

PARENTING AND SOCIAL MEDIA: HOW PARENTS CAN TAKE ACTION AND SUPPORT TEEN MENTAL HEALTH



The Center for Health Communication works to create toolkits and briefings that help content creators spread evidence-based health information on social media. The information provided is meant to be educational and is not a substitute for medical advice.

This toolkit was created in partnership with the Center for Digital Thriving at Harvard Graduate School of Education. It provides creators with key stats, research findings, and evidence-based strategies for helping teens with social media habits and mental health.

REFRAMING THE CONVERSATION

Conversations involving teens, mental health, social media and parenting are often anxiety-ridden and tense. To turn these into more productive and hopeful conversations, aim to infuse these perspectives:

1

SOCIAL MEDIA IS BOTH

Acknowledge that social media can be both helpful and harmful. Conversations that only focus on the good or bad parts of social media don't line up with what teens are actually experiencing. Social media can be connecting and dividing; depressing and inspiring; insecurity-inducing and validating. When we make space for teens to talk about this complexity, we can have more honest conversations without pushing teens into a defensive stance.

2

TEENS DESERVE TO BE HEARD

Let's make sure we're addressing teens' real issues. Instead of making assumptions about what we think teens are experiencing with social media, let's actively listen to teens talk about their lives – because often what's hard for them isn't what we expect. By asking teens compassionate, non-judgmental questions (like What's stressing you right now? How's social media helping or hurting that?), we'll be able to see what we were missing and support their mental health in a way that feels actually helpful to teens.

3

ELEVATE SOLUTIONS INSTEAD OF FEARS

It's true that tech is everywhere and constantly changing. A lot of people are stoking fear about how things are out of control, especially with teens. But this fear-based approach is exhausting. We're stronger when we remember the power that we do have: We can set boundaries around tech that preserve our health. We can build digital agency and media literacy. We can institute policies and practices that prioritize well-being. We can address the problems without magnifying them. Let's reclaim our power in this conversation.

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TAKE ACTION - STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

1

NAME IT TO TAME IT

Teens might not recognize the effects of their digital habits because they lack the words to describe them. Having language can make it easier to talk about digital well-being. Try using these terms in future conversations:

KOMO - (knowledge of missing out) The regretful awareness that you are missing out on something. This differs from FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and JOMO (Joy of Missing Out), as it relates to the direct knowledge of being left out because of online evidence, often in real time.

Technoference - (technology + interference) When tech interferes with a live, in-person conversation. E.g., When you miss something going on with your child because you're focused on your device.

Phubbing - (phone + snubbing) - When you snub someone by being on your phone in their presence, and signal that whatever is on your phone is more important.

Design tricks - Features that tech companies use to capture and hold your attention, like autoplay, infinite scroll, notifications, and streaks.

Thinking traps - Exaggerated or irrational ways of thinking that amplify negative feelings and lead us to conclusions that aren't necessarily true. Social media can provoke these, so being able to recognize them can keep you grounded. E.g., If a person leaves you "On Read", you may think they're mad at you, the "mind reading" trap. ([Glossary of thinking traps.](#))

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2

COACH, DON'T JUST REFEREE

Parents often take on the role of referee when it comes to tech — blowing the whistle when screen time is over time or issuing penalties when rules are broken. Instead, become a coach for digital life who problem-solves and strategizes alongside them. Because tech conversations often devolve into generational debates, adults and teens are usually pitted against each other. But teens need to know that adults are with them, not against them. A coaching stance helps teens know that you are on the same team. Try these moves:

ASSESS THE SITUATION, BEFORE YOU CALL THE PLAY

While the digital referee yells “Get off your phone! You’re so addicted!” the digital coach analyzes, and asks questions like: “What’s pulling you to your phone right now?” Then they determine the “play” that’s fit for the moment. The play might involve [empathizing](#), discussing “[red flag feelings](#)”, or experimenting with a new tech boundary. Remember it's really hard to regulate tech habits, even for adults! So strategize with your player(s) and work together to set up wins.

PRACTICE GRADUAL RELEASE

Slowly introduce new apps or devices in stages. The first phone doesn't have to be a smartphone (and actually, “[dumber \(phones\) can be smarter](#)”). Getting a phone also doesn't have to mean getting on social media! As your children mature and demonstrate more skill with navigating tech safely, you can match their access to their readiness. Have conversations at every step so that they anticipate your guidance and build their digital agency.

CONSULT ANOTHER COACH

Ask a question and get evidence-based answers from the [Q&A Portal](#) by the American Academy of Pediatrics Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health. Join a parenting support group by [Parents Helping Parents](#), the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#), or [Parents Anonymous program](#). Call or text the National Parent & Youth Helpline at 855-427-2736.

