

Social Media's Impact on Young People

Social media is an important part of the lives of adolescents and children. Increased access to and use of social media has raised concerns among parents, physicians, public health officials, and others about the impact on the mental and physical health and wellbeing of youth. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2023)

Six Degrees, considered the first social media site, was created in 1997; Facebook launched seven years later in 2004. Since then, the social media landscape has blossomed. Some have come and gone; examples of currently popular sites include Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Twitch, Reddit, and TikTok. Passageway to social media platforms and texting has been made easy via widespread access to computers and smartphones (95% of teenagers are reported to have access to a smartphone).

Data on average on-screen time by teens is difficult to measure but reports over the last few year suggest increases from 7 to about 8 ½ hours a day. A 2018 Pew Research Center survey of nearly 750 13- to 17-year-olds found that 45% were online almost constantly, and 97% were using a social media platform, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat.

In 2022, the Pew Research Center reported that adolescents from low-income families and children of color had the highest increase in screen time; 67% of teenagers were using TikTok; 62% were on Instagram; and 52% were on Snapchat. More teenage girls tended to use TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat while teenage boys were more likely to use YouTube, Twitch, and Reddit (Vogels, Gelles-Watnick. & Massarat, 2022).

Given the high rate of usage, many questions have arisen about the impact of social and digital media on young people. Researchers report positive and negative effects. Here we highlight what researchers are reporting about the impact, and current guidelines being recommended for teen social media use.

What Has Been the Impact on Young People?

All forms of technology produce positive and negative outcomes. That is why social media often are characterized being like a double-edged sword.

About Positive Outcomes

Social media platforms generally are sought out by adolescents as spaces for entertainment and news and as a place where they can choose to interact with others. Online networks are seen as having potential for broadening social circles, fostering social connections and supports, and countering feelings of disengagement or marginalization. Social media can be especially valuable for those who have difficulty relating off line or are isolated physically, geographically, or emotionally. During the Covid-19 pandemic's periods of quarantine, social media provided critical connections with school, relatives, and peers.

Social media are credited with promoting various facets of young people's development (e.g., cognitive, social, and emotional knowledge, skills, and attitudes). The various platforms have been credited with fostering practice and performance activity that enhances self-expression and communication skills and generates feelings of self-determination, competence, and connectedness.

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Examples of Research Reporting Positive Effects

In their review, Ehrenreich et al., (2021) report that adolescent social media usage fostered both on and offline relationships and identity development. They note that researchers have found that social media “allows adolescents to seek (and receive) support, encouragement, and approval from peers, and explore romantic relationships (Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013). Adolescents report that following friends’ social media feeds makes them feel closer to them and have a better understanding of what is going on in their lives (Lenhart, 2015a). Indeed, many teens report that social media use makes them feel more popular, more confident, and less lonely (Rideout & Robb, 2018).

Ehrenreich et al., (2021) also provide a synthesis of research on the role social media plays in helping adolescents explore and form their identity and move toward autonomy for parents. And based on their review, they conclude that “overall, there is little conclusive evidence that time spent on social media is causing mental health problems among adolescents.”

About Negative Outcomes

Concern is widespread that social media can have negative effects. Included are fears that excessive use of social media takes time away from other important activities, distorts reality and spreads false information, inflicts peer pressure, harassment, cyberostracism, and cyberbullying, produces distress, disrupts sleep, and more. There also is worry that use of smartphones, the internet, social networks, or games will become addictive. And researchers continue to offer data suggesting that social media can increase levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness.

Risks have been widely associated with amount of time spent on screen. However, Ehrenreich et al., (2021) caution that

the most robust conclusion that can be made from this literature is that ‘screen time’ may be too broad of a construct to fully capture the ways in which digital technologies are related to adolescents’ wellbeing and development. Self-reported estimates of hours spent online do not fully capture adolescents’ nuanced online activities and interactions. As with offline exchanges, digital communication varies widely and the specifics of conversations can differentially relate to wellbeing. Therefore, the content of what adolescents are seeing and saying online may be more informative indicators of wellbeing than overall measures of screen time.

Risks also are seen in the immature and impulsive ways in which youngsters use social media. For example, posting highly personal material and sexting with little consideration of the consequences.

Examples of Research Reporting Negative Effects

Twenge and Campbell (2018) reported more hours of screen time were associated with lower well-being in ages 2 to 17; high users showed less curiosity, self-control, and emotional stability; twice as many high (vs. low) users of screens had an anxiety or depression diagnosis; non-users and low users did not differ in well-being; and associations with well-being were larger for adolescents than for children.

