The Good and Bad of Social Media: What Research Tells Us

The connection between social media and mental health is complicated and personal. Everyone responds to social media differently. Here are a few ways to think about how social media impacts kids and teens.

Potential Benefits

Social Connection: Teens can engage with friends and family online.

Identity, Self-Expression, and Self-Affirmation: Youth can share their interests and activities through texts, videos and images, which can help them better understand who they are.

Support for Marginalized Identities: For young people who are gender- and sexually diverse, from minoritized racial or ethnic backgrounds, or with disabilities or chronic illness, social media can be used as a safe space to gain social support, learn through each other's stories and find validation through shared experiences.

Interest-Driven Exploration: Teens, as they develop more independence, can pursue new ideas and hobbies online or follow educational, health-related or inspirational accounts.

Empowerment and Civic Engagement: Teens can use social media to learn more about causes they care about, engage in activism and connect with communities on and offline.

Fun and Entertainment: Whether watching funny videos, playing online games or keeping up with music and pop culture, social media can help teens relax and have fun.

Potential Risks

Cyberbullying: Teens may experience or witness bullying, harassment or aggressive behavior online.

Body Image and Disordered Eating: Social comparison is common, especially on image-based platforms. Image-altering filters and profiles that focus on disordered eating or "thinspiration" can lead to negative self-esteem and impact how teens think about their appearance.

Harmful Content: Despite platforms' best efforts to prevent it, harmful content like pornography, child sexual abuse material, self-harm depictions, violence, exposure to sexist, racist or homophobic language or accounts selling illegal substances can be found on social media.

Unwanted Contact: Teens may receive unwanted contact from strangers or from companies trying to sell them things.

Sleep: Sleep is essential and can be negatively impacted when teens postpone bedtime so that they can continue to use social media for entertainment or feel pressure to be responsive to friends. The use of mobile devices during bedtime can make it harder to fall asleep and to get deep, restorative sleep that teens need.

Digital Stress: Constant access to a wide array of social content designed to keep teens online as long as possible can be overwhelming. Teens may get anxious about likes and engagements, have fear of missing out (FoMO) when away from their device or struggle against expectations to always be available.

For more information on what research tells us about the impacts social media has on youth and what teens can do, check out our website: Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health and browse previously submitted questions on our Question and Answer Portal.

CENTER OF EXCELLENCE
Social Media and Youth Mental Health
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Full list of references can be found at https://bit.ly/40nY8Xm.

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