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RESEARCH INSIGHTS TO KNOW

1

NO MORE EVIDENCE IS NEEDED TO JUSTIFY INTENTIONAL EFFORTS TO SUPPORT TEENS RELATED TO WELL-BEING.

While researchers are still divided about whether we have sufficient evidence to say social media is a/the cause of the mental health crisis, it's clear that [social media can amplify challenges](#) that impact teens' well-being.

2

TECH COMPANIES DESIGN SOCIAL MEDIA SITES TO GRAB ATTENTION, PLAY OFF OF OUR EMOTIONS, AND MAKE MONEY

(A) [They play and prey on our cognitive and emotional sensitivities](#), which means youth require additional safeguarding because they are still developing. (B) Youth deserve [platforms](#) that “uphold the highest safety standards by design and by default,” but this isn't the current default on popular social media apps.

3

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA HELPS OR HURTS DEPENDS ON THE TEEN

[Social media isn't inherently harmful or helpful for teens](#). Their lives online reflect and impact their lives offline. How much social media helps or hurts depends on what environments teens grow up in and their strengths and vulnerabilities.

4

YOUNGER TEENS SEEM TO BE ESPECIALLY SENSITIVE TO NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON MENTAL HEALTH

There are different [early windows of sensitivity](#) for girls (11-13 years old) and boys (14-15 years old).

5

UNLIKE MOST ADULTS, “TEENS THEMSELVES PAINT A MORE NUANCED PICTURE OF ADOLESCENT LIFE ON SOCIAL MEDIA,”

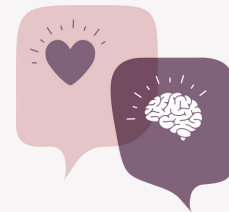
For example, teens credit social media platforms with “[deepening connections and providing a support network](#),” while also acknowledging them as sites for “drama and pressures.”

6

“SCREEN TIME ISN'T ALWAYS WASTED TIME”

Technologies like social media can help teens understand the world, learn new things, and [strengthen their relationships](#). Adults should recognize that teens are trying to get positive things from their technology use.

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STATS TO KNOW



[1 in 3 teens](#) “almost constantly” use YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, and/or Facebook.



[4 in 10 teen](#) girls who use TikTok say that it interferes with their sleep at least once a week.



[8 in 10 teens](#) say that social media makes them feel more connected to their friend’s lives. Almost [6 in 10 teens](#) say that social media makes them feel more accepted.



About 1 in 2 teens say that [parent technoference](#) is an issue in their homes – meaning they think their parent’s tech use is interfering with parent-child interactions.



Nearly [1 in 3 teens have experienced cyberbullying](#) at some point. Conflict online often happens in ways that may be invisible or [seem harmless to adults but are meaningful to teens](#) (e.g., cropping someone out of a photo, or tagging all but one person).



Seeing traumatic content online can evoke negative responses that [mirror trauma in ‘real life.’](#)



Social media is a [double-sided for LGBTQ+ youth](#): more than 70% say it helps them feel less alone and nearly 90% encounter affirming comments about their identities, but 3 in 4 encounter homophobic comments.



Social media is double-sided for Black teens: while racial discrimination and exposure to traumatic content online [negatively impacts their mental health](#), the social support they find online can [positively impact their racial identity development](#).

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CONTENT RESOURCES

Remix these research-based resources for new posts:

- [This Teenage Life Podcast](#) - Produced by youth, hear directly from teens about what being a teen today is really like.
- [Tech + Values App](#) - Reflect on how tech is helping or hurting what matters to you most.
- [Design Tricks Video](#) - Learn about design features tech companies use to influence our behaviors.
- [Thinking Traps Video](#) - Learn about common negative thinking patterns that get exacerbated online.
- [Tech Without Stress](#) - Check out their reels for helpful tech parenting insights.

DEEPER DIVES

Our top picks for a deeper dive into the research:

- [Behind Their Screens](#) – BOOK/AUDIOBOOK. An accessible read for any adult who wants to understand teens' lives behind their screens and what most adults are missing.
- [Teaching Digital Well-being](#) - REPORT. A guide for anyone, especially educators, who want to understand how evidence-based mental health practices can support teens' digital well-being.
- [Techno Sapiens](#) - SUBSTACK. Newsletter for those who want to keep up to-date with the latest research on how social media and technology affect teen mental health and how parents can help.
- [Gen AI Report Brief](#) - BRIEF. Highlights from a longer report about how teens and young adults are using AI.