America’s Top Doctor on Why He Wants Warning Labels on Social Media

0:01

from The New York Times I'm Sabrina tavernes and this is the [Music]

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daily a rising tide of mental health problems among teens has sent parents

0:16

teachers and doctors searching for answers this week the nation's top

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doctor offered one today I talk with Surgeon General Viv

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morthy about his plan to take on what he sees as a central threat facing American

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teens social [Music]

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[Applause] media it's Friday June

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[Music]

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21st Dr morthy nice to see you hey Sabrina it's good to see you too you can call me Viv by the way I'm very

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informal Viv okay well you know being the nation's stop doctor I'm inclined to call you doctor but uh we can go with v

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yeah I'll tell you Sabrina I still think of Dr morthy as my dad so

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interesting so you are the country's Surgeon General and we're talking to you today because earlier this week you made

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a pretty big announcement about the dangers of social media for young people

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and you suggested a potential fix for it you actually announced this move by writing an oped in the New York Times

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but before we get to that fix that you're proposing let's talk about the problem when did you start thinking of

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this as an issue that you should be focused on well I first started seeing the roots

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of the youth Mental Health crisis during my first term as Surgeon General this was during 2014 to 17 I was traveling

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the country listening to communities and big cities and small towns and I was

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hearing often about these struggles that young people are having with loneliness and isolation with depression and

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anxiety over the course of two terms I have seen this ratchet up with a pandemic pouring fuel on a fire but a

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fire that was already burning before the pandemic arrived and what specifically were you hearing I mean was there a

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patient you saw or was it something that happened to a friend or your own family that made this problem especially real

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for you well actually there have been a series of things that made it real one is my own experience personally you know

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as a young person I struggled a lot with my mental health with feeling alone and isolated I was very shy and introverted

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as a child and at that time I thought I was the only one who was struggling it was only years later Sabrina that I

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actually realized a lot of my classmates were struggling too but then I think about the conversations I had as Surgeon

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General then I heard some stories I expected but many I did not I remember stopping at a college and one young

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woman said to me I feel like I'm on this campus surrounded by thousands of other students but but nobody really knows me

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and I feel like I can't be myself and I feel all alone I think about the moms

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and dads who have come to visit me who have talked about how social media has impacted the mental health of their kids

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the one mother whose son was also shy and introverted and struggled a lot with

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his mental health was being bullied and and was having a really difficult time and then the algorithm on his social

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media platform started suggesting to him that he take his own life and started

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directing him as to how to do that and he ultimately followed his directions and took his own life I heard just

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countless stories like this of young people who are struggling parents who are struggling as well and those have

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stuck with me and those go along with the many statistics we now have that demonstrate that we are indeed living in

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a profound Mental Health crisis okay so you're noticing this problem or this looming problem and you're hearing these

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really tragic stories how did you go from that kind of anecdotal information

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gathering to actually studying this issue more closely you know to inspect this as a potential health hazard well

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once I started hearing those stories and hearing them at such volume and consistency they what really compelled

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me to dig more deeply into the data and to try to understand what is driving

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this deeper Mental Health crisis it turns out it's not just one thing loneliness and isolation are

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contributing the experiences of violence and the fear of violence particularly

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gun violence are contributing to the Daily stress and strain that so many families are going through right now but

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it turns out again and again the issue of social media kept coming up so when I

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decided I needed to dig into this more deeply I began essentially a research project with my team to understand more

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deeply what is the data telling us about social media and youth mental health and

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the data tells us that there is an in fact an association between social media

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use among young people and the mental health harms that they are experiencing

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the second thing though that we know and this is very important is we know a lot based on what young people are telling

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us themselves six out of 10 adolescent girls talk about being approached by strangers on social media in ways that

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make them feel uncomfortable a third of young people say they're staying up till past midnight on their devices a lot of

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that is social media use but nearly half of adolescence are also telling us on these studies that using social media

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makes them feel worse about their body image and I want to just caveat this by saying there are so open questions like

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we want to know more about which populations are most deeply impacted by social media both positively and

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negatively we want to know what types of use of social media seem to contribute to the most harm and the most benefit

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these are really important questions to address and we should be investing more research and understanding them I want

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to return to something that you said which is that there's an association between social media use and mental

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health problems among young people so this is a point of dispute within the scientific Community right like there

