



# Plastic Surgery, Photoshop, and Pageantry Myths the Media and Parents Teach Adolescents

By Jonathan Guenther

Few would argue that the media dominates today's culture. Radio stations tell us what songs will be popular even before an album is released. Television ensures that we know every aspect of the life of every celebrity. Magazine covers tell us what we should look like.

So it seems, anyway. Magazines can be tricky. The very issue that tells us what clothes we should buy and where can buy them also appears to provide a similarly realistic example of what we should look like when wearing those clothes, but what seems to be a subtle difference actually is the biggest lie the media feeds society today. While it is largely known that many, if not most, celebrities alter their experience through plastic surgery, less known is the fact that virtually every celebrity photograph has been altered on a computer.

It would be easy to point fingers at the media as the cause of the problem, but many parents share the blame equally. From the time their children are too young to know any different, some children are

enrolled in beauty pageants. Though they may not yet have entered first grade, more attention is given to their hair and makeup than most adults. For the most part parents' intentions are good, but the unintended lesson this teaches children is that how they look is important – extremely important.

Parents and the media alike are strongly influencing the way adolescents think about their bodies. In order to find a solution to this problem, one must better understand it. What follows is a look at each myth – one the media has created and one many parents unknowingly produce – and what youth ministers can do to try to put an end to it.

## **The media myth: Celebrities provide teenagers an attainable goal for appearance.**

Sadly, this statement provides a summary of the self-image problem plaguing America's adolescents. The media portrays images of celebrities that students feel they must emulate in order to be accepted among their peers. This creates a

variety of problems for students, as eating disorders run rampant among America's teenagers.

One of the classic responses to this issue for youth ministers is that celebrities do not give the rest of us “normal people” a realistic means of comparison because of plastic surgery. Because so many celebrities alter every aspect of their appearance, from face lifts to tummy tucks, what is seen on a magazine cover is not really an accurate representation of what that person was made to look like. What may not be as known, however, is that the images of celebrities aren't even real at all. Powerful computer software such as Adobe Photoshop allows photographers and graphic designers to alter appearance more than any needle or laser ever could.

This practice is no longer going unnoticed, as celebrities are beginning to bring attention to the subject. One of the first times that this issue was brought to life involved *Redbook* magazine in 2003. On two separate occasions, *Redbook* combined

several photographs to create a completely false image for its cover.<sup>1</sup> For its June 2003 cover, an image of Julia Roberts combined a head shot from the 2002 People's Choice Awards with a picture of her body from the *Notting Hill* premiere in 1999. The very next issue featured an image of Jennifer Aniston for its cover, which was determined to be a composite of at least three separate photographs.

Even when only one image is used, images are commonly doctored heavily. Digital retoucher Greg Apodaca explains: "It doesn't seem natural to take out every curve, to airbrush out every blemish, but what the art director wants, the art director will get."<sup>2</sup> With just a few clicks, skin tone can be evened and blemishes can be removed.

What is the result of such doctoring? Images appear to be photographs, but they do not adequately represent the person they depict. Tyra Banks explains: "I disappoint people who meet me in person because I don't look like me," she says. "But the public is really hard on people in the industry and your image has to be perfect, and I openly admit that I have cellulite and I get that touched off."<sup>3</sup> Photoshop is the digital equivalent of plastic surgery, only it takes much less time and is far more common.

This creates major problems for teenagers, who feel the need to look like models and celebrities but do not understand these practices. Why should teenagers feel pressured to look like celebrities when the celebrities themselves do not even look like pictures of them that consumers see?

Jamie Lee Curtis sought to answer that very question in 2002, when two pictures of her appeared in *More* magazine.<sup>4</sup> The first featured her in her underwear as her normal self; she had no stylists to alter her appearance and did not even wear any makeup. The second was "Glam Jamie," as she calls herself. With the aid of thirteen people and three hours of time, Curtis was transformed into the image of herself that normally makes its way into the public eye. With the aid of slimming clothing and strategic camera angles, Curtis looked

like a completely different person. This is exactly the point of the article. "Women have become accustomed to needing to feel good about themselves," Curtis says, "and show business and media and magazines don't help by promoting these images of women that are completely airbrushed, that are

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completely altered, to then give you, the unsuspecting buyer, this fake sense that that's what people are supposed to look like... I need to be the person I look at every morning when I wake up and stand in the mirror; you know, kind of as God intended me to look."

