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Handling with kid gloves : With numbers on the rise elsewhere, a look at teen plastic surgery

More than 333,000 cosmetic procedures were performed on patients age 18 and younger in the United States in 2005. This is a dramatic increase from approximately 14,000 in 1996, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

One in four of the surgeries in 2005 included nose reshaping, ear pinning, breast enlargement, liposuction, chin augmentation and tummy tucks. While the figures may seem alarming, Santa Barbara teens are not part of the national trend, according to three plastic surgeons with local patients. "Teenagers here are not flocking to have plastic surgery. It's just not happening," said Dr. Brent Moelleken, 50. "I have seen no increase in cosmetic surgery for teens," said Dr. David Buchanan, 65. "For me, the number has been fairly constant since I have been in practice." [Dr. Terry Perkins](#), 62, reports "no particular spike" in the past two years.

All agree, however, that there has been a tremendous increase in the number of people having cosmetic surgery, which is defined as surgery to improve a "normal" appearance. "When I opened the Santa Barbara Plastic Surgery Center in 1986, 90 percent of my practice was reconstructive surgery — burns, trauma and breast reconstruction after mastectomies," said Dr. Buchanan. "Today, 90 percent of my practice is cosmetic or aesthetic surgery."

Dr. Moelleken, who practices in Santa Barbara and Beverly Hills, pointed out that this is the first generation having plastic surgery. "In our parents' generation, it was a very rare thing — the times, the economics, the techniques were very different," he said. "Exposure in the media has brought it more mainstream." A resident of Los Angeles, Dr. Moelleken, for example, has been featured on more than 60 national television programs, including "Extreme Makeover," "Discovery Health," "Extra," "The Doctors," "Oprah," "E!" and numerous print publications such as The New York Times, Los Angeles Times and People magazine.

Despite the increasing acceptance of cosmetic surgery, the three surgeons are unanimous in their disapproval of procedures such as breast enlargement and liposuction for teenagers. "I won't do it," said Dr. Buchanan. "I don't feel comfortable with it even if they come in with their mothers who are willing to pay for the procedure. I tell them to feel free to seek other opinions. If they are willing to drive around, they will find someone who will take their money. It's very important that they get good parental input. I stress that character is so much more important than appearance.

"In today's culture, there is an exhibitionist tendency. It all goes back to the parents. When they are pressured, it is important for the plastic surgeon to finally say 'No.' I'm happy to report that locally most families have their priorities in place," he said.

Dr. Perkins, founder of the [Cosmetic Surgery Center](#), realizes that peer pressure is "huge, and appearance

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is important” for teens, but he doesn’t do breast implants because someone that age isn’t physically and emotionally mature enough. “Teenagers think they know it all, but they may change their minds later. It’s better to be conservative,” he said, adding that he is “less critical” of minimally invasive procedures like Botox or chemical fillers because they are temporary.

The American Society of Plastic Surgery notes in its 2009 study the following statistics for cosmetic minimally invasive procedures in a total of 134,701 teens:

- Laser hair removal: 65,308
- Laser treatment of leg veins: 19,933
- Laser skin resurfacing: 16,310
- Botox: 11,889
- Microdermabrasion: 9,563
- Chemical peel: 5,379
- Other: 6,319

Dr. Moelleken agrees with [Dr. Perkins](#) about the importance of physical and emotional maturity when it comes to breast implants for teens. “There is less of a downside to liposuction, but I still discourage it, telling patients to focus on better eating and exercise habits,” he said.

Asked if there is a difference in the patients he sees in Santa Barbara and those in Beverly Hills, Dr. Moelleken said, “Definitely. Santa Barbara is a more conservative town, where young ladies come in with their mothers for consultations. “In Beverly Hills, there is an eclectic group, an international community. Forty percent of my patients are from out of the state or the country. The entertainment industry is a factor, too,” he said, adding that today’s teenagers are “far more informed than we were as teens. Statistics show that kids have already identified what they want to improve when they get older.”

Dr. Moelleken pointed out that although 18- and 19-year-olds are technically still teenagers, they consider themselves adults, capable of making their own decisions about cosmetic procedures. Dr. Buchanan concurs. “When they get to be 18 or 19 and they are healthy women who want liposuction or breast augmentation, I feel they are mature enough to make that decision,” he said.

For [Dr. Perkins](#), a patient’s emotional maturity is a top priority no matter which procedure the person is having. His practice consists of 85 percent women and 15 percent men, ranging in age from 30 to 70. “I want to know if her motivation is realistic and that she is aware of what the surgery entails and that results are not guaranteed,” he said.

There are several reconstructive procedures for teens and even younger that get the thumbs up from the physicians — correcting protruding ears (otoplasty), nose reshaping (rhinoplasty) and breast reduction. Reconstructive surgery corrects a clear abnormality and can provide a benefit to children and teenagers, according to an article in the Journal of Adolescent Health.