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are some studies that show that these two things are associated in other words that there's some relationship there but

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there really isn't much evidence that one actually causes the other that

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social media is the reason for the rise in mental health problems one of my

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colleagues this week talked to the chief science officer at the American Psychological Association and she was

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asking about whether the time a child spent on social media contributed to poor mental health and and he said and I

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quote the results have been really mixed with probably the consensus being that

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no it's not related what is your response to that well I I think look

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it's important to look at the research question broadly what we're trying to understand first and foremost is the

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answer to the question parents are asking us which is is social media safe for my kids and if you ask researchers

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what does the data tell us about safety where is the data that tells us these platforms are safe that data is not

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there so there's not evidence of safety there is growing evidence of harm there

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is data showing an association between social media use and youth mental health harm now where there are debates and

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discussions in the research Community is how big is that Association is it bigger for boys versus girls and it seems like

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it is bigger for girls does it differ based on your socioeconomic status based on other indicators and those are

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important questions to debate but one of the things that you learn in medicine and in public health when you're faced

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with the real world problems is that you have to assess when you have enough information to act recognizing that you

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want to continue to get clarity that will continue to home your approach as time goes on to give you an example from

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a clinical circumstance if I have a patient in front of me whose blood pressure is dropping rapidly and who is

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in danger of losing their life I have to rapidly assess what are the potential

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causes of that there could be many different reasons I've got to quickly assess it and I've got to move forward with treating it and I keep Gathering

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data along the way but the risk of inaction of saying hold on let me not take action here until every question I

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have is answered the risk of that is the patient's life and that is literally what we are seeing taking place right

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now it's not to say that there aren't kids who are having some benefits but the measure of whether we should take

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action or not is not are some kids getting benefits from social media or not that is not the threshold I lay out

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in my advisory last year that there are certain benefits but getting some benefits does not justify forcing kids

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to endure significant harms we can make social media safer we should so that

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kids can get the benefits without having to sustain the harms so I want to talk more about the

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warning advisory that you issued last year as you said the moment when you first started to act on this basically

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your thinking was that there were these findings on social media and mental health you know they seem to be related

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you were raising the alarm and you called on parents on tech companies and

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on lawmakers to do more to protect Young people why did you take that approach

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well because I think to address the harms of social media does in fact require all of us to ask the question

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what can we do to protect our kids and we all do have a role and responsibility

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here but I do think up until now the vast majority of the burden of managing

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the harms of social media has been placed almost entirely on the shoulders of parents and kids alone now think

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about this for a moment because the platforms themselves are designed by some of the best product engineers in

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the world is supported and resourced by some of the wealthiest companies in the world and informed by cuttingedge brain

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science ultimately to maximize how much time our kids are spending on the platforms and to tell a parent who

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didn't grow up with these platforms that they should somehow manage these rapidly evolving tools and keep their kids safe

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when they don't even understand the full extent of harm here that is both unreasonable and unfair and that is why

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in The Advisory I issued I called on a number of other players to step up and what did you hope would happen

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after you issued your report last year Well my Hope was that a few things would happen number one that policy makers

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would respond and would come together to start putting in place the kind of

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safety standards and data transparency requirements and privacy protections that we need My Hope also was that

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parents and young people would feel seen would recognize that they're not alone in their struggles and finally I wanted

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platforms to know that they also have a role here that they still have an opportunity to fulfill social media has

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been around for nearly two decades there's been plenty of time for platforms to make uh the experience of

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young people safe sufficiently safe it's one thing to say we're implementing safety measures it's another thing to

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actually provide evidence that those measures are working to keep our kids safe so now we come to this week when

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you decide to put forward your suggested fix to the problem and that is a warning

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label which is something you know we're used to seeing on cigarette packages surgeon general's warning how exactly

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would a warning work in practice I mean Which social media platforms are we talking about and and what would it look

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like in your ideal scenario so a warning label would be a digital warning it

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would pop up at a regular basis when individuals used social media there are

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important details of what that warning label looks like what kind of font size it is with the literal wording of the

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warning label does it have Graphics associated with it what part of your screen does it appear on those questions

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are typically answered in a scientific process that takes place after Congress authorizes a label lastly it's important

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for people to know that there is data about warning labels and their effectiveness we have now Decades of

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experience with tobacco and alcohol warning labels and what they tell us particularly from tobacco is that these

