



SOCIAL MEDIA

Social Media and Youth Mental Health

In recent years there has been growing concern about the safety and effects of social media on the mental health of children and youth. Recent studies have shown that up to 95% of teenagers report using a social media platform, with more than a third indicating their usage is almost constant. In the Spring of 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an [advisory](#) calling attention to mounting concerns and exploring this as a public health issue impacting American youth.

Social media can be both beneficial and harmful to adolescents, depending on how it is used, and the strengths and vulnerabilities of the individual user. It is particularly concerning that the ages of 10 to 19, when youth report the

highest usage, are also a highly sensitive period of brain development. Additionally, youth in this developmental stage are particularly susceptible to peer pressure, opinions, and comparison.

Additional concern stems from the sheer amount of time adolescents spend on various social media platforms. As of 2021, 8th and 10th graders report spending an average of 3.5 hours per day on social media. Research has shown that those who spend more than three hours a day on social media double their risk of poor mental health, including symptoms of depression and anxiety. This excessive use has been linked to poor sleep quality and depression and has led to reports from youth of feeling “addicted” to certain social media.

The carefully curated and edited images youth are exposed to on social media can reinforce negative body image leading to problematic

SURGEON GENERAL ADVISORY: WHAT PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS CAN DO

- *Create a family media plan establishing healthy technology boundaries.*
- *Create tech-free zones and encourage children to foster in-person friendships.*
- *Model responsible social media behavior.*
- *Teach kids about technology and empower them to be responsible online participants at the appropriate age.*
- *Report cyberbullying and online abuse and exploitation.*
- *Work with other parents to help establish shared norms and practices and to support programs and policies around healthy social media use.*

behavior such as disordered eating, social comparison, and low self-esteem. While the promotion of body positivity on social media has become more widespread, 46% of adolescents aged 13 to 17 still say that social media is damaging to their body image. The wide availability of hate-based, suicidal, and self-harm related content can appear to normalize problematic behaviors. Furthermore, youth exposure to inappropriate content, bullying, harassment and predatory behaviors on social media are associated with negative emotional impacts.

However, according to the advisory and the American Academy of Pediatricians (AAP), social media also provides important benefits for youth. Social media can be a great place for young people to find community, acceptance,

belonging and connection. Those who struggle to fit in or feel “other” can form positive and lasting relationships with peers that provide support and buffer feelings of isolation they may feel offline. It can also provide youth access to important information, provide educational content to learn new skills or pursue hobbies, and be an outlet for creativity and self-expression. Research also suggests that social media-based and similar mental health interventions can be helpful in promoting help-seeking behavior and initiating mental health care.

The advisory and the AAP’s Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health conclude that more research needs to be done on the relationship between social media and youth mental health to better safeguard the well-being of children and adolescents. Families and children should both be made aware of the potential risks and benefits of social media use among adolescents. Caregivers should be concerned if kids are using social media so often that it interferes with their ability to get sufficient sleep and physical activity, or if they see their kids retreating from activities they normally enjoyed.

For more recommendations on what families can do to protect and guide their children’s digital use, please visit [Social Media and Youth Mental Health — Current Priorities of the U.S. Surgeon General \(hhs.gov\)](https://www.hhs.gov/social-media/youth-mental-health), [OCMH Fact Sheet_April2022_Healthy Screen Time in a Digital World.pdf \(wic.gov\)](https://www.wic.gov/ocmh/fact-sheet), and [Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health \(aap.org\)](https://www.aap.org/center-of-excellence).