

Navigating the Digital Jungle

Where tech meets family life

EP 04: Behind the Selfie Girls Social Media and Self-Esteem

Navigating the Digital Jungle with Sue Atkins and Friends.

Sue: Welcome to Navigating the Digital Jungle with Sue Atkins and Friends. This episode is behind the selfie, girls, social media and self-esteem struggles. So welcome to Navigating the Digital Jungle, where we try and navigate the complex world of technology, social media, mental health, and family life with me, Sue Atkins, parenting author and broadcaster, and I'm delighted to be here today with my friend Angeline Corvaglia, creator of Data Girl and Friends, empowering young minds with online safety and AI literacy videos, games, and educational materials.

So, thanks for joining me today, Angeline. How are you?

Angeline: I'm doing great. Thank you. I'm really passionate about this topic that we're talking about today. So I'm really looking forward to sharing and hopefully bringing, some real value to parents.

Sue: Absolutely. So it's a big topic. We're diving into a critical and timely topic, the impact of social media on girls in particular, on their body image and their self-esteem.

And to guide us through this conversation, we'll be drawing insights from the work of social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his highly researched new book, *The Anxious Generation*. how the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness. So, let's set the stage. Social media is ubiquitous in all of our lives.

And for many young girls, platforms like Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat are not just means of communication, but they're really integral parts of their social identities. And while these platforms offer opportunities for connection and self-expression, they also present significant challenges, particularly, I think, around body image and self-esteem. So let's talk about why body image and self-esteem are such pressing issues for young girls. Because research has shown that during adolescence, girls are particularly vulnerable to developing body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. And this period of their lives is characterized by numerous physical, emotional, and social changes, making teens more sensitive, really, to the external influences, including media and peer feedback. So social media platforms can really amplify these challenges and unlike traditional media, which might present idealized images in one format or another, social media, as we all know, seems to involve a lot of constant interaction and comparison.

So girls are not just consuming content, they are creating it and they're seeking validation from their peers. And of course, this then can lead to an unhealthy cycle of comparison anxiety and self-criticism. And this is what I found very, very interesting when I read Jonathan Haidt's book. Now he's this prominent social psychologist, and he's done extensive work on the effects of social media on young people.

Jonathan argues that the rise of social media has coincided with an increase in mental health issues among teens, particularly girls. And he points out that the constant exposure to curated, often unrealistic images, can create a distorted perception of their reality, contributing their feelings of inadequacy and depression.

So to delve deeper into Jonathan Haidt's perspective, let's listen to a segment from one of his talks where he discusses the impact of social media on adolescent mental health.

Audio from Jonathan Haidt Talk: The nature of girls' bullying is hypercharged by social media and smartphones. That's one mechanism. The other two mechanisms are the social comparison because it's always been hard to be a teen girl emerging with beauty standards and impossible beauty standards. And when we were kids, you had impossible beauty standards that these models were all doctored up and then Photoshop. Okay, so you've got these impossible beauty standards out there, but beginning with social media, especially in recent years, your own friends can put on a filter on Instagram to make their lips bigger, their skin cleaner, their eyes bigger.

So your own friends are more beautiful than they are in real life. You feel uglier. So that's the social comparison of beauty and then probably the biggest single one is the fear of missing out the fear of being left out. So all kids are subject to this. Everyone's concerned about whether they're included or whether they're excluded but girls are much more sensitive.

And so Suddenly when everybody is tracking each other's who was invited who's there?

Sue: So Jonathan Haidt's insights highlight a troubling trend. The more time young people spend on social media, the more likely they are to experience mental health issues. And for girls, who are often socialised, to value appearance and look for social improvement, this pressure can be really intense and to contribute to this as well, I was reading a very, very interesting article, a piece of research that was sent to me recently by Common Sense Media. Their newest research, and it's their recent report is called a double-edged sword. How diverse communities of young people think about the multifaceted relationship between social media and mental health. Now, this is the third Common Sense Media report in a series that they've done, tracking the role of social media in how young people support their own mental health and their well-being. It was conducted in partnership with Hope Lab. This particular piece of research focuses on diverse communities of young people, and it looks at their social media and their mental health.