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labels when done right can be effective in increasing awareness and changing

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Behavior but what gave you the idea to propose this is it a reflection of any

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frustration that you know not enough has been done after you issued your report last year well it's it's a reflection

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more of the fact that we all have to look at every tool we have in our toolbx and use them to help address the harms

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that we may be seeing here with social media and in our case a surgeon general's warning is one of those tools

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I want to be very clear that a warning label in my mind is not the entire fix

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to the harms that social media poses to our kids I still firmly believe what I stated last year in my advisory and what

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I called for this week in the AED which is Congress ultimately needs to make social media safer and the way to do

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that is by putting in place measures that protect kids from harmful content and from manipulative features that lead

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them to excessive use that is what Congress has to do alongside that a warning would help parents and kids

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understand the risks that we see but let me separately say that if you're asking uh am I frustrated or

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concerned that there hasn't been enough action absolutely yes look I think all

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of us should be deeply concerned about how long it has taken for us to ultimately take action to make social

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media safer we've got to do better and that starts ultimately with the platforms as well as with Congress

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stepping up to take

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action we'll be right back [Music]

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I wanted to ask you Dr Mory about the benefits actually because we're talking

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that this is a complicated problem but that there are benefits of course you know social media can be particularly

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helpful for marginalized kids people maybe who don't have access to a

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supportive group of people around them that it is meaningfully good in their

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lives so how do you think about putting a warning label kind of just in a

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blanket way on all social media Platforms in that respect so I think about a warning label is providing

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people with information about the risk of harms now risk of harm doesn't mean

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that every single person is harmed it doesn't mean that there aren't benefits as well that's true with tobacco it's

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true with alcohol and we have warning labels on both of those products but what it does mean is that there are

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significant risks that people should be aware of and when it comes to special

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populations and groups of people and individuals who are helped by social media we also have to look at the full

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picture there think about lgbtq youth for a moment we do know that in some cases social media can be a way for

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lgbtq youth to find Community to find support that in some cases they may not have in person right that can be

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positive but what is less mentioned is the fact that lgbtq youth are much more

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likely to be bullied and harassed on social media compared to straight youth so how do we put that together how do we

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balance those the bottom line is that we can't assume as I worry we have been doing in some of the debate around this

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that because there are some benefits that justifies all the harms that means we shouldn't talk about the

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harms people have compared this moment in social media to moments in America

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when New Media arrived on the scene and created a kind of social Panic or say new things arrived on the scene seen and

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created a kind of social Panic you know TV video games that these things would

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be dangerous for kids that these things would be bad for kids growing up and for

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their brains and and all of that what do you say to that criticism that maybe

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right now we're just in the midst of another moral Panic about this because we don't quite understand it yet what do

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you say to that well I think it's an important question to consider we want to make

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sure ouris responses are appropriate to the gravity of the situation but in the case of social media there's something

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here that is fundamentally different from some of the other technologies that have propped up and created temporary

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moral panics whether that was TV radio even going way back you know the printing press and books what's

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different here is that social media has fundamentally transformed childhood in a

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way that these previous Technologies did not when TV came onto the scene I wasn't bringing my TV into my bed and watching

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it throughout the night I wasn't able to be contacted by strangers through the TV

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in ways that would lead to bullying and exploitation I didn't have my personal data stolen because I was watching TV in

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ways that also could lead to exploitation and abuse all of these things are very unique to social media

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and the pervasiveness of it the fact that young people can now carry it in their pockets and have 247 access to it

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that has fundamentally Chang the game and this point is just important to

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underscore adolescence are not little adults they are fundamentally in a very

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different stage of brain development and in that stage of brain development their impulse control hasn't developed as much

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they are more susceptible to social comparison and social suggestion so the

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things that even to us adults might seem as just willpower questions you might just say ah it's about just draw a few

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boundaries around your use of social media no problem one I would argue it's quite hard for adults to do that by the

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way but especially for young people this is exceedingly hard and Sabrina I got to

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say that like for me and I know for many others this is very personal you know I'm a father of two young kids who's

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watching them grow up you know faster than I would like every day and who is seeing the world coming at them rapidly

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and I know I'm not alone as a parent and I think about the day when they come up to me and ask

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me if they can have a social media account I think about what's going to happen when their friends are bullied

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and harassed online how are they going to respond are their friends going to feel comfortable talking to them about it um these are the questions that all

