

Directions:

1. Show evidence of a close reading.
2. Answer the questions at the end of the text.
3. Write a one-page reflection in your WN.

Say ‘Cheese!’ And Now Say ‘Airbrush!’

More photo studios are offering to retouch your child's flaws away. But is digital perfection good for a kid's self-image?

Jessica Bennett - NEWSWEEK - From the magazine issue dated Feb 25, 2008

We've all looked back on grade-school photos and wondered, "What in God's name was I thinking?" For me it started with buckteeth and hair-sprayed bangs—a true child of the '80s. Then came the braces, stringy hair and oversize Kurt Cobain T-shirt, the tween years of Seattle grunge. High school wasn't actually that long ago, but I'm sure whatever it was I wore will be grossly unfashionable by the time my 10-year reunion hits.

The grade-school class portrait is a time capsule of sorts—a bittersweet reminder of forgotten cowlicks, blemishes and crooked teeth. Awkward, at least in retrospect, is awfully cute. So it's sad to think those mortifying school snapshots might soon be a thing of the past. A growing number of photo agencies and a horde of Web sites now offer retouching for kids to wipe their every imperfection clean: powdering complexions, whitening teeth, erasing braces or freckles. And parents are signing up their kids at younger and younger ages.

"It surprises me so much when a mom comes in and asks for retouching on a second-grader," says Danielle Stephens, a production manager for Prestige Portraits, which has studios in nearly every state and starts its service at \$6. "I have a 12-year-old, and I'd be afraid that if I asked for retouching she'd think she wasn't good enough."

Not all parents are as worried about the message they'll send. The rise in retouching is just one byproduct of a culture consumed with the idea "that the body is perfectible," says psychoanalyst Dr. Susie Orbach. Stephens says that nearly every middle- and high-school order comes in with retouching requests. At Legacy Photo, an agency outside Philadelphia, the tally is about half. "I had a mother on the phone for 45 minutes the other day [who was unhappy with her daughter's hair]," says Kelly Price, a photographer at Legacy, whose youngest students are sixth-graders. "People want their kids to look perfect rather than teach them to appreciate their flaws."

There is no market data on photo alteration for kids, but all the agencies contacted by NEWSWEEK agreed that the clients are getting younger. And that might cost our children more than just a fond nostalgia piece. Kids form body images almost as soon as they can form words, and already studies show that girls think negatively about their shapes from as young as grammar school. Today 42 percent of first-to-third-grade girls want to be thinner, while 81 percent of 10-year-olds are afraid of getting fat, according to a 2004 global study by the Dove "Real Beauty" campaign. Out of 3,000 women and girls surveyed by Dove in 10 countries, that study found that just 2 percent said they'd describe themselves as beautiful, while two-thirds said they avoided basic activities on days they felt unattractive, ranging from going to the beach or a party to showing up for work or school—or even voicing an opinion.

"I think there used to be a kind of separation between fairy-tale figures, like those in the magazines, and properties of the self," says Orbach, a professor at the London School of Economics and the author of the 1978 best-seller "Fat Is a Feminist Issue." "But kids these days are acutely aware of body image from the get-go."

Once upon a time, retouching a photo was "an art in and of itself," requiring a paintbrush, a steady hand and a lot of time, says Mike Cofer, an Oklahoma photographer who has been in the portrait business for 28 years. "When I was growing up they offered 'retakes'," says Pam Carden, a 40-year-old mother of two in Brooklyn, N.Y. "I begged my mom to let me have them taken one year, because I wanted to die when I saw how stupid my smile was in the original shot. I had the pictures retaken, then realized halfway through the day that I'd worn my sweater backward! I will never live that down, and I'm happy about it."

But the shift from film to digital media has made it easier, faster and more routine to clean up and "perfect" faces and figures. Buy a digital camera, and it comes with retouching elements. Anyone can learn how to use Photoshop to blend and tighten and thin. And that creates "a culture of kids who are being socialized to unrealistic images," according to Cornell University historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg, author of "The Body Project," which looks at the diaries of teenage girls from the 1820s through the 1980s. "Girls internalize this form of self-criticism and say, 'I don't look like that.' But in reality nobody looks like that," Brumberg explained in an interview with NEWSWEEK last year.

For the most part, professional photo agencies that do school portraits try to keep retouching to a minimum: they don't change body shape or facial structure. But out of the dozen or so companies contacted by this reporter, all offered some minimal adjustments, like erasing blemishes or fixing stray hairs. And a quick Google search will yield an excess of companies who will gladly airbrush everything a nitpicky parent's heart desires.

One, called Natural Beauties, touts a "total makeover" package for tots that includes restyled hair, blended skin, added makeup, reshaped eyebrows, enhanced eyelashes—even changed facial expressions. And then, of course, the photos are cropped and sharpened. (The site's owner, Alycia Collins, who specializes in pageant photos, declined to comment.) "Retouching was always meant for problems like a bump or a scrape, but it's gotten to be a vanity," says Stephens. "Kids don't need to look like a model in a magazine." Sure, but do they know that?

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What is the author's purpose?

Who is the intended audience?

Possible Writer's Notebook Responses:

1. Summarize the main points of this article.
2. Is picture retouching good for a child's self-image? Thoroughly explain your view on this issue.