



Trends is published regularly throughout the school year by **Cornerstone Day School** as a service to New Jersey school professionals. Each issue highlights one important topic with practical applications for those working with students with emotional and behavioral problems.

TRENDS



"Integrating state of the art psychiatric treatment and outstanding academics within a dynamic school environment."

Everyone needs a respite from the demands of intimacy and connection; time alone to regroup, replenish and just chill out.

To learn more:

- Psychology Today: Social media could be harming your teens mental health
- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/social-media-could-be-harming-your-teens-mental-health>
- Psycom: Social media and teens: does social media affect teenagers mental health
- <https://www.psycom/social-media-teen-mental-health>

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND CHILD/ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health professionals have associated a rise in sleeplessness, loneliness, worry, and dependence among children and adolescents with the increasing use of social media and the technologies that are used to connect with them. Anecdotal evidence often associates frequent use of social media with anxiety, poor self-esteem, insecurity, and sadness, attributed at least in part, to constant social media use. One study found that 48 percent of teens who spend five hours per day on an electronic device have at least one suicide risk factor, compared to 33 percent of teens who spend two hours a day on an electronic device. Young people may be experiencing intolerably high levels of stress from the constant communication and comparisons that social media invites.

The connection between social media and child mental health is not clearly established, simple, or purely negative. Correlation does not equal causation; it may be that depression and anxiety lead to more social media use, for example, rather than the other way around. There could also be other related variables, for instance, academic pressures or economic concerns connecting them, or children and teens could simply be more likely to admit to mental health concerns now than they were in previous generations.

It's important to remember that children and teens experience social media in a wide range of ways. The ability to raise awareness, connect with people across the world, and share moments of beauty can be empowering and uplifting. When youth understand that the images they see are curated snapshots, not real-life indicators, they may be less likely to let those posts make them feel insecure about their own lives.

A 2015 Pew study of teens, technology, and friendships suggests a range of social media-induced stressors:

- Seeing people posting about events to which you haven't been invited
- Feeling pressure to post positive and attractive content about yourself
- Feeling pressure to get comments and likes on your posts
- Having someone post things about you that you cannot change or control

If youth aren't getting enough practice relating to people and getting their needs met in person and in real time, many of them may grow up to be adults who are anxious about social interactions. As social negotiations become more complex, these individuals may experience levels of social anxiety that interfere with employment and intimate relationships.

When friendship is conducted online and through texts, young people are doing this in a context stripped of many of the most personal, and sometimes intimidating aspects of communication. It's easier to keep your guard up when you're texting, so less is at stake. You aren't hearing or →

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seeing the effect that your words are having on the other person. Because the conversation isn't happening in real time, each party can take more time to consider a response. No wonder many adolescents report that calling someone on the phone is "too intense"—it requires more direct communication, and if you aren't used to that it may well feel scary.

The other big danger that comes from kids communicating more indirectly is that it has gotten easier to be cruel. This seems to be especially true of girls, who typically don't like to disagree with each other in "real life."

Peer acceptance is a big thing for adolescents. Young people today are getting actual polling data on how much people like them or their appearance via messages such as "likes." They may spend hours pruning their online identities, trying to project an idealized image. Teenage girls sort through hundreds of photos, agonizing over which ones to post online. Boys compete for attention by trying to out-gross one other, pushing the envelope as much as they can in the already disinhibited atmosphere online.

Another big change that has come with new technology and especially smart phones is that we are never really alone. Kids update their status, share what they're watching, listening to, and reading, and have apps that let their friends know their specific location on a map at all times. Even if a person isn't trying to keep his friends updated, he's still never out of reach of a text message. The result is that kids feel hyperconnected with each other. The conversation never needs to stop, and it feels like there's always something new happening.

Everyone needs a respite from the demands of intimacy and connection; time alone to regroup, replenish and just chill out. When youth don't have that, they may become emotionally depleted, fertile ground for anxiety to breed.

It's also easy to feel lonely in the middle of all this hyper-connection. Young people know with depressing certainty when they're being ignored. When they are waiting for a response that doesn't come, the silence can be deafening. The silent treatment might be a strategic insult or just the unfortunate side effect

of an online adolescent relationship that starts out intensely but then fades away.

What educators can do to reduce the developmental risks posed by interaction with social media:

Help students focus on developing "off-line" relationships: Learning how to make friends is a major part of growing up, and friendship requires a certain amount of risk-taking. This is true for making a new friend, but it's also true for maintaining friendships.

Model and teach "real time" conflict resolution: Part of healthy self-esteem is knowing how to say what you think and feel even when you're in disagreement with other people or it feels emotionally risky. When students experience problems that need to be faced—big ones or small ones—it takes courage to be honest about their feelings and then hear what the other person has to say.

Educate students about the risks and benefits of social media: Research suggests that there is likely a correlation between time spent on social media, and vulnerability to problems of mental health. Encourage the development of real time alternative activities that promote the development of social skills and social relationships.

Support the development of positive self-esteem in girls: Girls are socialized more to compare themselves to other people, other girls in particular, to develop their identities. A lack of positive self-esteem is often to blame. Relational aggression, like cyberbullying, may arise from insecurity and girls not feeling good about themselves.

Educate parents about the risks: Parents should monitor child use of social media, encourage off-line activities, and model balanced use of social media and devices. Parents who spend too much time communicating on-line, send the wrong message to children and teens.

