

CORNERSTONE
DAY SCHOOL

Parents Matter

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Social media, internet, and screens and kids: good or bad?

Research tells us maybe both, and outcomes can vary between kids. There is growing support for a relationship between social media usage, screen time, and mental health in children and adolescents. The American Academy for Pediatrics recommends no more than 2 hours per day of social media use for secondary school aged kids. In reality, technology usage in this age group far exceeds this recommendation, averaging 6 hours per day. Concerningly, using social media for more than 3 hours per day is linked to depression symptoms in kids aged 12-15, and in 11-17 year olds problematic internet use is associated with ADHD. Furthermore, kids who engage in more social media use (3+ hours) are likely to get less than 7 hours sleep, which in itself is a risk factor for myriad mental health problems.

Yet, these findings do not shed light on which factor is causal in the relationship between mental health and screens/social media. For instance: do screens increase attention problems? Or do kids with attention problems use screens more? Further complicating matters, there are also positive factors associated with screen use. For instance, 81% of youth say that communicating online makes them feel more connected, and online education about mental health can facilitate help-seeking behavior. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers here. Overall, less social media may be helpful for some kids, with up to 1 hour a day being potentially beneficial, 2 hours not harmful, and 3 linked to problems.

Guidelines for parents

1. **Quality (not just quantity) of screen consumption matters too.** Is the exposure developmentally appropriate? Does it illustrate the values you would like to instill in your child? Does it engage your child's imagination? Particularly for younger children, the AAP recommends co-viewing and co-engagement of screens with parents so you can casually monitor, mitigate negative messaging, and share your values.
2. **Facilitate balance: screen time not all the time.** Encourage more of the 'good stuff' – engage in non-screen related activities like outdoor time and exercise. Create a family media plan, for instance, using the guide from healthychildren.org.
3. **Model good tech behavior.** Kids learn from what we do, not what we say they should do. Modelling healthy boundaries with screen use is an excellent way to impart your values around technology. For instance, some parents may choose to eliminate screens at dinner. Doing so can also strengthen the parent-child relationship and provide moments of connection that allow your children to turn to you (rather than the internet) for help and support.
4. **"Yes to friending, no to spying,"** says the Child Mind Institute. Unless there is significant cause for concern, covertly reading your teen's text messages is not advisable. Micromanaging

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Social media, internet and screens: cont.

can backfire, especially with teens who have the developmental 'task' of becoming more independent. Instead, 'friend' your child on their social media accounts and actively talk to them about their social media exposure. An added benefit is that this will allow you to become more educated in social media usage and better informed to support and guide your child.

- 5. Practice mindful social media consumption.** Too often, using screens can happen on auto-pilot, without even consciously making the decision to check our phone before we have been 'doomscrolling' for 5 minutes. Similarly, two thirds of teens report feeling compelled to respond to text messages and notifications immediately. Engaging mindful and intentional social media use can be the antidote for mindless technology use. Encourage kids to pay attention to how they feel during different screen interactions, and to disconnect from those that are unhelpful or make them feel worse. Other strategies include planning how many minutes you would like to assign to each application, increasing awareness into times you look at your phone, deleting applications from your home screen, and turning off notifications at certain times of the day. Technology can help here, including phone reports that tell you how much time you have spent on each application and phone-enforced time limit applications.
- 6. Get to the root of the problem.** For many kids, screen time may be a symptom, not a disorder. For instance, teens with social anxiety disorder may avoid in person interactions in favor of connecting via text message, which in turn reinforces their social anxiety. Addressing the underlying condition may be the best way to facilitate your child's wellbeing.

- 7. Support sleep.** Some mental health experts have suggested that the relationship between internet use and depression may be mediated by poor sleep. To support sleep, kids may need help setting boundaries with social media use in developmentally appropriate ways. For instance, for some kids, disabling apps after a certain hour can be beneficial. Screen free time 1 hour before bed and using an alarm clock instead of a phone are ways to practice good sleep 'hygiene' and counteract the negative associations between sleep and screen usage.
- 8. Listen.** Be curious, empathetic, and open to your child's experiences about social media use. Ask questions about their likes and dislikes regarding screen time and give them space to talk to you about it without judgment. Common Sense Media and the AAP share useful guides to help facilitate conversations with teens about their social media usage.

Resources:

Guides to discussing social media with kids

<https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/featured-content/files/ftp-en-teens-common-sense-media.pdf>

<https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/media-and-children/center-of-excellence-on-social-media-and-youth-mental-health/conversation-starters-for-families-about-media/>

Does limiting social media help? The jury is still out

<https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/media-and-children/center-of-excellence-on-social-media-and-youth-mental-health/qa-portal/qa-portal-library/qa-portal-library-questions/impact-of-limiting-time-spent-on-social-media/>

Making a family media plan

https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/How-to-Make-a-Family-Media-Use-Plan.aspx?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAjw5qC2BhB8EiwAvqa41peiB-sWC1MnD6W4KN9-iu_FyMJDL-PUuo5_Psbu-9ZOkmAjwIIDzhoCby8QAvD_BwE



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