Your Child's Mental Health and Social Media

Social media use by youth is nearly universal. Current research indicates that while social media may have benefits for some children and adolescents, there are indicators that it can also have a profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents.

Up to 95% of youth ages 13-17 report using a social media platform, with more than a third saying they use social media "almost constantly."

The impact of social media on youth mental health is shaped by many factors, including:

- The amount of time spent on platforms
- The type of content children and adolescents are exposed to
- The activities and interactions social media affords
- The degree to which it disrupts activities like sleep and physical activity.

Brain development is an important factor to consider when assessing the risk for harm. Adolescents, ages 10-19 are undergoing a highly sensitive period of brain development. This is a period when risk-taking behaviors reach their peak, and when mental health challenges such as depression typically emerge.

In early adolescence, identities and a sense of self-worth are forming, and the brain development is especially susceptible to **social pressures**, **peer opinions**, and **peer comparison**.

We must acknowledge the growing body of research about potential harms and take action to create safe and healthy digital environments that minimize harm and safeguard our children's and adolescents' mental health and well-being during critical stages of development.

Potential Benefits of Social Media Use Among Children and Adolescents

While virtual interaction on social media doesn't have the same psychological benefits as face-to-face contact, there are still many positive ways in which it can help youth stay connected and support their well-being. Social media can provide the opportunity to:

- Communicate and stay up-to-date with family and friends around the world.
- Find new friends and communities; network with other people who share similar interests or ambitions.
- Join or promote worthwhile causes; raise awareness on important issues.
- Seek or offer emotional support during tough times.
- Find vital social connection if theylive in a remote area, for example, or have limited independence, social anxiety, or are part of a marginalized group.
- Create a space for creativity and self-expression.
- Practice critical thinking skills they will use in the future.
- Discover (with care) valuable sources of information and learning.

Potential Harms of Social Media Use Among Children and Adolescents

Since it's a relatively new technology, there's little research to establish the long-term consequences, good or bad, of social media use. However, social media may promote negative experiences such as:

- **Inadequacy about your life or appearance.** Even if you know that images you're viewing on social media are manipulated, they can still make you feel insecure about how you look or what's going on in their own life.
- **Fear of missing out (FOMO) and social media addiction.** While FOMO has been around far longer than social media, sites such as Facebook and Instagram seem to increase feelings that others are having more fun or living better lives than they are.
- **Isolation, depression, and anxiety.** Human beings need face-to-face contact to be mentally healthy. Nothing reduces stress and boosts their mood faster or more effectively than eye-to-eye contact with someone who cares about them.
- **Cyberbullying.** About 10 percent of teens report being bullied on social media and many other users are subjected to offensive comments.
- **Self-absorption.** Sharing endless selfies and all their innermost thoughts on social media can create an unhealthy self-centeredness and distance you from real-life connections.

Helping Children and Adolescents with Unhealthy Social Media Use

Childhood and the teenage years can be filled with developmental challenges and social pressures. If you're worried about your child's social media use, it can be tempting to simply confiscate their phone or other device. But that can create further problems, separating your child from their friends and the positive aspects of social media. Instead, there are other ways to help your child use Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms in a more responsible way.

- **Monitor and limit your child's social media use.** The more you know about how your child is interacting on social media, the better you'll be able to address any problems. Parental control apps can help limit your child's data usage or restrict their phone use to certain times of the day. You can also adjust privacy settings on the different platforms to limit their potential exposure to bullies or predators.
- **Talk to your child about underlying issues.** Problems with social media use can often mask deeper issues. Is your child having problems fitting in at school? Are they suffering from shyness or social anxiety? Are problems at home causing them stress?
- **Enforce "social media" breaks.** For example, you could ban social media until your child has completed their homework in the evening, not allow phones at the dinner table or in their bedroom, and plan family activities that preclude the use of phones or other devices. To prevent sleep problems, always insist phones are turned off at least one hour before bed.
- **Teach your child how social media is not an accurate reflection of people's lives.** They shouldn't compare themselves or their lives negatively to others on social media. People only post what they want others to see. Images are manipulated or carefully posed and selected. And having fewer friends on social media doesn't make your child less popular or less worthy.
- **Encourage exercise and offline interests.** Exercise is great for relieving anxiety and stress, boosting self-esteem, and improving mood—and is something you can do as a family. The more engaged your child is offline, the less their mood and sense of self-worth will be dependent on how many friends, likes, or shares they have on social media.

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Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory. hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf