

Adolescent mental health and technology



Social media has altered the landscape of social interactions for everyone, but especially for adolescents. This flyer addresses both the positive and negative impact of technology, especially social media, on the mental health of teens and suggests steps that adults and teens can take to use technology in a more responsible and healthy way. If you are not a parent of an adolescent, you may still benefit from this information. Also, consider sharing this flyer with others who are concerned about the mental health of youth.

Teens' social media choices

The 2022 Pew Research Center survey of the use of technology by American teenagers ages 13 to 17 found that TikTok was the top social media platform with 67% of those surveyed saying they've used the app and 16% of all teens saying they use it almost constantly. This is followed by Instagram (62%) and Snapchat (59%) and Facebook (32%). YouTube was the most popular online platform, with use by 95% of teens. The percentage of all teens who said they are online almost all the time has nearly doubled since 2014-15 from 24% to 46%.¹

When reflecting on the amount of time they generally spend on social media, 55% of teens said they balance their time on these apps and sites, while 36% reported spending too much time on social media. When asked about the idea of giving up social media, over half (54%) of teens said it would be somewhat hard to stop using these platforms.¹

Social media is here to stay

Teens look to social media for entertainment, connecting with friends and family across geographic barriers and as sources of information on a variety of subjects. Other positive aspects of social media include providing a platform for sharing creative talents, connecting to current events in their community and boosting their confidence and general well-being. These benefits are especially important for teens who experience exclusion due to disabilities or chronic illness. Some experts believe positive experiences with social media might actually help some teens avoid depression.^{2,3}

Sharing isn't always caring

Along with the benefits of social media, there are numerous negative implications that can harm the mental health of adolescents. Social media can expose teens to rumor spreading, inappropriate sexual content, cyberbullying and even blackmail. It can also create feelings of being excluded from social events (called "FOMO" or "fear of missing out"). A single negative post can change a teen's social standing from being embraced and loved to being criticized or even hated. As a result of social media, teens may give up their privacy, become mistrustful of others or develop a sense of isolation. Teens can experience enhanced envy, narcissistic tendencies and be more prone to anxiety and depression due to overuse or inappropriate use of social media and technology.

Cyberbullying

One negative aspect of social media that is especially disturbing is cyberbullying. It can take place on social media, messaging platforms, gaming platforms and mobile phones and involves using an electronic medium, such as text messages, to repeatedly scare, anger, shame or harm others. A nationally representative sample of U.S. teens in 2021 showed that about 23% had been cyberbullied in the last month, while about 5% had cyberbullied others in the last month.⁴

Tips for teens: Steps to take to prevent and stop cyberbullying⁵

- Report any harassing text message that they receive to a parent or another trusted adult.
- Use good judgment with every message sent. Think twice before posting or sharing anything on digital platforms.
- Don't give out personal details, such as their address, telephone number or name of their school. Learn how to adjust account privacy settings.
- If experiencing cyberbullying, block the bully and report the behavior on the platform itself. Social media companies are obligated to keep their users safe.
- Collect the evidence to show what has been going on.
- If in immediate danger, contact police or emergency services. Helplines are also available.

Negative body image

Eating disorders can affect anyone, but teens and young adults are especially vulnerable. Eating disorders cover a broad range of conditions that involve abnormal or disrupted eating. Some of the most common are: bulimia nervosa, anorexia nervosa, binge eating disorder and avoidant restrictive food intake disorder. While each disorder is different, they may have overlapping symptoms.

The exact cause of eating disorders is not fully understood, but research suggests a combination of genetic, biological, behavioral, psychological and social factors can raise a person's risk. Many social media and other media images promote the ideal body as fit, thin or muscular. Aspiring to unrealistic or unattainable body ideals may contribute to developing an eating disorder. Parents who suspect that their teen has an eating disorder should have him or her evaluated by a healthcare provider or mental health professional that specializes in these conditions.^{6,7}

Banning social media typically doesn't teach teenagers anything

It's appropriate for parents and adults to be concerned about the safety and welfare of children and adolescents. Instead of banning teens from using social media, focus on monitoring their use. Help your kids self-regulate so they learn how to think critically and make good decisions on their own. Be sure to reward good online behaviors when they occur.

Below is a list of questions that families might consider asking about their children's use of technology.

Technology and youth mental health: Questions for families to consider⁸

Time

- How much time is my child spending online? Is it taking away from healthy offline activities, such as exercising, seeing friends, reading and sleeping?
- Are there healthy limits I can set on my child's use of technology, such as limiting screen time to specific times of the day or week, or limiting certain kinds of uses?

Content

- Am I aware of what devices and content my child has access to?
- Is my child getting something meaningful and constructive out of content they are looking at, creating or sharing? How do I know?
- Are there healthier ways my child could engage online? (Examples: Finding meal recipes, researching options for a family outing, video chatting with a relative, etc.)
- Is being online riskier for my child than for some other children? For example, does my child have a mental health condition that might make them react more strongly to certain kinds of stressful or emotional content?

Impact

- How does my child feel about the time they spend online?
- Is my child engaging because they want to or because they feel like they have to?
- How can I create space for open conversations with my child about their experiences online?
- How do I feel about my own use of technology? Can I be a better role model for my child?

Note that the last question in the above list addresses the social media habits of adults. Don't let your use of technology distract from parent-child interactions. Your teen will remember what you do as much as what you say.



The risk of social media for teens

A 2019 study of more than 6,500 12-to 15-year-olds in the U.S. found that those who spent more than three hours a day using social media might be at a heightened risk for mental health problems.³

Your family plan for media use

Use the information in this flyer to develop a media use plan for your family. Introduce the plan and any guidelines for using technology as part of a broader family conversation. As appropriate, consider addressing safety issues, such as texting while driving or walking, sexting, cyberbullying, the potential damage to reputations and other potential risks.

Tips for families: Ways to arrange your home environment for safety and success⁹

- Explain what is not OK and what is appropriate and safe to share on social media.
- Arrange computers that will be used by teens in a common area of the house – rather than in a bedroom – where you can casually keep an eye on what’s on the screen.
- Designate media-free zones within the home.
- Create a family charging station for all users in a central location and set a digital curfew in bedrooms for mornings and evenings.
- Pick a place and time that you all agree is going to be device free. Create a device storage box and have some fun decorating it. As you are making the box, discuss why it is important to spend quality time together as a family.
- As a family, challenge yourselves every day for a week to use technology to learn something new that you can share with each other. At the end of the week, talk about what was learned and what was most interesting and surprising.
- Try playing an online game as a family. It will help you better understand the online games your teens enjoy. Organize a family game night that includes both digital and non-digital games.
- At face-to-face gatherings, play the phone stack game. Everyone places their cellphones or other devices face down on the table or in a basket that is removed from the immediate proximity for a period of time.

Tips for teens: Manage social media use

- Pick a time at night after which they will not check their phone.
- Recharge their phone in another room while they sleep.
- Use an alarm clock instead of their phone alarm so they avoid using their phone when they first wake up.
- Choose one day a week to give up social media and focus on other things.
- Turn off notifications for a few hours each day. Set boundaries or certain times to check their notifications.
- Avoid apps that contribute to unhealthy body image. Don’t compare themselves to stylized representations posted by others. Remember that people mostly exaggerate positive aspects of their lives.
- Try to understand what triggers their desire to use social media. Use an app that tells them about their usage.
- Avoid posting anything when feeling tired or angry, sad or any other negative emotion.
- Follow only people they actually know on social media.
- Try a meditation app or one that will help them feel better.
- Spend more time hanging out with friends in person and less time interacting on social media.

Sources:

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