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of us have to Grapple with uh as parents how old are your children my kids are six and seven now

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and even though they're young I will say that a couple years ago when my daughter was in preschool she came home one day

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and asked us about posting a picture on social media wow that's how early it's coming at us and what did you say to her

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we said no and she went on her way and she was fine but this is going to happen more and more it's happening earlier and

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earlier to kids and parents are out there trying to manage this all on their own there's no manual for how to manage

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social media for your kids there's no set of Ideal practices for how to tailor your kids needs to the evolving nature

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of social media that's actually why I believe that parents need to also come together and support one another uh you

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know around taking a set of shared rules so that not only is it easier for us but it's easier for our kids when we tell

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our kids for example as my wife and I are planning to do for our kids that we are not going to consider them being on

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social media until at least after Middle School it will be helpful to us if there are other parents in our friend

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community and our school Community who are doing the same because then we can say no you're not the only one but Bobby

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and Mary and Jack are also waiting until after middle school and are there other parents who want to do the same to wait

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until after middle school or are you guys outliers well so this is what has been fascinating I would say even in our own

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School community in the last few weeks alone there has been more conversation in our school about how to manage

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technology for our kids and there are many more parents than I had even realized in our school who want to wait

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until later but the reason many don't is because they want to assume that everyone is just doing this they don't

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want their kid to be left out so this is a collective action problem but many of them are also Unsure how to manage some

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of those harms or may not even be sure what the harms are and there's a lot of pressure too you know the number of

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parents I talk to who say my child came up to me and said if you don't let me

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open up an account on social media I'll be the only one right in my class I'll be left out do you want me to be more

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lonely and if you're a parent facing that of course you don't want your child to be lonely so I really feel for

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parents because our kids shouldn't be alone in this and we shouldn't be alone either as parents in managing social

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media so as the daughter of parents who decided that their child should not have a television I can identify with those

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kids who say I feel more lonely you're not part of the conversation you can't participate in the games because you

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don't hear and you don't see and it is difficult it's the hardest thing for a parent right are you worried that could

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happen to you that you know your kids would you would somehow kind of deepen

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the loneliness I mean you yourself were lonely child growing up you said how do you think about this well this is why I think it's so

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important for us to build this broader movement together to re-engineer the relationship that our kids have with

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technology because imagine if we delay the age at which kids start using social media imagine even after they use social

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media if we build tech-free zones in their lives in their days to protect

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sleep in-person interaction physical activity and learning think about what we would do and could do with at that

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time I think about the school in Indiana that I went to which had put in place restrictions around the use of social

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media and phones during class time and they said that what they noticed was kids started playing games together in

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the library and in the hallway they were talking more the volume in the hallways went up and this has been one of the

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most striking things to me about the college tour that I've done I remember college as a time where the most noisy

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place on campus was the dining hall because was coming together to talk about what they did it was just you

23:01

could barely hear yourself and think right these days when I go to college campuses and particularly the dining

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Halls it's quiet because people are on their devices they're listening to music on their iPod they're on their laptops

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and one of the most chilling questions that I got on the college tour again and again from kids was how are we supposed

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to build connection with one another when the culture isn't for people to talk to each other anymore just think

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about that for a minute yeah they're saying the culture is not for people to talk to each other

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anymore we have to rebuild the spaces where people can talk to each other

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where our kids can talk to each other where they can discover things together where they can agree and disagree

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together but where they can do that in a way that helps them build healthy relationships negotiate disagreement and

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build friendships so let's say that Congress goes along with us and warning labels start to appear on social media online

24:01

we're now almost 20 years since the Advent of the smartphone 2007 was the

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first iPhone I remember getting in one entire Generations have formed their habits around these devices and you know

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as we've discussed there have been some real benefits but also there are some steep societal costs someone I read

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somewhere put it that you know our kids are now this giant human real time real

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life laboratory of what all of this is going to mean so is a label actually going to

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unwind that you know is it too late to unwind this I don't think it's too late

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I think about smoking in our country in 1964 when the first surgeon general's

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report on Tobacco was issued at that time 42% of Americans smoked there were

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advertisements everywhere for smoking that kids could see it was just seen as part of the culture and there were

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people at that time who said the notion that you're going to get people to stop smoking just seems unrealistic but the

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combination of not just a report but all of the action that that report helped to

