



# Social Media Design: 4 Things Parents Need to Know

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Social media sites such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Discord, TikTok, YouTube, Twitch and Reddit are incredibly popular among children and teens. Kids seek social connection, entertainment and ideas through social media. But as they interact with these platforms, kids create a "digital footprint" that make them the target of digital marketing and other content aimed at influencing their behavior.



For parents who might have grown up watching television and DVDs, it's important to understand the unique design features of social media that can have positive or negative effects on your child. Here are 4 of these features, paired with ways you can help your child understand and manage them.

## 1. Personalization in social media

Social media personalization means that every child or teen has their own custom "feed." It includes recommendations that suit their tastes and personality, based on what the platform learns about them as they use it.

Kids can follow their favorite celebrities, sports teams, creative interests, learn about new things and discover new ideas. But a personalization also means that their feeds may be tailored with digital ads ([/English/family-life/Media/Pages/5-Unhealthy-Ways-Digital-Ads-May-Be-Targeting-Your-Child.aspx](#)) or content that aren't in their best interest. Think diet ads being sent to a teen with poor body image or conspiracy theory videos being sent to a teen who likes science fiction.

### What parents can do

Talk to your child about what shows up in their social media feeds: what is inspiring or hilarious? What is creepy or annoying? Help them recognize that personalization on social media means they may be in their own "filter bubble." This can prevent them from recognizing how other people from different backgrounds experience the online world.

If your child seems stressed out by social media, you can have them take a 2-week break and see how it feels. Or, change up their feed by searching out more positive and inspiring content.

## 2. Easy social connection

As soon as your child creates a social media account, it immediately seeks to access their contacts to build a big network. In some ways, this can be good. It can let them easily keep in touch with family and friends, find support for specific life experiences or medical conditions, for example. It also lets them build networks that include more diverse groups of people and perspectives.

On the downside, if their social media account isn't private, they can be contacted by marketers or adults they don't know. Another potential drawback is that seeing other "popular" users with a lot of followers and "likes" can make teens feel more lonely. Plus, the ease of interacting over social media also means that kids and teens may be more likely to post toxic or rude comments about each other – things they wouldn't necessarily have the nerve to say in real life.

### What parents can do

✓ Child or teens' social media settings should be set to private, so that strangers can't contact them. It's important to monitor kids' social media interactions. However, the approach will depend on your relationship with your child.

One solution that has worked for many parents is to make a deal with their child that they will occasionally look at their texts and social media feeds together. This way, parents can help their child navigate bullying ([Back to Top. \(/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Cyberbullying.aspx\)](/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Cyberbullying.aspx) interactions, stand up for others or filter and block people who are behaving in toxic ways. Other parents may want to give their teens privacy, but check in from time to time by asking questions like "what's the craziest or coolest thing you saw online today?" Either way, opening the doors of communication about what kids and teens experience online is key. Show them that you have an open mind about what they are experiencing online and are there to help them.

### 3. Social media content creation & "performance"

Anyone with a smartphone can publish their thoughts, dance moves, musical talents or video game (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Video-Games-Set-Your-Own-Ratings-System.aspx) expertise. This ready access allows or diverse children and teens have a voice in a world that is dominated by adults. It also means that some kids start to "perform" online in a way that isn't authentic to their inner true self. Instead, they may start to over-focus on "likes" and positive online feedback. Research has also found that content creators sometimes post racist or sexist material that doesn't get taken down by platforms.

#### What parents can do

Does your child post their own material online? If possible, subscribe to their channel to get regular updates and monitor what they're posting. If you think they're getting too obsessed with their appearance or their "followers," have them take a break or find other ways they feel competent and valued. Also, help them recognize the subtle biases and inappropriate posts that may show up in their feed, so they can become more critical thinkers about what they see.

### 4. Social media algorithm traps

Social media algorithms, sets of mathematical rules based on what users have viewed before, determine what people see on their sites. This means that your child's feed will be filled with videos or posts that the platform predicted your child might click on. Research has found that algorithms can "pigeon-hole" users into feeds dominated by self-harm, eating disorder content or biased posts.

Social media posts that are the most extreme – in terms of beauty, sexiness, violence or humor, for example – tend to get the most "engagement." Because of this, they are then amplified in users' recommendation feeds. This may lead to teens seeing more unrealistic views of beauty, wealth or behavior. In turn, it may influence their self-esteem or get them to take part in dangerous internet challenges (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Dangerous-Internet-Challenges.aspx).

#### What parents can do

Help your kids become savvy about ridiculous beauty standards, extreme stunts, challenges or over-the-top social media posts that may appear in their feed. Also help them understand that more extreme posts go "viral" because social media companies make more advertising money, and collect more data, when users are sharing and interacting more.

### The big picture

Whether your child is already on social media or they're asking you if they can start, be sure to go through your family rules for using it. You can make a family media plan (/English/fmp/Pages/MediaPlan.aspx) that everyone agrees to follow. Overall, it's important to be open-minded about the laughs and connections that teens get from social media. But it is also important to help them recognize behavior that is not authentic, misinformation and how they are profiled by companies.

Keep channels of communication open about the whole family's media use. Consider how mhow it's affecting mood, sleep (/English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/My-teen-is-having-more-trouble-falling-asleep.aspx), or family interactions, and whether it's a positive force in your lives or becoming a time-waster.

### More information

- AAP Family Media Plan (/English/fmp/Pages/MediaPlan.aspx)
- 5 Unhealthy Ways Digital Ads May Be Targeting Your Child (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/5-Unhealthy-Ways-Digital-Ads-May-Be-Targeting-Your-Child.aspx)
- Social Media & Your Child's Mental Health: What the Research Says (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/social-media-and-your-childs-mental-health-what-research-says.aspx)
- Cyberbullying: What Parents Need to Know (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Cyberbullying.aspx)
- Constantly Connected: How Media Use Can Affect Your Child (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Adverse-Effects-of-Television-Commercials.aspx)

- [Your Child's First Phone: Are They Ready? \(/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Cell-Phones-Whats-the-Right-Age-to-Start.aspx\)](#) [Back to Top](#)

## About Dr. Radesky



**Jenny Radesky, MD, FAAP** is an Assistant Professor in Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics at the University of Michigan Medical School. Within the American Academy of Pediatrics, Dr. Radesky is a member of Council on Communications and Media and was the lead author of the AAP policy statement, "Media and Young Minds (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2016/10/19/peds.2016-2591>).\" Clinically, her work focuses on developmental and behavioral problems in low-income and underserved populations, family advocacy, parent-child relationship difficulties, and autism spectrum disorder. Follow Dr. Radesky on Twitter @jennyradesky (<https://twitter.com/jennyradesky>).

## About Dr. Moreno



**Megan Moreno, MD, MEd, MPH, FAAP**, is an executive committee member on the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Communication and Media and the lead author of the 2016 academy policy statement, "Media Use in School-Aged Children and Adolescents." She is principal investigator of the Social Media and Adolescent Health Research Team (SMAHRT) within the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. Dr. Moreno served on committee for the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine's 2016 report: "Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy and Practice."

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