



# Social Media & Your Child's Mental Health: What the Research Says

By: Megan A Moreno, MD, FAAP & Jenny Radesky, MD, FAAP

Social media plays an important role in the lives of many tweens and teens. Roughly 18% of 8- to 12-year-olds and 62% of 13- 18-year-olds reported using social media sites such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Discord and Reddit every day ([https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web\\_0.pdf](https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_0.pdf)) in 2021. Among adolescents and young adults, an estimated 90% use one or more social media platforms.



All this media use can influence young people in a variety of ways. And with a reported rise in depression and anxiety among teens (</English/ages-stages/teen/Pages/Mental-Health-and-Teens-Watch-for-Danger-Signs.aspx>), you may wonder how social media may impact your child's mental health. Research suggests it depends on how they use it. Understanding potential connections between social media and mental health can help you guide your kids toward healthy social media habits.

## Ways social media use may benefit mental health

**Social connection.** One of the ways kids use social media is for social connection. Sharing photos and comments on social media platforms can help keep them in touch with peers and family who live far away, for example. Teens can also join groups that represent aspects of their identities or interests, such as groups around sports, theater, music or LGBTQ pride and support.

**Learning.** Another positive way adolescents use social media is to learn. They can explore and follow organizations such as art museums, local park systems or recipe bloggers. Some platforms also allow them to create share their own content. Adolescents have described sharing their own crafts, hobbies and art to their social media audience.

## Risky ways teens may use social media

**Overload.** Using social media too much, though, can push out other important activities. Examples include being in person with friends and family or getting enough sleep (</English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/My-teen-is-having-more-trouble-falling-asleep.aspx>).

**Unhealthy content.** Social media can also expose adolescents to content that is violent (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Virtual-Violence-Impacts-Childrens-Behavior.aspx>), dangerous or inaccurate. Further, social media can present idealized images of people that can lead to issues with body image for some teens.

## Current evidence around social media and mental health: FAQs

### Can more social media use lead to depression?

There have been a lot of news stories lately about whether too much social media use contributes to depression.

Some studies have found that young people who used more social media were more likely to report depression symptoms. It is important to consider that these studies could not tell if more social media use was impacting depression, **or** whether participants with depression already were using more social media. The cause-and-effect relationship for social media and depression remains unclear.

There are also research studies that found no relationship between the amount of social media use and depression symptoms. In a few other studies, researchers found that there was a small effect on depression, but only with very high levels of social media use.

All of these studies focus on the quantity of social media use; they do not address the different ways that each unique child may use social media.

In 2020, a review article (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31951670/>) summarized all of the studies over the past five years on social media and depression. This systematic review article is a very powerful type of study that allows an understanding of evidence across multiple studies over time. This article concluded that "most recent and rigorous studies report small associations that do not distinguish between cause and effect, and are unlikely to be of clinical or practical significance."

## My child uses social media, but doesn't post much. Does that make a difference?

Another important consideration about social media and mental health is **how** your child uses social media.

**Passive or active use?** Some studies show that teens who use social media in a passive way, such as by scrolling and looking at content as it goes by on the screen, had a higher likelihood of feeling depression symptoms. These studies also found that adolescents who used social media in a more active way, such as by liking or commenting on people's posts, or making their own posts and sharing them, did not have negative impact on mental health.

These studies suggest that it is not just quantity of time a child spends on social media, but the quality of time using social media.

## What are some other factors that may play a role in how social media affects mental health?

**Different levels of risk.** Newer research studies are teaching us that not all adolescents use social media in the same way. We're also learning that some kids may be at risk for negative consequences while others may not. This approach in research is called "differential susceptibility." What this means is that adolescents have unique combinations of risks and strengths that they bring to, and that impact, their social media use.

**The role of parents.** A recent study (<https://pediatrics.jmir.org/2022/2/e35540>) looked at technology use and possible links to health and well-being behaviors, mental health and parenting. Two-thirds of adolescents in the study were doing well with their technology use and mental health. This group was called "Family-Engaged Teens," since they reported good communication with their parents about technology use. Their parents also had low levels of their own social media use.

The smaller one-third group of teen participants had higher rates of negative health outcomes such as depression and loneliness. This group was called "At Risk Teens." This group of teen participants reported higher rates of social media use by their parents, as well as less frequent communication with their parents about their social media use.

Another recent study found that adolescents who had higher depression symptoms reported that their *parents spent up to 8 hours a day on social media*. These studies highlight the important and positive role parents can play by:

- communicating with their children about social media, and
- serving as role models in monitoring their own social media use.

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# How to encourage healthy social media habits for your whole family

Here are steps you can take to help promote positive social media use for your child:

- Establish a Family Media Plan (</English/fmp/Pages/MediaPlan.aspx>) for rules about social media use. Make sure that you are also following rules and role modeling healthy use for the family.
- Have conversations with your child about their media use, including how they are using these platforms. What do they like about them? Have they seen anything concerning? Make this an ongoing conversation.
- If you as a parent use social media, be sure to role model positive actions. For example, you can put away your phone at important family times such as during dinner, or during family time.
- Be cautious about children under 13 years old using social media. Most platforms set 13 as the minimum age to sign up.

**For more tips, see [Beyond Screen Time: Help Your Child Build Healthy Media Use Habits \(/English/family-life/Media/Pages/healthy-digital-media-use-habits-for-babies-toddlers-preschoolers.aspx\)](/English/family-life/Media/Pages/healthy-digital-media-use-habits-for-babies-toddlers-preschoolers.aspx).**

## Remember

If you're concerned about your child's mental health, be sure to talk (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/How-to-Talk-with-Your-Child-and-Their-Pediatrician-About-Mental-Health-Concerns.aspx>) with your pediatrician.

## More information

- AAP Family Media Plan (</English/fmp/Pages/MediaPlan.aspx>)
- Social Media Design: 4 Things Parents Need to Know (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/social-media-design-4-things-parents-should-know.aspx>)
- Constantly Connected: How Media Use Can Affect Your Child (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Adverse-Effects-of-Television-Commercials.aspx>)
- How Parents Can Support the Well-Being of Youth Around Digital Technology and Media ([https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c0da585da02bc56793a0b31/t/62719dc9d8ac396dfe222238/1651613129409/LCA\\_Parent+Tip+Sheet\\_5.3.22.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c0da585da02bc56793a0b31/t/62719dc9d8ac396dfe222238/1651613129409/LCA_Parent+Tip+Sheet_5.3.22.pdf)) (Social Media & Adolescent Health Research Team)
- Social Media and Adolescent Mental Health: Pediatric Mental Health Minute Series (<https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/mental-health-minute/social-media-and-adolescent-mental-health/>) (AAP.org)

## 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."

## 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>).

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