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promote and unleash Community Education programs advocacy from parents

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legislation from Congress and from state and local legislatures together over the years that helped us take us from 42% to

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below 12% that helped us save countless lives so is it going to be easy to

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change and reengineer our relationship to social media and to make social media safer no it's not going to be easy it's

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going to be complicated but I firmly believe that as a nation America can do

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hard things we've done hard things before and what better time than on this

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issue when what's at stake is the mental health and well-being of our kids

26:01

[Music] do your kids know what your job

26:07

is my kids now know that I'm the Surgeon General but I don't know that they know

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what that means they know that I wear a uniform and they know that I do a lot of

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interviews and talks but I'm not sure that they entirely know what my day job is they

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just know it has to do with health and my house my when you ask who's a doctor in the house yeah my kids point to my

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wife and we often have to remind them that hey Daddy's a doctor too so it's

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one of the humbling things about being a parent and I love it did they know anything about what you

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did this week they know that I was doing a lot of

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media because they they saw me on TV here and there uh when they were walking past their grandparents television

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but they don't really know otherwise um they don't really know what really what

27:04

social media is at this point but that is going to change any day now it's

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[Music] coming do you think that potentially

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what you're doing now means that they will be more protected I hope so

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yeah I mean we we do the work we do as parents I do the work I do as a

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dad not only because I want to serve but because I want the world to be better for my

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kids and that that's what guides me here too you know I want my kids to grow up in a world

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where where the technology and the tools that are in front of them help them and don't harm them I want them to grow up

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in a world where we are more connected with one another where they can build friendships

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and they can seek out other kids who may be struggling with loneliness and and help them feel less alone and know that

28:04

there's somebody who's got their back if I've learned one thing you know

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in my life it's that we really do need each other my wife and I as much as we

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love our kids we can't make sure the whole world is safe for them by ourselves we can't make sure that they

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grow and encounter healthy levels of adversity just on our own this is something we've got to do together as

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parents and so I do hope that the work that I do will have some small contribution to making the world better

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for them but I also know that to to fulfill that hope it's going to take all of us working hand inand and keeping our

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North Star clear which is ultimately taking care of our kids because as a dad

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I just don't know what's more important than that Dr Mory thank you so much for your

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time thank you so much Sabrina I really appreciate the chance to talk with you about [Music]

29:09

this you can hear more discussion of the Surgeon General social media

29:15

recommendation on this week's episode of hard [Music]

29:24

Fork we'll be right back

29:30

here's what else you should know today on Thursday the Supreme Court upheld a tax on foreign income that helped

29:37

finance the tax cuts that President Donald Trump imposed in 2017 in a case

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that many experts had cautioned could undercut the nation's tax system the

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vote was 7 to2 with Justice Brett Kavanaugh writing the majority opinion

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he was joined by Chief Justice John Roberts and by the Court's three

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liberals the ruling avoided what many feared could have been fiscal chaos by

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upholding for now the structure of the income tax system and Donald Sutherland the actor

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who played a laid-back Battlefield surgeon in the television series mash and A Soulful father in the movie

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ordinary people died on Thursday in Miami at the age of 88 Southerland was

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known for his wide range he had the ability to both charm and unsettle to

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reassure and repulse across six decades starting in the early 1960s he appeared

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in nearly 200 films and television shows some years he was in as many as half a

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dozen [Music]

30:50

movies a quick reminder to catch a new episode of the interview right here

30:55

tomorrow this week Lulu Garcia Navaro talks with Michigan Governor Gretchen

31:01

Whitmer about why she wants to meet one of the men convicted of plotting to

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kidnap her in 2020 I'd like to understand what drove this group of

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people to undergo this exercise to try to kidnap me and kill me I want to understand it what is happening you

31:18

think there's something to understand maybe maybe there's not but I'd like to see

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today's episode was produced by Lindsay Garrison Rob zipco Alex Stern and Ricky

31:37

nety it was edited by Lexi Dia and Michael benois contains original music

31:45

by Dan Powell and Chelsea Daniel and was engineered by Alyssa Moxley special

31:51

thanks to Ellen Berry our theme music is by Jim brunberg and Ben Lanser of

31:57

Wonderland [Music]

32:08

[Music] that's it for the daily I'm Sabrina Tavern see you on Monday

32:18

[Music]

English (auto-generated)