It's unique, and the people, the young people themselves co-created it with Common Sense Media. And I just pointed out a couple of the things. There's more bonus content if you go and join and subscribe to my podcast, but the key findings and takeaways are saying that lots of people and lots of young people turn to social media for emotional support to connect, of course, with friends and family and to support their wellbeing and to build that community, but for young people of colour and for the LGBTQ plus spectrum and others that have sort of beginnings of depression, they are the most to gain from and to lose from social media.

And so it goes on to express how young people are taking action to try and balance that. They look for affirmations, but they often get negative content. And then that creates even more stress. So, you know, even myself with my own clients and families that I work with, there are shared stories that they've shared with me.

I mean, they've given me permission. There's Matilda, who I talked to recently, and she said, I remember when I got my first Instagram, I was constantly comparing myself to influencers and even my friends. It felt like everyone was prettier and happier than me. And it really took a toll on my self-esteem.

Then there was Yasmin I was chatting to. She said the pressure to look perfect in every post was really overwhelming me. And I would spend hours editing my photos to hide what I thought were my flaws. And it wasn't until I started to talk to my mum about all that, that I realised how unhealthy my habits had become.

So there are lots of solutions and strategies to some of this as well. These stories are very powerful and they're reminders of the real impact of social media that it can have. And there are ways to navigate this digital jungle more healthily based on Jonathan Haidt's research. This is some of his recommendations and I offer them to you today.

The first one, limit screen time. Encourage girls to take breaks from social media to reduce the constant pressure of comparison. Promote media literacy with them. Teach your young person to critically evaluate the images that they see. Help them to understand the reality behind the curated content.

Obviously, encourage offline activities and hobbies where they're out meeting like-minded friends based on their skills and achievements, not just on their appearance. And have these open conversations with your girls, so that they have their feelings validated, but they understand that they're not alone and you can talk and teach them.

So this leads us on after this very long preamble. I sound like James O'Brien on a rant, but Angeline, how does AI feed into this narrative and start off and you can help conversations for parents. And I wonder if you're glad you didn't have the pressure of social media when you were growing up.



Angeline: Yes, I very much am.

I was depressed when I was a teenager for some period of my high school years, and I even had an eating disorder. I had anorexia for some time. And obviously, this was way before social media. This was way before even the internet. We didn't even have any phones to carry around. And I was the only one around me that had that problem.

And the rest of society was my friends and my family. They were trying to help me. They were trying to teach me and see, look, you're different than, you know, you're too thin. You're too obsessed with this kind of thing. And I did eventually get the message luckily and I got healthy, but it's a completely different atmosphere if I would have been able to log on the social media and find like-minded people, because that's one of the things about social media. It's great that you can find like-minded people, but it's also dangerous if you can find like-minded people if you have something dangerous that you want to do.

What did we do as a society that we're empowering certain things? It's empowering and I'm glad that I didn't have that. Um, cause it would have been much harder to break away from cause you know, teenagers, you always think that the adults don't understand. It's a normal part of being a teenager. And, but if you're the only one that is around you that has that problem, then at some point you realize, maybe it is me, but if you have this online community that supports you and says, no, you're right, and even gives you tips on, on how to, then it's much harder for the people offline in your, in the real world to convince you that you need help and I'm glad, I'm very glad I didn't have that because I don't know how much deeper it might have gotten back then if I had all that additional influence around me.

Sue: Yeah, because I've worked with some clients whose children self-harm. And of course, it's the same thing. And we talk a lot about algorithms and stuff. So if you're looking at something, and suicide is another topic as well, and kids are depressed and anxious, and they go down this route. And of course, they're getting more and more information back that is negative and damaging to them.

