone, she says.**

...The material that children and adolescents view online — selfies included — can be influential in molding their sense of self. Research has shown that adults make **emotional connections** to what they see posted online, and that their behaviors and decisions are influenced by how peers in their social network are interacting. People often **feel envy, loneliness and generally worse about themselves** after perusing their friends’ party pictures, for instance, and the **latest research**, published this week in the Journal of Adolescent Health, suggests that teens are more likely to engage in risky activities like **smoking** and drinking if they see their friends doing it in photos. (...)

## “Are You a Narcissist If You Take Selfies?” Melissa Schenker

Are selfies causing narcissism? With all the latest fervor about selfies you might think that people who take them are narcissists.

But what's true about selfies is that just as not all celebrities are narcissists, not all selfies are a symptom of narcissism. Sure, some selfie takers might be seeking validation but probably not because of a personality disorder. **People take selfies for a wide variety of reasons: to show off and get props, to celebrate an occasion or a moment, to share an event, to mark something personally memorable, to share something fun with friends, to note an achievement, to make fun of oneself.** In all the conversation about selfies, people seem to miss the fact that tons of selfies are silly, self-deprecating and fun.

Chalking all selfies up to narcissism shows that we don't really understand narcissism. Condemning teens for being the selfie generation is another indication that we don't understand narcissism.

Narcissism is far more than being in love with one's image in a photograph. It's a personality disorder — which means that a person uses a limited set of behaviors for all of life's situations. A key element is lack of awareness (and therefore consideration) of other people, and all sorts of behaviors flow from this basic dynamic. In fact, narcissists don't “relate” in the classic sense most of us assume; instead they “enmesh.” It's a different, specific way of being in the world and relating to others, which tends to make long-term relationships rocky and unrewarding.

(...)

Could it be that calling teens out for doing selfies may be our generation's rock-n-roll? And maybe, the older generations are being narcissistic by calling teens out for selfies — assuming the old way of using the new technology is better than the teen's way?

Calling everyone who takes selfies out as “narcissist” is like accusing everyone who wears black of being a punk. It's an over-generalization that invites people to rely on shallow notions of narcissism that do not serve us.

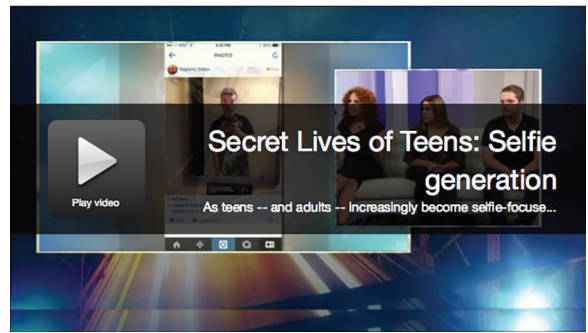
## Consider

- What do you think: Are selfies a sign of narcissism, self-absorption, or self-expression? How so?
- Why do you think kids post selfies? Which reasons concern you, and which seem reasonable?
- To you, what constitutes a “questionable selfie”?
- Think for a moment about the impact of viewing others' selfies online. When does seeing others' selfies make you feel better versus worse? How do you think this is similar or different for your kids?
- Have you ever taken a selfie or seen a selfie that you really liked? What is it that makes some selfies appealing to you?

## The Case: Part 2

Watch “Secret Lives of Teens: Selfie Generation”  
(6 minutes, 52 seconds).

 <http://pix11.com/2014/11/04/secret-lives-of-teens-selfie-generation/>



## Consider

- Selfies are often referred to as a form of self-expression. How do you think selfies foster or hinder a teen’s identity development?
- Dr. Greenberg mentions that while youth do have an obsession with taking selfies, not all obsessions are bad. Do you agree that an obsession can have some positive features? Are selfies an example of an obsession that can be healthy?
- The concept of balance is mentioned in the video regarding social media use. How do you promote balance at home with your kids and their use of social media?
- The teens discuss their reactions to getting “likes” on their posts. Do you relate to the idea of needing likes to “save face”? What do you think about having a minimum number of “likes” in order to determine if a post stays up or is taken down?
- Dr. Silverman says what parents should really be worried about is kids’ privacy settings and who can see the selfies that kids post. How do you manage family rules or norms about privacy settings and about what kinds of content are appropriate (or inappropriate) to share online?

