



FCS-2433

Is social media harmful for kids? What should parents do?

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Introduction

Almost all teenagers use social media. Surveys show about 92% of teens use social media, and over half (57%) say they are on-line almost all the time (Gottfried 2024). Most teens use their phones to go on social media. With this level of use, parents and teachers may wonder if social media is harmful to teens' mental health. Parents may wonder whether they should let their kids use social media at all or how to tell if it's becoming a problem. This article summarizes what research says about social media so you can make informed choices for your family.

What does research say?

Social media is linked to higher levels of depression and anxiety, but that relationship is small (Ferguson, Kaye, Branley-Bell & Markey 2025; Orben, 2020). Importantly, most teens (around 85%) use social media without it harming their well-being (Beyens et al., 2020).

Social media may not be the main cause of rising depression. In fact, it might work the other way around. Teens who already feel depressed may spend more time online to cope with their emotions. While this can feel helpful in the short term, it can sometimes backfire, making them feel worse over time (Puukko et al., 2020).

Why a teen uses social media and what they do on it matters more than how much time they spend. Using social media to connect with friends or explore hobbies is often linked to better mental health (Yang & Ariati 2021). But social media can also create challenges. Teens may compare themselves to others and feel worse about their bodies or lives. Using social media to escape negative feelings, like sadness or worry, can make those feelings stronger (Yang & Ariati 2021). Teens may also come across inappropriate or adult content. Teens may experience bullying or talk with unsafe adults. Some may feel pressured to share personal information or private photos that put them at risk for exploitation.

What should parents do?

Many parents worry about their kids spending too much time online. Some parents make strict rules to protect their children, but focusing too much on limiting social media or screen time can backfire. (Chen & Shi, 2019). Teens may become defensive or hide how much time they spend online. This can be a problem if they have a bad experience online or are contacted by someone unsafe, and they feel afraid to tell their parents. It's easier for teens to open up if they feel safe and know their parents will listen.

Instead of focusing just on limits, parents can talk with their teens about social media. Since not all online activity is bad, teens may tune out if parents only talk about the negatives. Talking about both the good and bad parts of social media show you understand it's not all harmful and helps teens build critical thinking skills about what they see and do online.

These important talks are not a one-time conversation. Instead, parents should talk regularly about social media and screen time. As your teens grow and mature, their social media use may also change. If you notice changes in your teen, such as how often they are online or how much time they spend alone, it could be helpful to have these conversations again.

Some social media platforms, such as Instagram, now feature Teen accounts. These accounts are designed to be safer for teens to use. They include built-in safety tools, such as limiting the types of content that can be seen and preventing adults they don't know from sending them direct messages.

Even with these new accounts, it is important that parents still have conversations with their teens. You know your child best and are the most important person to help them learn to use social media in a safer, healthier way.

Questions parents can ask

- What do you like about social media?
- What do you typically do when you're online?
- Are there any parts you don't like, or that bother you?
- How do you feel after using social media – better, worse, the same?
- Have you ever noticed it getting in the way of sleep, school or friendship?

What to listen for

Healthy use

Your teen talks about connecting with friends, learning new things, or enjoying creative or funny content.

Mixed signals

They use social media to relax or distract themselves. Using social media as an occasional break is normal, but if that's their main way to cope, try to discuss what they are feeling and explore other ways they could manage stress.

Possible concerns

They often compare themselves to others, feel left out, or use social media mainly to escape negative feelings.

Tips for talking with your teen

- **Reflect what they say:** Briefly repeat it back to show understanding. "It sounds like your favorite part is talking with friends online."
- **Ask for more details:** What else do you like? What else is not so good? How do you know when it's becoming a problem for you?
- **Stay calm if something worries you:** Thank them for being honest (that's what you want!) instead of reacting with criticism.
- **Avoid jumping straight to advice:** Listen first and ask, "What do you think might help?"

Remember: Focus on why and how your teen use social media, not just how much time.

If social media seems to be causing problems

- Help your teen notice when it's becoming a problem.
- Encourage short breaks or device-free times.
- Talk together about what's bothering them.
- Spend offline time doing fun things together.
- Seek support from a counselor or therapist if needed.

Final takeaway

Most teens use social media safely. By staying involved, listening openly and problem-solving together, parents can help support a healthy and positive online experience for their teens.

Citations

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