

Social Networking and Peer Relationships: The Benefits and Drawbacks of Children (9-12) Using Online Social Networking Sites

This resource is intended to help school personnel and parents understand the pros and cons of elementary and middle school aged students' use of online social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr. Particular attention is given to effects on peer relationships. Clearly, peer relationships are vital to normal development; social networks are a new interactive "playground" influencing development in positive and negative ways.

Available data on outcomes are mixed, with positive and negative indicators reported with regularity. Regardless of the data, there is little doubt that young children increasingly are participating in online social networking. For school personnel and parents, the main questions are how to minimize the drawbacks while maximizing benefits.

As a brief resource aid, this document highlights the following matters:

- What are the benefits of social networking sites?
- What are the drawbacks of social networking sites?
- How can school personnel and parents help maximize good outcomes and minimize those that are unwanted?

*The information presented here was culled from the literature and drafted by Jessica Krier as part of her work with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA
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In 2010, 57% of kids used the internet at home, and 85% had access to a computer at home (Child Trends, 2012). In 2012, the National Consumers League reported that 32% of children ages 8-10 and 69% of 11 and 12 year olds had their own cell phone. Of these, almost 50% could access the internet through their phone.

In addition, children have access to everything on the internet at the touch of a button through newer technology, such as the iPad, iPad mini, mp3 players, and iPod Touch. And with devices like the iPod, parents may only think about it as a music device and not realize that they are opening the whole internet to their child.



It is estimated that there are about 5.6 million Facebook accounts that are used by children 12 and under, and this is only one social networking site.

Parents and school personnel need to be knowledgeable and ready to instruct children on the best and safest way to use and benefit from the internet.

Benefits of Social Networking for Peer Relationships

Research has shown many positives and negatives of social networking for children in the 9-12 age group. For those who have heard mainly about the risks and challenges, it may be surprising to learn there are many benefits social networking sites can add to social development. The following are some examples researchers have reported:

Social Networking can help children

1. who may be isolated in their own community, such as those who have interests beyond what is available locally or who have a disability that limits physical contact with peers, find compatible peers and build an otherwise unavailable sense of community (Steward, Barnfather, Magill-Evans, Ray, & Letourneau, 2011)
2. who are “only children” or those who are home-schooled connect and communicate with and learn about a wider range of people (Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore, 2010)



3. create closer bonds with people they already know (Lee, 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007)
4. develop social skills and their own identities by commenting, liking, and sharing about themselves; in presenting different versions of themselves online, they can gauge peer reactions to their identity choices at a safe distance (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005)
5. facilitate new and ongoing peer relationships outside of school and beyond their own peer group at school; note that being online does not take away from off-line friendships; those on social networking sites have been found to have many off-line friends (Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, & Smallwood, 2006)
6. connect with peers online for social support; this has been shown to reduce stress as well as have many health benefits and is especially important for kids who do not have enough support in their lives (Leung, 2007)
7. reduce social anxiety through self-disclosure (Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007)
8. positively boost self-esteem through receiving positive feedback for their contributions (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006);
9. who are excluded to boost self-esteem, reduce negative affect, and increase relational value through talking to unknown peers online (Gross, 2009)

So it is clear there are some benefits children can accrue from social networking.

And while studies have found no negative psychosocial difference between 7th grade social network users and nonusers (Gross, 2004), there is research indicating possible drawbacks to the technology.

Drawbacks of Social Networking for Peer Relationships

The following are some examples of potential drawbacks:

1. 72% of students surveyed who use social networking sites reported experiencing cyberbullying (and 90% of those saying that they did not report the event to an adult). Cyberbullying can lead to increased social anxiety. (Juvonen, & Gross, 2008).
2. The use of social networking sites has been reported as leading to lower psychological well-being for some girls (Devine, & Lloyd, 2012).
3. Kids may compare themselves unfavorably to others when reviewing online profiles; (online profilers have been found to overly represent positive and under-represent negative aspects of their lives) (Qiu, Lin, Leung, & Tov, 2012).
4. Family members may find that users of social networking sites spend less time with them than they feel is appropriate (Lee, 2009).
5. Some kids post pictures or status updates describing behaviors, such as smoking, drinking, and other risk-taking. This may lead others to think that such behavior is the norm and induce them to engage in similar behavior (Huang et al., 2012; Moreno, Briner, Williams, Walker, & Christakis, 2009).
6. Some research reports that social networking can lower self-esteem if the child is given negative feedback (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006), and such networking doesn't help socially anxious kids learn to communicate more effectively with peers (Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore, 2010).
7. Outgoing younger adolescents may use social networking to begin flirting online at an earlier age than they would otherwise (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005)

Preventing or Alleviating Drawbacks

Parents and schools can help children have a positive and safe social networking experience. To do so requires first becoming educated about the technologies youngsters are using, including ways to facilitate positive experiences and how to implement protective safeguards and strategies (O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, & Council on Communications. 2011).

Strategies for Parents

- Consider developing a family online-use plan, including regular family meetings to discuss how well the plan is working.

- Lead children of this age to child friendly online networking sites, such as Club Penguin or Yoursphere. These websites limit the types of words that can be said, which can help tone down cyberbullying as well as other inappropriate contacts.
- Friend your child on social networking and have other family members do so as well. This will help the child remember that what they are publishing isn't just for their peers, but can be seen by everyone, including future colleges and employers.
- Encourage the child to spend less time on the internet by providing them with more real life social interaction. Spending less time online also encourages more time with family, more time participating in other activities that contribute to positive development and learning, and less time comparing themselves to others' profiles.
- Talk to the child about online risks and their experiences in ways that are not invasive and that build trust. Ask them directly to let you know if they or their friends are having trouble with cyberbullying or other forms of harassment and caution them about predators.
- Remind your child that not everything they see on the internet is true. This will help them deal with rumors, as well as protect them from some of the peer pressure from the presentation of online risky behaviors.

Strategies for Schools

In addition to the several of the above:

- Help students understand that words hurt and that they are responsible for what they say and do online. Particularly emphasize that cyberbullying is just as unacceptable as other types of bullying and that online bullying has led some to commit suicide
- Use social networks to enhance learning. For example, students might do message boards about a novel that they read. Using such activities can enhance engagement in learning and can be especially helpful for students who may be shy about participating in class discussions.



Clearly there are challenges and concerns related to social networking. The immediate press for parents and school personnel is to develop ways to capitalize on social network technologies while ensuring effective safeguards are in place.

With appropriate attention to facilitating learning and development, appreciating children's rights, and promoting their sense of responsibility, social network sites can be used as a powerful tool for enhancing youth expression and their participation at school and in society.

Resources

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