According to a 2009 Cosmetic Surgery Age Distribution Chart for ages 13 to 19 prepared by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, of the 74,852 procedures done, 34,994 were nose reshapings and 7,909 were ear surgeries. Surprisingly, 12,908 men had breast reductions.

Breast enlargements numbered 8,199 and liposuctions, 3,179. Others included dermabrasion, 2, 721, and eyelid surgery, 1,892.

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"I do about 10 to 12 ear surgeries a year for children from 13 to 17 and some as young as 5 or 6. The results are very successful. The kids, who may have been teased about their ears, are thrilled, and it's gratifying to see," Dr. Buchanan said. "I feel the same about nose problems, although I don't do as many of those." Extremely large breasts can be physically debilitating as well as devastating for adolescent girls, he said.

"Not only do they feel self-conscious and get indecent remarks from the boys, but they tell me they can't do P.E. and they can't run," he said. "In the past year, I have done breast reductions on several girls, and I have also corrected breast deformities. For example, one breast was smaller than the other because the ribs or chest wall was not developed. Dr. Buchanan said he has also done breast reductions on boys who suffer from male breast enlargement.

Ear pinnings and nasal surgeries are recommended for teen boys by Dr. Moelleken. "In fact, I feel their ears should be done by the age of 7, and female teens with enormous breasts shouldn't wait until their 20s or 30s," he said.

Although [Dr. Perkins](#) doesn't do breast reduction surgery, he says it can be worthwhile for teenage girls to have the procedure. "Physically, super large breasts are a heavy weight on their back and shoulders, and emotionally, they make the girl self-conscious and a victim of teasing," he said.

[Dr. Perkins](#) does not hesitate to do ear pinning on children as young as 5 because "by that age, ears are in reasonable shape and won't change that much as the child gets older. As for nose surgery, I feel it's better to wait until the person is more mature. I ask the person to bring photos of themselves over several years. If the nose is changing, I think it is better to wait."

The costs for the reconstructive procedures, which are not covered by insurance, can range from \$4,000 to \$6,000. "Usually, the parents save the money, or they put it on a credit card," said Dr. Buchanan. "Often, it's a combination of both. When they see the change in their child's appearance and quality of life, they say it's worth every cent."

Like many of her friends, the fashionable 18-year-old Santa Barbara City College student, who preferred to remain anonymous, has worn her straight dark hair below her shoulders most of the time. But sometimes, she wanted to pull it back in a ponytail or try an updo. However, she was reluctant to change her hairstyle because of her ears, which stuck out from the side of her head.

Then in early June, she had what is called otoplasty, the highly successful plastic surgery that pins the ears back. Physicians refer to it as ear pinning. She is so happy with the results that she advises anyone with the same concern "not to put it off. You will feel a whole lot better than you ever thought you would. It definitely increases my confidence." The Carpinteria resident said she was self-conscious about her ears all her life.

"They really stuck out. They weren't so big, but they stuck straight out," she said. "My mother's ears are the same way. When I was small, my curly hair covered them up, but as I got older and my hair got straighter, my ears began to show. I never got teased because I did a good job of covering them up."

Although her grandmother suggested to her mother that she should have otoplasty when she was much younger and even offered to pay for the procedure, the young woman didn't consider having the surgery until she read an article last May in People magazine.

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“Three different teens wrote about having cosmetic surgery — one for breast reduction, one for the nose and one for ears,” recalled the woman. “A boy told about having his ears pinned back.”

The article recommended that anyone contemplating the procedures should see a psychologist first, “an excellent idea but I didn’t feel it was necessary because I had family support,” the woman said. In researching otoplasty on the Internet, she found it would cost between \$3,000 and \$5,000 and would not be covered by insurance.

Assured by her mother that “they (the parents) would find the money somehow and not to feel guilty” about the cost, the woman, who volunteers with LifeChronicles, consulted Dr. David Buchanan, founder of the Santa Barbara Plastic Surgery Center. “I had gone to him for acne treatment and was familiar with him. I checked his website to see if he did ear pinnings, and I knew by word-of-mouth that he had a good reputation. I had also observed his credentials and diplomas on his office wall,” said the woman.

On June 3, the outpatient surgery was done in Dr. Buchanan’s center across from Cottage Hospital. It took about an hour and a half, and the young woman went home afterward with pain medication. “The pain during the healing process was like having braces on your teeth — something that has been there so long is being shifted. I had a big white bandage and padding wrapped around my head. It looked like I had brain surgery,” she said with a laugh.

Her major discomfort during the 11 days she had to wear the bandage was that she had to sleep on her back. “I usually sleep on my side. There were a lot of nights that I got little sleep,” said the young woman, adding that boredom was another problem — “keeping myself entertained in the house. Mostly, I read and slept.” After 16 days, the stitches were removed, and five weeks later, her ears felt “completely normal.”

This summer, the young woman has a film internship with a local production company. She is studying film production at Santa Barbara City College.

A movie buff, she frequently goes to the theater in Carpinteria with her dad, who told her after the ear surgery, “Now it’s up to you to pursue whatever you want. The only one holding yourself back is you.”