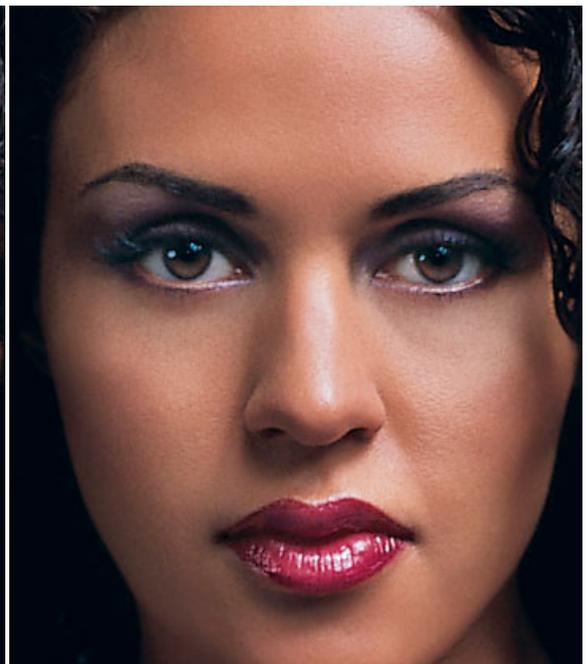
### **The parental myth: Self-image should be of utmost importance from early childhood on.**

This myth is a bit tricky, because replacing the "should be" with "is" yields another sad truth. It has received less attention than the appearance of celebrities tends to receive. Even before awareness of airbrushing techniques surfaced, practices of plastic surgery in Hollywood were well known. The notion of parental emphasis on self-image, however, only began to come to light after the murder of JonBenet Ramsey in December 1996. Critics then began to harshly criticize the childhood beauty pageant scene. While pageants can develop a child's social skills, said child psychologist Duane Hopson, other children might be overwhelmed by the experience.<sup>5</sup>

Some pageants take things to even more of an extreme. Girls as young as two years old can be seen parading in sequined gowns with fake teeth and hair and plenty of mascara.<sup>6</sup> Even though the images of JonBenet appalled many, as critics argued that such pageantry sexualized young girls, but

#### **Before and after**

Digital retoucher Greg Apodaca transformed the untouched photo, left, into the final product, right. For this project, he was "asked to retouch almost every aspect of this image, except the lips."



some parents liked what they saw; pageantry actually increased in popularity following Ramsey's murder.<sup>7</sup>

The death of JonBenet Ramsey not only brought the problem of pageantry into the eye of the media but also into the creative mind of Hollywood writers. The 2006 film *Little Miss Sunshine* centers on a family determined to enter their daughter into a beauty pageant, creating a satire of the pageant subculture. A few years prior, the 2001 documentary *Living Dolls: The Making of a Childhood Beauty Queen* investigates the matter and demonstrates the lengths to which many parents go to see their children win. The documentary even found newborns entered into such contests. Parents of older children may argue that they are entering their children in the contests because the children enjoy it, but such is obviously not the case with newborns.

This reveals the greater problem that plagues many parents, which comes to light in far more areas than only pageantry. Overly controlling parents, coined as "helicopter parents" for their hovering nature, are becoming increasingly common.<sup>8</sup> While the major problem nationally is parents who are not involved enough, says psychologist Michael Thompson, "In affluent suburban neighborhoods, you get a lot of parents who are way overinvolved."<sup>9</sup> Such parents attempt to control every aspect of their children or teenagers' lives, doing homework assignments for their children when they feel it is being done incorrectly, choosing extra-curricular activities that would benefit a school application for their children rather than letting them select enjoyable hobbies, and generally expecting perfection from their children. The trend even continues when children reach college, as some parents flood college orientations and even enroll their children in classes.<sup>10</sup> Some schools, such as the University of Vermont, even employ "parent bouncers," students who are trained to divert parents from orientation.

Clearly, at any age, too much parental involvement creates dangerous consequences. From the heavy competition childhood beauty queens face to the lack of responsibility that overactive parents can unknowingly instill in their children, parents attempting to



control their children can do more harm to a child's self-image than the intended good.

### Three Biblical truths youth ministers can teach to combat the myths

*Everyone is created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27).* It's no coincidence that the first thing the Bible says about people is that we are created in the image of God. A discussion of this passage from Genesis can help students to understand their value just the way they are.

*Man looks at outward appearance, but God looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).* Samuel was sent to find a new king, and he wanted to choose Eliab based on his appearance. God instructed him otherwise, though, because God's standards are different. Few would have thought the scrawny shepherd that God chose would have worked out better than brawny Eliab, but obviously God knew best. David had the exact set of skills that would be needed, as his musicianship and accuracy with a sling would both come in handy later on. The call of David in 1 Samuel 16 contains a truth that students desperately need to hear.

*Parents: let kids be kids! (Luke 3:23)* Even Jesus did not begin his ministry until he was thirty years old. When parents urge their children to dress, act,

### Three Biblical truths about self-image:

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and behave as adults, they rob them of an important stage of development. Adulthood is the longest phase of life as it is, so children need to enjoy childhood while they can. Even teenagers, though they gain many of the privileges of adults, are not developmentally adults. They want to be treated as adults, but only to an extent. If told they would need to find a full-time job and pay bills, most teenagers would quickly object. To treat adolescents as adults simply means to respect them and give weight to their opinions. Especially for children, the pressure of adulthood can wait. It's important to for parents to influence the lives of their children in a positive way and instill Christian morals and values in them, but it's also important to give children some space. Let kids be kids! Let kids dress like kids, live like kids, and behave like kids (well-behaved ones, of course).

With a little bit of teaching, youth ministers can enable students to see their true worth and value. As beloved creations made in the image of God, students can value themselves for who they are, and parents can learn to allow their children to live just that way.

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