So I'm glad you turned a corner. What turned the corner? What helped you get better?

Angeline: Honestly, I don't remember. I remember. All the steps that I took to make sure I didn't eat. I remember everything. I don't remember what happened. I remember what year it was. It was during something during the summer. Then I came back from school and all of a sudden I had a normal body weight.

But I can't remember. Honestly, what it was, you know, often when you have these difficult experiences, you, your brain leaves out certain parts.



Sue: I was working with the family for a year, actually their daughter started having anorexia. She was very academic. She was a perfectionist. She was very, very hard on herself, but I didn't work with the daughter because she needed specialist support and help and guidance, but I worked with the family because the family had two other daughters, and it was impacting on the daughter that was younger, two years younger, and then the younger child again, four years younger, because the whole family was so uptight, anxious, worried.

And so it became such an issue for the whole family. And that's where I work with them over a period of about a year. And, you know, thank goodness now I still get updates from the wonderful family. You know, what happened that she got better. She got the support. She got the help. She's now studying law at university.

And, you know, always kind of trying to keep things in balance and be mindful of what triggers her into a stressful place. And that's when she might stop eating a bit or think about what she's doing. But yet, with the right support, with the right help, children and young people can come through the difficulty.

So I'm so glad you shared that story with us. So courageous and brave of you to be that vulnerable and that open. So thank you for that.

Angeline: Thank you. Thank you, too I hope that it really helps. I hope it helps some parents and I hope it helps some young people as well. Just one more small comment that you can't obviously always see that someone is suffering, some people are very good at hiding it. So it's important to have the conversation, always a conversation. Share more about yourself to try to get them to share about themselves. I can just say because that will really help build bridges.

Sue: Yeah. I'll tell you what we'll do now. We'll put some helpful websites of support for anorexia so parents can access some good websites and support and counselling to help with this issue that we've discussed now.

So thanks Angeline for sharing that.

Angeline: Also, I would like to add that you were talking about the research that girls also mature earlier than boys. And when children go into puberty, they search socialisation outside the family. So, girls, they're going to social media earlier because they're hitting puberty earlier.

So that's another aspect to consider why it can be more difficult for girls. And just to go on what you say about AI, there's a few things, I mean, there's, the algorithms that serve content mostly with the purpose of increasing engagement. So they want the people that to stay on as long as possible and they feed content that they think the person is interested in.



And AI doesn't know morals. It doesn't know right and wrong. And so it will, if it sees the person is interested in content about eating disorders, if the person is interested in keep looking at perfect people, then it will just keep feeding it. To the person that keep them there. So that is the bubble that, we often talk about the social media bubble.

So that's AI. And another thing that I was thinking about when you described the diverse communities is the filters. I've never used it, but I've seen videos of them. So you put the photo in on the video and you put this AI filter and it gives you like a, some kind of different face. And more perfect face.

And the thing is, these filters are built on, mostly like white people that have a specific way of looking. And, and this can be damaging also for the mental health. If, uh, if you're Asian or you're, you're African or something, you don't look like that. This AI is trying to make you look perfect, which is a different culture completely.

Sue: Yeah, which is awful, isn't it? Because then that's not, they're not being represented properly as well. I mean, it's a very difficult thing. I mean, I know that social, I'm glad that social media wasn't around when I was growing up. Because I said to you the other day when we were talking before this episode, I was bullied at school when I started secondary school at the age of 11.

And, you know, I never really know why I was particularly, so was Wendy Halter and another girl called Elaine Culloway. For different reasons, I suppose, but at least we got home and we got a break from it because the difficulty now for kids is the relentless look for perfection and that it's 24 7 and with all the filters, with all the algorithms, with all the social media around them swirling, it's very difficult for girls to keep their own sense of self-esteem and identity, so that's why it's so important, isn't it? For parents to talk about it, really about what is, I've got a daughter, she's a grown-up now, but you know, she saw me, I'm no slim Jim. Um, but she saw me healthy. She saw me working out in the gym, going for a walk, eating healthily, talking about sort of, you know, the balance about my body image and my self-esteem.

