

Series Introduction

How Social Media Affects Kids & Teens



It's Not About Cutting It Out Completely

Social media is already part of almost every kid's life. Your role as a parent is **not to remove it entirely** – but to help your kid use technology with **balance, safety, and awareness**.

Educate Yourself

Understanding both the risks and benefits equips you to have meaningful conversations.

Have Open Conversations

Conversations that feel open – not like a lecture – make it more likely your teen will come to you when something feels uncomfortable online.

Social Media Is Not Inherently Good or Bad

Research shows the impact on mental health depends on individual factors – not the platform itself.

Psychological research shows that the impact of social media on mental health depends on three key factors:

The 3 Factors That Shape Mental Health Outcomes



Individual Characteristics & Traits

A child's personal traits, emotional regulation abilities, and existing mental health status.



Social Support & Circumstances

The level of parental involvement and social support available to the child at any given moment.



How & What They Consume

The type, amount, and intentionality of social media use – and how balanced their offline life is.

Factor 1: Individual Characteristics

Certain traits have been associated with **negative outcomes** related to social media use:



Difficulty Regulating Emotions

Trouble calming down or managing big feelings – whether happiness, anger, or sadness – beyond what is expected for their developmental stage.



Lower Impulse Control

Difficulty putting down the phone or tablet when it's time for homework or dinner – beyond what is expected for their age. Online content is biologically rewarding to the developing brain.



Existing Mental Health Challenges

Teens already dealing with anxiety, depression, or ADHD are more vulnerable. Girls in particular are often more sensitive to peer comparison on social media.

Factor 2: Social Support & Circumstances



Parental Involvement Is Key

Parents should guide their kid's online experiences and have open conversations about algorithms, beauty portrayals, AI, perfectionism, and misleading content.



If Parents Aren't There, Algorithms Will Be

Algorithms pick up on what your teen watches and feed them more of it. If a teen already feels insecure about their appearance, their feed can quickly fill with content reinforcing harmful ideas.



Parental Guidance Buffers Negative Effects

Research shows that when parents guide and have conversations about these topics, it buffers against the negative effects of social media on mental health.

Factor 3: How & What They Consume

The Surgeon General points to about **1–3 hours a day of intentional, active use** for ages 14+ as potentially positive – especially when balanced with schoolwork, adequate sleep, positive friendships, and time outdoors.


Active & Intentional Use

Engaging positively with others, creating helpful content, connecting with supportive communities – this is tied to better outcomes.



Passive Scrolling

Just swiping through endless videos without engaging or being mindful of algorithms. Tied to lower mood and more social comparison.

 Research shows **both extremes** – very low use *and* very high use – are linked to higher depression risk. There may be a "sweet spot," though research on this is still evolving.

The Outcomes: Both Sides of the Story

Potential Positive Outcomes


When used well, social media can provide:

- Access to valuable information (educational videos, trusted sources, life skills)
- Safe spaces to support identity development
- Feelings of acceptance, support, and connection with friends
- Opportunities to express creativity
- Connection to supportive communities with aligned values

Negative Outcomes at Excessive Use (5+ hrs)

When social media use becomes excessive, it can:

- Disrupt sleep and reduce physical activity
- Increase isolation by replacing in-person interactions
- Put pressure on brain areas critical for learning, social sensitivity, and emotion regulation
- Be associated with higher risk of depression

 Rates of depression and suicidality have increased alongside social media expansion – a trend worth monitoring closely.

Warning Signs to Watch For

Social media may be negatively impacting your teen if you notice:



Social Withdrawal

Pulling away from friends, family, or social activities they used to enjoy.



Changes in Mood or Sleep

Noticeable shifts in emotional wellbeing or disrupted sleep patterns.



Dropping Grades

A decline in academic performance or engagement with schoolwork.



Loss of Interest

Losing interest in activities or hobbies they once genuinely enjoyed.

Social media isn't inherently harmful or helpful. What matters most is:

Key Takeaway for Parents

→ Individual Characteristics

Know your child's emotional regulation, impulse control, and mental health context.

→ Social Environment & Support

Be present. Be part of the conversation. Your guidance buffers the algorithm.

→ How They Use It

Encourage active, intentional use. Limit passive scrolling. Aim for the 1–3 hour sweet spot (ages 14+).

→ A Balanced Offline Life

Sleep, friendships, physical activity, and time away from screens are essential protective factors.

✔ **Setting realistic limits, guiding your teen, and staying informed** can help social media become something that supports your teen's mental health instead of harming it.

References

- References: American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), U.S. Surgeon General, World Health Organization (WHO), Preventive Medicine Reports, Social Issues and Policy Review.