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Parenting while plastic

A debate about how parents should disclose their cosmetic surgery to their children



Would you keep your surgery a secret from your children? [Image credit: [Beautiful Insanity Photography](#)]

By [Taylor Kubota](#) | Posted December 12, 2011

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A [study](#) in the November issue of *Journal of Adolescent Health* found that adolescents who worship celebrities are more likely to get cosmetic surgery.

Celebrities aren't the only role models getting nipped and tucked, however. A parent's cosmetic surgery can also influence their children's body image. So, should parents discuss these surgeries with their kids?

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Even parents who are secure with their decisions to undergo cosmetic surgery should be cautious when talking about it with their children. Some experts warn that when a parent discloses their surgeries to their child, it could put the youth at risk for body image problems. Others believe, however, that keeping surgery a secret could jeopardize the parent-child relationship.

“I think people should just be honest about it,” says Joe Niamtu, a Virginia-based plastic surgeon, adding that he believes much of the stigma about cosmetic surgery is gone.

Research supports Niamtu’s claim. According to a 2011 [survey](#) by the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS) — the world’s leading authority on cosmetic surgery education and research — more than half of Americans approved of cosmetic surgery. This is up 3 percent from 2008.

The general population may be less judgmental about cosmetic surgery, but whether to breach the issue with children is still a sensitive question. In family life, both full disclosure and strict secrecy have their advantages and disadvantages.

When parents decide whether or not to discuss their cosmetic procedures with their children, they are also deciding what role honesty should play in that relationship, some experts say. “Lies don’t work well in family life,” says child psychologist Elizabeth Berger, author of “Raising Kids with Character.”Hiding a “mommy makeover” is not exactly the same as lying, but both acts can violate trust, Berger adds.

Berger and Niamtu agree that children can often sense when their parents are hiding something from them. Even if they don’t, children could discover his parent’s guilty secret in old photos or from casual family conversation. In that situation, they might think their parents don’t trust them, says Berger. Phyllis Bisch, a Dallas-based licensed professional counselor notes, however, that it is oftentimes the parent’s own attitude that creates a problem. If their decision not to tell makes the parent feel like they’re hiding a dirty secret, children can pick up on those gut feelings.

Additionally, cosmetic surgery can leave visible bruises and scars and, if a child isn’t informed about the procedure, they can become “concerned that the parent is sick or even dying” says Berger. Niamtu, who has witnessed this in his own practice, urges parents to explain their surgeries to their children. Still, this may not completely quell the youngsters’ fears. “Young mothers are always worried they’re going to scare their kids, and they probably will,” he said. In order to address this issue, Bisch suggests telling the child just enough to reassure them, only going into the reasons for the procedure at the child’s request.

But talking more in-depth to a child about cosmetic surgery can also make them more self-conscious about their own appearance. Says Bisch, “If a woman keeps going in to have more and more done, it sends a message to our young girls that we have to go under the knife to

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be fixed.”

Kelly Brooks, a psychologist at Roger Williams University, agrees that parents can significantly influence their children’s body image. Her [research](#) found that women with fathers who focused on physical appearance – such as the importance of dressing well or dieting – had more desire to get plastic surgery. Brooks thinks that this may be due to the parents’ implied support of societal standards of beauty or through their position as physical role models. Although her own research doesn’t focus on parents who have been operated on, she suggests that if parents’ disclosure of their surgery reinforces the importance of societal beauty standards, it could negatively affect their children’s body image.

However, Brooks also sees danger in not disclosing. “Children may be comparing themselves to their parents, and if they are unaware of procedures their parents have had, they may compare themselves unfavorably,” she says.

Niamtu champions careful disclosure. He suggests that parents explain to their children why they didn’t like their own appearance while emphasizing that there is no reason for their children to change theirs if it doesn’t bother them. And Brooks suggests discussing the health benefits rather than the physical benefits, as a possible solution to avoiding overemphasis on outward appearance.

To be clear, no expert is suggesting strict honesty. The age and gender of the child need to be considered, the experts say. They think the discussion should be different if a child is three than if she’s 13. “You don’t necessarily want to give information that’s over the child’s head,” Berger says. Likewise, Niamtu sees no reason to tell a son about a previous breast enlargement. Boys don’t have to worry about bust size and the surgery happened before he was around, so the conversation is simply unnecessary.

Putting limitations on honesty is especially advisable for parents who have unhealthy body images. Both Niamtu and Bisch warn that parents who have excessive cosmetic surgery are likely to send a negative message to children, regardless of their disclosure methods. [According to the American Psychological Association](#), approximately 7 to 12 percent of plastic surgery patients have some form of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), a psychological condition that makes the affected person obsess over perceived defects in their appearance. A [study](#) by University of Pennsylvania psychologist Leanne Magee found that the more severe a person’s BDD, the greater their desire for cosmetic surgery. As a result, their surgeries tend to be more numerous and [extreme](#). Even if the disclosure to children is done cautiously, [studies](#) have suggested that body dysmorphia is inheritable, which puts children who have parents with BDD at higher risk for impaired body image and makes disclosure riskier.

There is healthy debate among experts, but ultimately parents have to decide for themselves what to tell their kids about their cosmetic surgeries. Neither full disclosure nor zipped lips works in every situation. Yet parents can be sure that surgical complications and a rough recovery are not the only things they risk when they go under the knife.

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1. Interesting concept, looking at the parents surgery through the eyes of their teen. I work with parents and troubled teens, and I have never considered the impact of the parents plastic surgery on their teen. We work with teens that are disrupted, many times because of the actions of their parents. I have never specifically asked a teen if this has had, or would have an influence on how they viewed themselves.

[Dave Harris](#), December 12, 2011 at 7:59 pm

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