

## About Teen Social Media Addiction\*

Note: Wenjie Wang, an undergraduate working with our Center at UCLA, indicated an interest in how schools address students seen as experiencing social media addiction and wanted to look at what the literature had to say. The following briefly highlights material from her research paper (with some edits).

In 2024, more than 5 billion people used social media – and projections indicate the number will grow to 5.8 billion by 2027 (Statista, 2024). The majority of users engage with social media on a daily basis, and surveys reveal that 39% of users report feeling addicted, with 9% fully agreeing with the statement, “I am addicted to social media” (Dixon, 2025). Of the 54% of teens who report that it’s hard to cut back, girls state this with greater frequency.

Considerable concern has been raised about the negative impact on youth of excessive use of screen time. A wide range of *social, emotional, behavior, and learning problems* are among the concerns (Hou et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2025; Royal Society for Public Health, 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023; Thames, 2023). Examples include higher levels of anxiety and sadness, body image worries, lowered self-esteem, increased aggressiveness, cyberbullying, sleep interference, and decreased connection with school learning.

*Social media gives quick gratification – likes, messages, attention. This makes you feel like you matter; it can also become hard to stop.*

Common Reasons  
Given for Teens  
Getting Addicted to  
Social Media

>*Everyone wants to feel like they belong.* – When teens feel lonely, stressed, or left out, they often turn to social media to feel accepted or connected.

>*Social media activates the brain’s reward system.* Likes, comments, and messages give small “hits” of pleasure by triggering reward centers in the brain, similar to how addictions work (Sherman et al., 2016).

>*Teens are more impulsive by nature.* Teenagers’ brains are still developing, especially the parts that manage self-control. This makes it easier for them to get hooked on things like social media (Vidal, 2023).

>*The more time spent, the stronger the attachment.* The more we see or use something, the more we like it – this is called the mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968). Teens also feel emotionally attached to their profiles and online presence.

>*Apps are designed to keep you scrolling.* Social media platforms use design tricks – like infinite scroll, push notifications, and algorithmic suggestions – to hold one’s attention for as long as possible (Center for Humane Technology, 2022).

*\*Social media addiction, particularly among teenagers, is characterized by excessive screen time, compulsive checking, and detrimental effects on real-life relationships and responsibilities.* Amirthalingam & Khera (2024)

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The material in this document was produced by Wenjie Wang as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2025.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

## Countering Social Media Addiction

Social media isn't inherently harmful, but its addictive features, paired with adolescent vulnerabilities, can cause harm if left unchecked. Those at home and at school play a critical role in preventing the harms that can arise from excessive screen time.

### Some Guidelines from the American Psychological Association

1. Encourage youth to use social media features that promote connection and emotional support.
2. Match social media design and permissions to youths' developmental level.
3. Monitor early adolescents' social media use, while balancing with appropriate privacy.
4. Limit and remove harmful content (e.g., self-harm, disordered eating), and prevent tech from promoting it.
5. Minimize teens' exposure to cyberhate and discrimination online.
6. Routinely screen for signs of problematic social media use.
7. Limit social media so it doesn't interfere with sleep or physical activity.
8. Reduce appearance-based social comparison on social media.
9. Provide social media literacy training before active use.

Here are some examples of what schools have done:

- *Ensuring students feel connected at school so that they are less likely to turn to social media to fill emotional gaps.* Some activities used include group projects, setting up "connection corners" where students can relax and talk, having weekly "kindness circles" or reflection time. For instance, Allen and colleagues (2020) reported using group sharing and personal value exercises to build belonging and reduce loneliness.
- *Limiting Use.* Cutting back screen time, even just a little has been reported to counter problems. For instance, Hunt and colleagues (2018) report that students who only used social media for 10 minutes per app per day for 3 weeks felt less lonely and less depressed.
- *Building Awareness by helping students to reflect and reset* (Young, 1999, 2007). Activities used include having students track their screen time, providing reminder cards ("Why I want to use less."), asking students simple questions ("How does scrolling make you feel?" or "What times do you usually reach for your phone?"), assigning daily emotion journals ("How does social media affect your feelings?").

### A Note from the Center Co-directors

Schools must prevent and ameliorate many types of learning, behavior, and emotional problems each day. Fortunately, the ways in which such problems overlap means that similar strategies and interventions can be used for a variety of problems, rather than approaching each as a separate entity (Adelman & Taylor, 2017).

Given this and based on many years of research and development, our Center stresses embedding interventions for problems, such as social media addiction, into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system (Adelman & Taylor, 2022).

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\*For more on social media, see the Center's Quick Find.  
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/socialnetworks.html>