



Social Media and Teen Mental Health

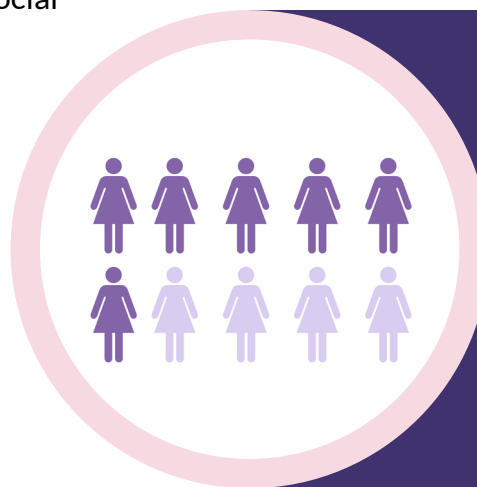
Guide for Parents & Caregivers to Support Healthy Social Media Use Among Teens

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Social media is here to stay, and it's important for parents and caregivers to understand the role it plays in their teens' lives. Parents and caregivers also need to know how to support teens' mental health when it comes to social media use. If you've been wondering how to steer teens in your life toward healthy social media use, this guide is for you! It includes a quiz you can share with teens to help them discover how social media affects their lives and mental health and a discussion guide to facilitate conversations about strategies they can use to avoid the risks and maximize the benefits of social media.

According to a Pew Research Center survey of American teens conducted in 2022, 97% of teens aged 13–17 reported being online daily and more than a third say they use social media “almost constantly.”¹ Studies have also shown that social media use is linked to anxiety, depression, and lower self-esteem among teens.^{2–4} It can contribute to negative body image;^{5,6} interfere with sleep quality⁷ and focus on schoolwork and other tasks; and put teens at risk for cyberbullying⁸ and exposure to inappropriate, hate-based, violent, or other harmful or upsetting content. Social media platforms can also put teens at risk for predatory behaviors such as fraud, sexual assault, and extortion. Because of growing concerns about the effects of social media

Throughout this document, the term “parents and caregivers” includes biological or adoptive parents; guardians; other relatives such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents; and other supportive adults who care for a teen.



In a survey, 6 in 10 teen girls ages 13–15 and pre-teens ages 11–12 reported that they had been contacted by a stranger on certain social media platforms in ways that made them feel uncomfortable.⁹

on youth mental health, the U.S. Surgeon General released an [Advisory](#) to call attention to the issue and offer recommendations about what can be done to help teens, including recommendations for parents and caregivers. These recommendations and others are provided below. Read these tips and then use the discussion guide to have a conversation with a teen you care for.

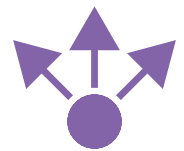
1. Educate yourself.



Use the resources provided at the bottom of this guide to become familiar with the social media platforms teens commonly use, the positive and negative aspects of different online behaviors, and the ways you can help minimize risks to teens in your life. Learn about parental controls for social media and your options for monitoring for signs of potential harm.

2. Get on the same page.

Despite the risks associated with social media use, teens experience many benefits, including connections with friends and family, opportunities to share ideas and information with people who share their interests, and an opportunity for self-expression and creativity. To help teens find the right balance, it's especially important to begin your conversation with an open mind and non-judgmental approach. The teens in your life may have experienced many of the following benefits of social media use. Which ones are you aware of?



Strengthened friendships/connecting with friends

Connections with others who have shared interests

Motivation to participate in worthwhile endeavors

Interactions with others across geographic barriers

Reduced feelings of isolation

Increased sense of belonging

Strengthened social support (especially for LGBTQIA2S+ teens, other teens who might face exclusion in their regular social circles, or teens with disabilities)

Increased outlets for personal or artistic expression

Greater access to information about topics of interest

When you talk with the teens in your life, make a point to acknowledge the positive sides and see what you can learn about the positive ways they are using social media. Then, open the door to discussing the potential harms and how to minimize them. They may be more open to talking if they know you aren't trying to take away their use of social media altogether.



3. Establish rules about privacy and security and help them set their own boundaries for screen time.

They might not say so, but teens need and appreciate clear limits from their parents and caregivers:

- *Rules about privacy and security.* Make sure they use appropriate privacy settings to control what others can see. They should restrict posts with personal information to people they know and trust in real life and should disable location services for all social media apps on their phone to minimize the risk that someone could use that information to harm them. Make sure they know there are serious lifelong consequences for sharing sexually explicit photos, videos, or messages through phones or online. Such images can be easily shared, which can cause significant emotional trauma and have legal consequences. You can also help them set their own boundaries about what is appropriate to post by talking with them about oversharing highly personal or sensitive information in a public space. Remind them that anything they post could be shared and therefore become extremely difficult to remove from the internet. It's best to assume that anything posted could stay on the internet forever. Make sure they consider who might see a post in the future (employers, teachers, family members).
- *Screen time limits.* Talk about your expectations regarding how much, where and when they can use social media. There are ways teens can manage screen time on both [iPhone](#) and [Android](#) that help them become more aware of their social media use, and you can find many other apps that let you set time limits. Some parents and caregivers even create a written agreement that can serve as a reminder about expectations. To encourage healthy sleep, you may want to designate appropriate hours for social media and restrict use entirely during the hour before bedtime. Having screen-free zones (like the bedroom or dinner table) can help. Encourage them to learn how to recognize when they need boundaries and to set their own. For example, some teens decide to turn off notifications or delete certain apps from their phone when they know they need a break.



