

Social Media and Youth

Since the late 90's, social media has become a large part of our society. Beginning with AOL Messenger and anonymous forums, these platforms have grown from a simple way to connect into one of the most lucrative industries on the planet. This may be surprising, since signing up and using these platforms is largely free, but the real goal of these companies is to both advertise to you, and sell your information to advertisers. Because of this, these companies are directly incentivized to convince us into staying on their platforms as long as possible. While this is predatory for anyone using these websites and for adolescents and children in particular, this compulsion can have huge long-term effects.

When we use social media, the website will collect as much information as it can. This doesn't only include the demographic information you enter or the links you click, it also includes your activity across other websites, the location and information from your internet service provider, and even the information on what you spend more time hovering over, even if you don't click a link or like a post. Using all of this information together, the website will tailor its algorithm to show you more and more of the things that hold your attention. This leads to a feedback loop in which a user is presented so much content that catches their attention in these apps that it becomes harder to do things that don't provide that much stimulation. Studies have found that the dopamine released from social media use is similar to that of eating chocolate, gambling, and other instantly gratifying behaviors. Because of this, developing brains in children and adolescents can be especially susceptible to these loops. Additionally, this isn't coming from a single source. A teen that's using Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram to varying degrees will have four different endless dopamine loops. When one of them fails to catch their attention, the teen can just switch to another one that will. This can lead to a teen developing social media addiction and have a huge negative effect on their attention span. Using social media for three or more hours a day constitutes social media addiction, and multiple studies have found that a majority of teens fit this description.

While the addictiveness of social media is already cause for concern, it's not the only effect it's having on youth. Prolonged social media use has been found to have a positive correlation with a variety of mental health concerns. One study found that social anxiety and stress eating had a positive correlation with social media use. This effect was more pronounced in those who followed health and lifestyle influencers, particularly young women. Other studies have found a relationship between internalizing problems (such as depression, eating disorders, and anxiety) with high social media use, as well as a relationship between externalizing behaviors (such as bullying and attention problems) and high social media use. There are a variety of proposed causes for this. Some of the most common are the perpetual self-comparisons teens are doing between themselves and others on social media, the pressure to always appear perfect online, and even the harassment some have to endure due to cyberbullying. Importantly, most kids won't recognize that social media is the root of these new behaviors. This can lead to them becoming further engrossed in dopamine seeking behavior, in an attempt to feel better.

Because of the negative consequences involved with high social media use, it's important to talk to kids about their outlook on it. A few things to keep in mind while talking to them include:

- While they will likely be resistant, having them understand social media and the harms that come from it is the very first step. Even if they choose to engage in high social media use, they will at least be able to make informed decisions on their own and potentially recognize problems with it as they arise.
- It's important to remember that for many kids, particularly those who are otherized by their surroundings (such as BIPOC, LGBTQ+, victims of trauma, etc.), online spaces and social media can be their only way to build connections with others like them safely.
- Many kids see social media as necessary in order to connect with their friends. They could interpret warnings about social media as you telling them not to hang out with their friends. Make sure to emphasize that their health is the primary concern, not who they spend time with.

Some other things to keep in mind are:

- Talk about the science involved. While we don't want to scare kids, presenting them with hard facts and data about those with high social media use, rather than abstract stories about what could happen, can help them understand the risks.
- Be a good role model. If you tell them to be wary of social media but are still spending hours swiping on Facebook or talking about what you've seen on social media, they likely won't pick up the proper message.
- If they're concerned about connecting with their friends, propose alternative ways of spending time with them. For those who are nearby, suggesting activities in person that can keep them off their phone can be a good option. If their friends are farther away, it can be good to suggest actual calls rather than just messaging through social media. This can help them build closer connections, while also discouraging idly scrolling while talking to their friends.
- For parents, establishing screen-free environments and time-frames, such as at the dinner table and after 9 P.M., can help your kids manage their social media use. Additionally, putting ALL chargers in a central spot where devices can't be used while plugged in can help increase screen-free time. Having a charger by their bed encourages them to seclude themselves in their room, and provides the temptation for them to check their phone frequently throughout the night.

For more information on discussing social media use with kids, check out the resources on the following websites:

<https://scipnebraska.com/>

<https://www.common sense media.org/articles/teens>

<https://connectsafely.org/>

References

<https://www.jeffersonhealth.org/your-health/living-well/the-addictiveness-of-social-media-how-teens-get-hooked>

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/article-abstract/2749480>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9169592/>

<https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/mental-health/teens-social-media-addiction/>

<https://xiphcyber.com/articles/social-media-tracking#:~:text=How%20do%20social%20media%20companies%20collect%20all%20this%20data%3F,you%20anywhere%20on%20the%20web.>

<https://www.common sense media.org/articles/how-to-help-girls-have-healthier-social-media-experiences>