So hopefully passing on to her, that she is not based on just her appearance. You know, it is important that girls in particular are valued for their skills, for their competencies, for their capabilities, for their intellect, for just for being kind, all sorts of wonderful qualities that they have. So it's very important for parents, as we talk about in all of the episodes of this, to connect and to talk and to guide their girls in particular because they are the ones under pressure around anxiety and depression and, you know, going down unhealthy routes as we see in the media sometimes. I mean, you've got an eight-year-old little girl, what do you do about it?

Angeline: Well, she's not online at all. Actually, she doesn't have that yet.

And I do live in a culture where there's no pressure for her to be there yet. She is starting to notice some differences. I mean, She looks differently. She's the only half-American here in Southern Italy, so she noticed that she's different. So she, she dealt with that. But I mean, obviously, I see, I see the older children, the friends of cousins and children of friends.



And I think maybe parents, I see this often, but I think this is especially important in these really sensitive topics. That we as parents can't really imagine what it's like, I can't imagine not having, as you say, you're bullied and there's nowhere to go because your phone is with you always unless you are strong enough to learn to put it down.

So the bullies go with you everywhere. You don't have a safe place. And also we see the pressure again from the algorithms or the people who design the algorithms is more, more precise that they also push content that they believe are going to get the most attention. And there's a certain way that this content should, should be right.

They should be smiling. They shouldn't do some, some kind of extreme emotion. And what young people, young girls don't understand, it isn't about them, it really isn't, it's an algorithm, it's a program that's designed to make certain things more popular than other things, and it can be hard even when we see it on LinkedIn, it's the only social media I have, it keeps suggesting to me, that I should write in a different way.

I should like and comment on certain people because that way I'll get more followers and I'll get more attention. And I'm an adult and I see through this, but children's minds aren't so mature that they can really see through this. They really think it is me. And even, I've also read research about how much teens understand about these algorithms.

They do understand that there's the algorithm there. They do understand that what they do has an influence on, on the behaviour of their feed, but obviously they don't understand completely because there's, that's not a part of our education. So, there is often holes, uh, holes in this information that can lead, if you're already suffering from self-esteem and the pressure, then obviously you're not going to, you're going to read the negative into it.

Sue: Yes. Yeah. And that's why we've got to fill the girls up with so much confidence and self-esteem within themselves, so they're not externally referenced, which means they rely on other people's view of them. We have to fill them up. And that's why I wrote my can-do kids journal. Actually, it's geared up around confidence, self-esteem and, well-being and resilience for, you know, not just girls, but that's where we have to have those conversations. So as we've discussed today, social media can significantly impact girls' body image and self-esteem. So Jonathan Haidt's research really does provide some valuable insights into the mechanics behind these issues.

And he does offer some really great guidance on mitigating its effects. So I think by fostering open conversations. By promoting media literacy and encouraging balanced media use, we can help young girls navigate the digital jungle more confidently and healthily. And if you go to the bonus content, I've written a great deal more about TikTok and Snapchat and conversations to have and how to say it and how to introduce it so that you support your girls and daughters in particular. Today's episode of Navigating the Digital Jungle is brought to you in collaboration with World Digital Detox Day, an international movement dedicated to reclaiming our lives from the overwhelming grip of technology.



So are you feeling overwhelmed by screens and technology? Take a break and join millions of people around the world on World Digital Detox Day because it's the perfect opportunity to unplug, unwind and reconnect with the world around you for your mental health and your family and children's well-being.

Join this important movement with over seven and a half million people worldwide and visit worlddigitaldetoxday.com to learn more about becoming involved with the world's largest digital well-being initiative. Start your digital detox journey today to better mental health and well-being for your whole family.

Angeline: So it's time for our family change segment, where we ask you to try a small change that will make a big difference to your daughter's well-being and mental health. So grab your digital machetes and let's tackle this together. So what we have today is to promote positive role models, so find and follow positive influencers and encourage your child to follow influencers and accounts that promote body positivity and self-acceptance and diverse representation.

Expose them to diverse body types, cultures, and lifestyles to broaden their perception of beauty. This, by the way, also helps against the famous algorithm. The more that you look at different things, the more it's going to think you're interested in different things. That's a special trick that you can use to do that.

And obviously talk and teach your child to critically evaluate the images and messages that they see online. Discuss the prevalence of editing in the filters that I mentioned before. That can be very damaging and also compare your child to the people that they see around them, because there are cultural differences, people in Southern Italy all look a certain way, not all of them, a lot of them, if you're looking on social media, you see someone completely different, you know, so to have that discussion, you're a different culture, you're different, that's okay, beauty is different.

So this is the family change for this week.

Sue: And I think, for me, it's all about conversations, isn't it? And about filling up a child's self-esteem so they don't have to keep comparing themselves. It's not easy, but these conversations, over time, because they don't, just don't have one talk and it's done.

Cerys VO: Listener questions.

Sue: We've received some fantastic questions from our listeners this week so let's dive in and provide some answers for those.

So the first one we've got is:

"What are the signs that social media is negatively impacting my child's mental health?"

Another one was;

"Are there specific social media platforms that are more harmful than others?"



So let's go back to the first one. What are the signs that social media is negatively impacting my child's mental health? Well, you'll notice a change in mood, definitely, and perhaps an increase in irritability or a bit of anxiety because they may become more irritable and anxious after using social media.

So be observant, start to notice if there are any changes if they've been online for a while. Notice signs of depression, you know, sort of persistent sadness, or perhaps withdrawal from friends or even family, and a loss of interest in activities that they used to enjoy, because that can be linked to social media use as well.

Notice if their sleep is disturbed. You know, they have difficulty falling asleep, perhaps because they're online, or they have difficulty staying asleep because excessive screen time, especially before bedtime, can really disrupt their sleep patterns. And if they suddenly start to become really preoccupied with their appearance.

I mean, teens go through this phase. Of course, they're always, you know, they dress the same way in the end when you walk, you know, watching teens walking down the road, they're all wearing something that's very fashionable. It's all pretty similar, but of course, but if you start to notice a real increase in focus and a bit more of an anxiety around their physical appearance, or their way of talking about themselves starts to seem a bit unrealistic in the standards.

That may be a sign that you need to sort of intervene and talk and help them and talk with them a bit more about it, or they start to withdraw socially. And then the next question was, "Are there specific social media platforms that are more harmful than others?". Well, yeah, I've written about this quite a lot in the extra content, but let me go through Instagram.

It depends on how they're used. I mean, certain platforms really have been associated with more negative effects on girls' mental health. Instagram, for example, Instagram focuses on images and of course that can lead to constant comparison and feeling of inadequacy. I watched a video that upset me where this young girl was fixated about the size of her ears, you know, and she started to get more and more anxious and she wouldn't go out.

She was messing around with all the filters because in her mind, her ears were too large and that's so distressing, isn't it? So we need to be mindful of what they're doing on their feeds and what they're looking at. And, you know, if they're frequently exposed to edited and idealised images, that can really impact on their self-esteem and body image.

And of course, celebrities don't care. They don't really seem to think about the influence that they have on other people and young girls in particular. So you've got to step in and you don't want to nag about it, but you really do need to talk and teach them about healthy ways of looking at it and detach from some of it and look at some of the images as if it's not just them engrossed in it, they're looking at it from a height and going, oh yes, I see she's been using that. You know, I saw Kim Kardashian, she was at some fashion thing. Oh my goodness. She goes on about her waist or something. She's been using some sort of exercise material thing. And she just had the most ridiculous size waist and I just felt so upset about it because young girls looking at that. It's just not realistic. I mean, her waist was just tiny and that's not normal.

