

Using Social Media In Healthy, Positive Ways

Today, almost all youth use social media. Some researchers estimate that up to 95% of young people between the ages of 13 and 17 use a social media platform. Many younger children regularly use social media, as well.

People are affected by social media in different ways.

- ▶ Social media can provide benefits for some youth by allowing positive connections with other young people who share their interests.
- ▶ Social media can help teens find information, and possibly help them access mental health supports if needed.
- ▶ Social media sometimes offers a space for young people to express themselves and be creative.

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

- ▶ the amount of time children and teens spend on platforms.
- ▶ the type of content they access.
- ▶ the activities and interactions they experience.
- ▶ how much it disrupts other activities that are essential for their well-being, like sleep, in-person interactions, and physical activity.

There are many questions about the impact of social media on youth mental health, and there is limited information about whether social media is sufficiently safe for children and teens.

- ▶ It is important to remember that children and youth are in a highly sensitive period of brain development.
- ▶ That means they may be vulnerable to social pressures, the opinions of their peers, and comparisons to other people.

Some common concerns about social media use include the following.

- ▶ More and more evidence is suggesting that *too much* social media use may be related to mental health challenges, including depression and anxiety.
- ▶ Too much social media use can result in poor sleep, a greater chance of online harassment, poor body image, and low self-esteem.
- ▶ Social media can expose children and youth to inappropriate and harmful content.
- ▶ Social media platforms can be sites for predators who target children and teens, such as adults who try to sexually exploit children, sell them drugs, or harass them.
- ▶ Social media platforms are often designed to maximize user engagement, which has the potential to encourage excessive use.

In response, families and educators can act together to help kids use social media in safer and healthier ways.

What Parents and Caregivers Can Do

- ▶ Create a family social media plan. Talk together about family rules for social media use. Determine how much time online is reasonable, what types of content should be accessed, and what everyone will do to protect personal information.
- ▶ Create tech-free zones. Electronics can distract students after bedtime and can interfere with sleep. It is therefore helpful to limit the use of phones, tablets, and computers for at least 1 hour before bedtime and restrict the use of technology throughout the night. You may also want to make family mealtimes and gatherings device-free.
- ▶ Help your children and teens develop social skills and relationships by making “unplugged interactions” a daily priority. Encourage your children to build in-person friendships.
- ▶ Model responsible and positive social media use. Develop healthy practices as a family. You can:
 - track the amount of time everyone spends online.
 - block unwanted contacts and content.
 - learn about and use available privacy and safety settings.
 - talk together about the difference between fact and opinion.
 - balance time online and in-person experiences.
- ▶ Teach your children to be cautious about what information they share. Personal information has value.

- ▶ Everyone should be selective about what they post and share online; it is often public and can be stored permanently.
 - ▶ If your children and teens aren't sure if they should post something, they should talk to a family member or trusted adult for advice.
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- ▶ Discuss the benefits and risks of social media in age-appropriate ways.
 - Talk about who your children are connecting with, their privacy settings, what information they are sharing, their online experiences, and how they are spending their time online.
 - Empower your kids to seek help if they need it.
 - ▶ Talk to your children and teens about what they should do if they feel unsafe online. Problems can arise in email, text messaging, direct messaging, online games, or on social media. It might involve trolling, rumors, or photos passed around for others to see – and it can leave people feeling angry, sad, ashamed, or hurt. Tell your children and teens ...
 - They can get support, without judgment, if they are uncomfortable.
 - They should report anyone who asks them to share their image or contact information.
 - They should not keep online harassment or abuse a secret. They should reach out to someone they trust, such as a close friend, family member, counselor, or teacher, who can give them the help they deserve.
 - ▶ Talk with your children about whether they can believe all of the information they find posted online. They need to know that they can't rely on "facts" that are shared through social media. It is important to consider who is sharing information and why.
 - Many young people prefer to get their news from social media, and they do not always consider how reliable the sources are.
 - Social media is flooded with untrue stories and claims, and there is research showing that children and teens may be more likely to believe false information because their brains are still developing.
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- ▶ New research from the News Literacy Project, an organization that works on media literacy, found that eighty percent of teens see conspiracy theories on social media – and about half reported seeing them at least once a week.
 - ▶ Of the teens who reported seeing conspiracy theories, 81 percent said they believed at least one, the report found (www.newslit.org).

- ▶ Work with other parents to establish shared practices for healthy social media use. It can be easier when families have similar guidelines.
- ▶ Reach out for help yourself, if you need it. The world of technology is changing fast, and it can be difficult to know how to handle every situation. While adults and children can benefit from social media, we also face challenges when we use it. If you or someone you know is being negatively affected by social media, talk to a family member, friend, or education staff for help.