## REFERENCES

Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year press release: <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/press-releases/oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-2013>

Ellen’s Oscar Selfie: <http://bit.ly/10oFBso>

Obama/Biden Selfie: <http://wapo.st/10wDFyk>

“Why Selfies Matter.” Alexandra Sifferlin. *Time Magazine* <http://healthland.time.com/2013/09/06/why-selfies-matter/>

“Are You a Narcissist If You Take Selfies?” Melissa Schenker. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/melissa-schenker/are-you-a-narcissist-if-you-take-selfies\\_b\\_5410605.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/melissa-schenker/are-you-a-narcissist-if-you-take-selfies_b_5410605.html)

“Secret Lives of Teens-Selfie Generation.” Pix 11. <http://pix11.com/2014/11/04/secret-lives-of-teens-selfie-generation/>

# Selfie Culture

- **Take the pulse on their posting.**

It's easy to watch the way kids pose and pout in front of the camera and panic that their behaviors are a sign of narcissism or self-absorption. But before you jump to any conclusions, consider asking your kids the following questions and listening earnestly to their responses: (1) Why do you like taking selfies? (2) What makes for a selfie that you like? Which selfies don't you like? (3) How do you decide which selfies to share? Where and how will you share a selfie? (4) What do your friends normally do or say when you post a selfie? Have you ever gotten a reaction that you weren't expecting? By taking the pulse on your kids' posting, you can determine whether or not their selfies are really something to worry about and tailor your responses accordingly. If the image they're projecting is concerning to you, explain why; if quantity itself seems like an issue, respond in the same way you would if your kid were spending hours in front of the mirror.

- **Clarify family expectations.**

Selfies are just one kind of photograph that kids take and share, but they can serve as a useful opportunity to dive into a conversation about digital footprints and what images kids should and shouldn't share online. Are there specific activities that they should never photograph? Is there a difference between what pictures they're allowed to take and which they can share online? When you clarify your expectations, you help kids think through potentially sticky situations before they arise — rather than after an image has already gone viral.

- **Encourage critical consumption.**

We know that kids are impacted by the content they see on their newsfeeds, but you can help by encouraging them to be critical consumers. Debunk the notion that everyone always looks as perfect and happy in person as they do on social media. Encourage a critical eye with respect to what they see online: ask them why they think a friend posted a particular image online, and what kind of reaction that person was hoping for. Invite kids to think about the kinds of posts that make them feel better about themselves and the kinds of posts that leave them feeling worse. Recognize, too, that the feedback kids give and receive online is often based completely on physical appearance. Make sure that you're focusing on other aspects of your kids' best qualities when you give feedback at home, and help them practice giving their friends positive reinforcement that isn't based entirely on looks.

# Selfie Culture

Digital Dilemmas are brief hypothetical situations and corresponding questions designed to foster cross-generational conversations about different aspects of adolescents' digital lives. Use this fictitious scenario, based on real-life stories, to spark a conversation at home with your children and open up the discussion about these very important topics.

Dylan's friend Jamie was completely addicted to posting selfies. Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook — you name it — Jamie's page was covered in selfies. Dylan had tried to ignore it, but it was only getting worse and a few things were especially driving Dylan crazy. One, their other friends had started making fun of Jamie's posting and Dylan didn't know what to do: defend Jamie or join in? Tell Jamie about their friends' teasing, or just stay quiet? Two, whenever they were hanging out, Jamie would be snapping selfies or asking for Dylan's opinion about which picture to post and what to make the caption. It started to seem like it was all about Jamie, all the time, and Dylan was exhausted.

1 ? Is this situation realistic? Why or why not?

2 ? Why do you think Jamie would post so many selfies?

3 ? Why do you think Dylan and Jamie's other friends make fun of Jamie for posting selfies?

4 ? If you were Dylan, would you say anything to Jamie? If so, what?

5 ? Are there rules among kids your age about acceptable ways to post selfies? What makes for a "good" selfie? What kinds of selfies are annoying?