And so we need as parents to step in and teachers as well, to talk and teach about the effects of celebrities and what they're doing in the messages that they're sending out. TikTok, as you've mentioned, Angeline, in past episodes, a bit of addictive nature, endless scrolling and short video formats that can lead to excessive screen time, disruptive sleep, again, exposure to inappropriate content and stuff that might trigger them around their body image and their self-esteem.

So, there are just a few of the questions that we've been sent in over this week. There's more in the bonus content that you can subscribe to, but you know, basically it's all about talking with your children, building their self-esteem up in all sorts of other ways so that they're not unduly influenced by what they see online.

So now it leads us to our weekly quick tips. where we share some bite-sized nuggets of wisdom to help you navigate the digital jungle more effectively. Angeline, what are your tips for this week?

Angeline: So my tip on this topic is really to share your stories with your children of childhood, how it felt for you, have those conversations that can really make, make a big difference.

I'm them understanding you've been there, you made it through. So that's my tip. Don't just advise and ask how they're doing, say how you did it. There wasn't digital back then, but all of these pressures were still there before, just much, much smaller.

Sue: Yeah, they need to know that it's not just their problem, that it's always an eternal problem, isn't it?

With, you know, when you're feeling insecure or a bit vulnerable. And the teenage years can really be difficult for kids as well. So if we talk about our own experiences, it means that they realize they're not alone, I think, really. My tips for this week, I want you to focus on your teenager or your young child's focus, focus on their strengths.

And their achievements rather than their appearance. So compliment your daughter on her efforts, on her skills, on her character traits, and help her to develop a habit of positive self-talk. Teach her to challenge those negative thoughts and replace them with positive affirmations and realistic positive statements about herself.

I talk in my can do kids journal about looking in the mirror when you're brushing your teeth and children, first thing in the morning, say I am special because, and they start off saying ordinary things and that the more they do it, the more they realise they are special, unique, and amazing. And it isn't just about how they look.

And then at the end of the day, we talked about, I think last week in the other episode, you know, you brush your teeth and you think about what you're grateful for because these different aspects help develop strong resilience, better mental health. So that's it around what we were sort of talking about today.

I hope you found it helpful. I hope you found the Jonathan Haidt clip interesting. Send in some questions for us for next time. But what are you working on at the moment, Angeline?



Angeline: Well, my main focus right now is really helping non-tech expert parents understand the world of AI that our children are engrossed in surrounded by in ways that actually most people aren't aware of.

So I've started a workshop series called The Parents Guide to AI. You can find in the show notes. So that's really help levelled off the playing field to help parents who have no, I really no idea. Um, talk with their kids, know these things, what I was describing with the algorithms, help them find the gaps and understand how they're being influenced.

So that's what I'm working on. And also this, the school, the summer school year is here and the school summer tomorrow is the last school day on the day we're recording this. And so I'm going to spend the summer preparing my materials for the schools when the break is over.

Sue: So just before we end, actually, we've had a lovely testimonial sent in this week about our episode about smartphones, which is our episode one, actually.

This comes from Jessica M. She's a mom of two and she says,

"Navigating the digital jungles episode on smartphones was eye opening. As a mum, I appreciated the tips on how to manage screen time and encourage more meaningful interactions with my kids. It's refreshing to find a practical piece of advice that fits into our busy lives."

So that was brilliant. Thank you, Jessica, for sending that in. That was very nice to receive.

Cerys VO: Navigating the Digital Jungle with Sue Atkins and Friends.

Sue: Remember! To subscribe, leave us a review, please. Send in your photos of your family change, or send in your questions to info at navigatingthedigitaljungle.com and tune in next week as we continue our journey through the digital jungle and tell all your friends to tune in too.

So until next time, take care, stay safe, have fun, and keep exploring.

Cerys VO: It's a jungle out there.