A review by Vandenbosch, Fardouly, and Tiggemann (2022) presents trends in social media and body image research, with a particular focus on different social media platforms, features unique to social media, and potentially positive content for body image. Visual platforms (e.g. Instagram) were found more dysfunctional for body image than more textual platforms (e.g. Facebook). Taking and editing (but not posting) selfies resulted in negative effects on body image. Positive comments intensified the effects of exposure to idealized content.

Viewing the Research Critically

It is important to remember that researchers are presenting correlational findings, so cause and effect remain uncertain. In general, available research on the impact of social media has significant methodological limitations and must be interpreted cautiously.

In January 2023, an ad hoc committee of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine began examining the current body of research and is charged with arriving at conclusions about the impact of social media on the mental and physical health and wellbeing of adolescents and children. Questions the committee is considering include:

- In what ways, if any, does social/digital media affect the mental and physical health and wellbeing of adolescents and children (age 13 -18 yrs), including anxiety, depression, addiction and self-efficacy, social isolation, relationship malformation, relationship with their parents, life satisfaction and physical activity?
 - >Do these effects differ between different social/digital media use (e.g. social media vs video streamers)?
 - >Do the effects of social/digital media on adolescents and children differ between different demographics of children (race and ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status)?
- What consequences, if any, do the effects of social/digital media on adolescents and children's mental and physical health and wellbeing have for education, social development, family dynamics, and projected economic prospects?

We expect the report of this committee will help clarify the current state of affairs.

Current Guidelines for Teen Social Media Use

In order to combat potential negatives of social media, it is widely recommended that parents and schools guide and monitor usage and educate youngsters about possible negative effects. And if problems arise, direct actions are advised, including if necessary, help seeking.

While the majority of parents believe they know what their child is posting on social media, a poll of teens by the Pew Research Center found that 70 percent are hiding their online behavior from their parents.

Here is an example of some guidelines from the [Mayo Clinic](#).

- **Set reasonable limits.** Talk to your teen about how to avoid letting social media interfere with his or her activities, sleep, meals or homework. Encourage a bedtime routine that avoids electronic media use, and keep cellphones and tablets out of teens' bedrooms. Set an example by following these rules yourself.
- **Monitor your teen's accounts.** Let your teen know that you'll be regularly checking his or her social media accounts. You might aim to do so once a week or more. Make sure you follow through.
- **Explain what's not OK.** Discourage your teen from gossiping, spreading rumors, bullying or damaging someone's reputation — online or otherwise. Talk to your teen about what is appropriate and safe to share on social media.
- **Encourage face-to-face contact with friends.** This is particularly important for teens vulnerable to social anxiety disorder.
- **Talk about social media.** Talk about your own social media habits. Ask your teen how he or she is using social media and how it makes him or her feel. Remind your teen that social media is full of unrealistic images.

At the same time, some concerns have been raised about guidelines that restrict social media use or limit access to the Internet to protect youngsters from psychological harm. For example, Hampton and Shin (2022) argue that:

Prior research has misspecified and exaggerated the magnitude of the relationship between screen time and adolescent psychological well-being. If the harm associated with heavy (excessive) or even average use of new media has been overstated, then the recommendation of disconnection may also be problematic. New media use is heavily integrated into youth culture and sociality, restrictive media parenting practices or digital inequalities may rob adolescents of experiences that would otherwise be protective of self-esteem. We conducted a survey of rural adolescents, who are more likely to experience disconnection at home because of a lack of physical availability of broadband, not simply affordability. Based on that survey, we find that a negative relationship between screen time and lower self-esteem is eclipsed by a more substantive, negative relationship to inequalities in material access to the Internet and restrictive mediation of media by parents. Findings show that new media use does not substantively displace time spent socializing with family and friends and in other social activities (e.g., volunteering). Omitting the supportive, indirect relationship between time on social media and self-esteem, through time spent socializing, exaggerates the negative relationship between social media use and adolescent well-being for girls, and for boys, misspecified the direction of the relationship. Adolescents, who experience heavy restrictive mediation of media by parents or have limited Internet access at home, tend to report substantively lower self-esteem than heavy users of any new media.

Beyond the various guidelines that are recommended, there also is the usual emphasis on improving coping through practices that enhance resilience and reduce anxiety.

Concluding Comments

As noted, social media are seen as a double-edged sword. The various types provide adolescents with opportunities that can promote positive development, but some of the ways in which the platforms are used have demonstrated their potential for undermining wellbeing.

There is much that still needs to be learned about the role social and digital media play, positively and negatively, in the lives of young people. In the meantime, many experts are calling on parents and school professionals to use “common sense” in order to accentuate the positives and avoid ignoring or overreacting to potential problems.

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