4. Model healthy social media use.

Show the teen you care for what it looks like to have mindful use of social media. You could even take a “social media cleanse” or do a “digital detox” to completely disconnect for a period of time and ask other family members to join you. The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health cited a randomized controlled trial among young adults and adults showing that deactivating a social media platform for 4 weeks improved their sense of well-being by about 25%–40% of the effect of psychological interventions like self-help therapy, group training, and individual therapy.¹⁰ That’s a huge benefit for a simple behavior change! Be sure you also model empathy and kindness toward others in your own use of social media.



5. Encourage balance.



Help the teens in your life find hobbies, sports, and other activities to keep them busy offline. Foster their in-person social skills by facilitating opportunities for face-to-face interactions with peers. Work with other parents and caregivers to provide opportunities for social interaction and establish shared norms around social media use.



6. Help teens develop critical thinking skills and media literacy.

Talk with them about how what they see online isn't usually a complete or accurate picture. Remind them that most people try to project an image of perfection on their social media accounts, leaving out the difficulties, failures, and mundane parts of their lives, which can make others think their own lives aren't as good in comparison. Help them focus on all the positive things they have going on and encourage them to mute or unfollow accounts that make them feel bad. Help them to learn how to identify misinformation and avoid spreading it.



7. Make sure teens know they can come to you or another trusted adult for support.

Sometimes teens feel like they need to handle difficult issues—like cyberbullying, identity theft, or [sextortion](#)—alone. They need to know they have a trusted adult who can help them manage the situation and seek out the appropriate resources if they are a victim of cyberbullying or another online attack. Visit [CyberTipline](#) or [Take it Down](#) or contact your local law enforcement to report any instances of online exploitation.



8. Learn how to identify warning signs of excessive or problematic social media use and seek professional help if needed.

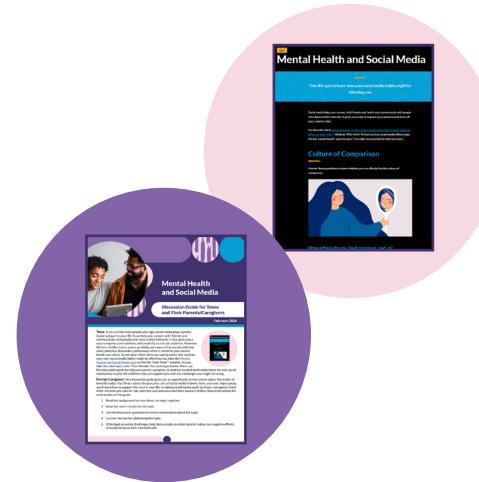
Social media may be causing problems if it interferes with teens' responsibilities at school or work or with extracurricular activities, if it prevents them from getting enough sleep or physical activity, if it keeps them from participating in in-person activities, or if they want to stop or cut down on using social media but don't seem to be able to. If you notice signs that teens in your life are struggling with their mental health or engaging in harmful social media practices that you can't address on your own, seek professional help. The Family & Youth Services Bureau's [Supporting Your Teen's Mental Health](#) tip sheet helps identify warning signs that teens might be experiencing challenges with mental health and provides suggestions on locating an appropriate mental health specialist when needed. It also includes hotlines for teens in distress.



By recognizing that social media will likely continue to play an important role in teens' lives, and by keeping the lines of communication open, you can teach the teens you care for how to navigate the digital landscape independently, safely, and productively.





ACTIVITY: MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL MEDIA QUIZ AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

Discover how teens in your life are using social media and start a conversation with them about the topic using the discussion guide that accompanies this resource, *Mental Health and Social Media: Discussion Guide for Teens and Their Parents/Caregivers*. Have them complete the [Mental Health and Social Media Quiz](#) to discover ways social media might be affecting their mental health. Their results will give you both a starting point for a constructive discussion. The quiz is from [We Think Twice™](#), a movement designed *with* teens, *for* teens, which provides tools and resources to equip and empower teens to form healthy relationships, set goals for the future, make smart decisions, and look out for their mental health.






ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For parents/caregivers:

- [Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#): The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory
- [Social Media Can...Help Connect: Research-Based Tips from Pediatricians for Families](#) : American Academy of Pediatrics, Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health
- [Family Media Plan](#) : American Academy of Pediatrics
- [Keeping Teens Safe on Social Media: What Parents Should Know to Protect their Kids](#) : American Psychological Association
- [Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence](#) : American Psychological Association
- [Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022](#) : Pew Research Center

To share with the teens in your life:

- [Mental Health Resources for Teens: We Think Twice™](#)
- [Teen Sexting—Think Twice Before You Hit “Send”](#): Administration for Children and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau
- [Tip Sheet on Social Media Use and Mental Health](#): Youth Engaged 4 Change
- [Grades 9–12 Student Tip Card](#): U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Stop.Think.Connect.™
- [Social Media Safety for Teens](#) : National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
- [General Tips and Advice](#) : U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Stop.Think.Connect.™
- [CyberTipline](#) : National center for Missing and Exploited Children

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This guide was created by the *We Think Twice*™ campaign with support from the Family and Youth Services Bureau. It is one of several valuable resources designed for youth-serving professionals as well as parents/caregivers. It is intended to encourage positive youth development by strengthening prevention education and other youth development programs.



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