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COVER STORY

Social media brings benefits and risks to teens. Here's how psychology can help identify a path forward

New psychological research exposes the harms and positive outcomes of social media. APA's recommendations aim to add science-backed balance to the discussion

By Kirsten Weir Date created: September 1, 2023 15 min read

Vol. 54 No. 6

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This was the year that social media itself went viral—and not in a good way. In March, President Joe Biden threatened to ban the Chinese-owned video-sharing site TikTok. In April, a bipartisan group of senators introduced legislation to ban kids under 13 from joining social media. In May, the U.S. surgeon general issued an advisory urging action to protect children online (*[Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2023](https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf)* (<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf>)). Just days earlier, APA issued its first-ever health advisory, providing recommendations to protect youth from the risks of social media (*[Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence, 2023](/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use)* (</topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use>)).

As youth mental health continues to suffer, parents, teachers, and legislators are sounding the alarm on social media. But fear and misinformation often go hand in hand. APA's recommendations aim to add science-backed balance to the discussion. "There's such a negative conversation happening around social media, and there is good reason for that. However, it's important to realize

there can be benefits for many teens,” said Jacqueline Nesi, PhD, an assistant professor of psychology at Brown University who studies technology use in youth, and a member of the APA panel that produced the health advisory. “Teens (and adults) obviously get something out of social media. We have to take a balanced view if we want to reach teens and help them use these platforms in healthier ways.”

[Related: [What parents should know to keep their teens safe on social media \(/topics/social-media-internet/social-media-parent-tips\)](#)]

In 2023, an estimated 4.9 billion people worldwide are expected to use social media. For teens who grew up with technology, those digital platforms are woven into the fabric of their lives. “Social media is here to stay,” said Mary Alvord, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Maryland and adjunct professor at George Washington University, and a member of the APA panel. That doesn’t mean we have to accept its dangers, however. “Just as we decide when kids are old enough to drive, and we teach them to be good drivers, we can establish guidelines and teach children to use social media safely,” Alvord said.

Social media charms and harms

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide in young people were climbing. In 2021, more than 40% of high school students reported depressive symptoms, with girls and LGBTQ+ youth reporting even higher rates of poor mental health and suicidal thoughts, according to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([American Economic Review, Vol. 112, No. 11, 2022](#)

https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS_Data-Summary-

[Trends_Report2023_508.pdf](#)).

Young people may be particularly vulnerable to social media's charms—as well as its harms. During adolescent development, brain regions associated with the desire for attention, feedback, and reinforcement from peers become more sensitive. Meanwhile, the brain regions involved in self-control have not fully matured. That can be a recipe for disaster. “The need to prioritize peers is a normal part of adolescent development, and youth are turning to social media for some of that longed-for peer contact,” said clinical psychologist Mary Ann McCabe, PhD, ABPP, a member-at-large of APA's Board of Directors, adjunct associate professor of pediatrics at George Washington University School of Medicine, and cochair of the expert advisory panel. “The original yearning is social, but kids can accidentally wander into harmful content.”

The potential risks of social media may be especially acute during early adolescence when puberty delivers an onslaught of biological, psychological, and social changes. One longitudinal analysis of data from youth in the United Kingdom found distinct developmental windows during which adolescents are especially sensitive to social media's impact. During those windows—around 11 to 13 for girls and 14 to 15 for boys—more social media use predicts a decrease in life satisfaction a year later, while lower use predicts greater life satisfaction ([Orben, A., et al., *Nature Communications*, Vol. 13, No. 1649, 2022](#) (<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-29296-3>)).

One takeaway from such research is that adults should monitor kids' social media use closely in early adolescence, between the ages of 10 and 14 or so. As kids become more mature and develop digital literacy skills, they can earn more autonomy.

The cost of connection

The internet is at its best when it brings people together. Adults can help kids get the most out of social media by encouraging them to use online platforms to engage with others in positive ways. “The primary benefit is social connection, and that’s true for teens who are connecting with friends they already have or making new connections,” Nesi said. “On social media, they can find people who share their identities and interests.”

Online social interaction can promote healthy socialization among teens, especially when they’re experiencing stress or social isolation. For youth who have anxiety or struggle in social situations, practicing conversations over social media can be an important step toward feeling more comfortable interacting with peers in person. Social media can also help kids stay in touch with their support networks. That can be especially important for kids from marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ adolescents who may be reluctant or unable to discuss their identity with caregivers (Craig, S. L., et al., *Social Media + Society*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2021 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305121988931>)). In such cases, online support can be a lifeline.

“We know from suicide prevention research that it’s critical for people to know they aren’t alone,” Alvord said.

Kids also learn about themselves online. “Social media provides a lot of opportunities for young people to discover new information, learn about current events, engage with issues, and have their voices heard,” Nesi added. “And it gives them an opportunity to explore their identities, which is an important task of the adolescent years.”

Yet all those opportunities come at a cost. “There is a lot of good that can come from social media. The problem is, the algorithms can also lead you down rabbit holes,” Alvord said. Technology is expertly designed to pull us in. Features such as “like” buttons, notifications, and videos that start playing

automatically make it incredibly hard to step away. At the extreme, social media use can interfere with sleep, physical activity, schoolwork, and in-person social interactions. “The risk of technologies that pull us in is that they can get in the way of all the things we know are important for a teen’s development,” Nesi said.

Research suggests that setting limits and boundaries around social media, combined with discussion and coaching from adults, is the best way to promote positive outcomes for youth (Wachs, S., et al., *Computers & Education*, Vol. 160, No. 1, 2021 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.104026>)). Parents should talk to kids often about social media and technology and also use strategies like limiting the amount of time kids can use devices and removing devices from the bedroom at night. Caregivers should also keep an eye out for problematic behaviors, such as strong cravings to use social media, an inability to stop, and lying or sneaking around in order to use devices when they aren’t allowed.

[Related: *How much is too much social media use: A Q&A with Mitch Prinstein, PhD* (</topics/social-media-internet/social-media-literacy-teens>)]

In helping to set boundaries around social media, it’s important that parents don’t simply limit access to devices, Alvord added. “Removing devices can feel punitive. Instead, parents should focus on encouraging kids to spend time with other activities they find valuable, such as movement and art activities they enjoy,” she said. “When kids are spending more time on those things, they’re less likely to be stuck on social media.”

Dangerous content

Spending too much time on social media is one cause for concern. Dangerous content is another. Despite efforts by caregivers and tech companies to protect

kids from problematic material, they still encounter plenty of it online—including mis- and disinformation, racism and hate speech, and content that promotes dangerous behaviors such as disordered eating and self-harm.

During the first year of the pandemic, when kids were spending more time at home and online, McCabe saw a flurry of new diagnoses of eating disorders in her teen patients and their friends. “These kids often reported that they started by watching something relatively benign, like exercise videos,” she said. But their social media algorithms doubled down on that content, offering up more and more material related to body image and weight. “It was an echo chamber,” McCabe added. “And several of my patients attributed their eating disorders to this online behavior.”

Unfortunately, McCabe’s observations seem to be part of a common pattern. A large body of research, cited in APA’s health advisory, suggests that using social media for comparisons and feedback related to physical appearance is linked to poorer body image, disordered eating, and depressive symptoms, especially among girls.

Other research shows that when youth are exposed to unsafe behaviors online, such as substance use or self-harm, they may be at greater risk of engaging in similar behaviors themselves. In a longitudinal study of high school students, Nesi and colleagues showed that kids who saw their peers drinking alcohol on social media were more likely to start drinking and to binge drink 1 year later, even after controlling for demographic and developmental risk factors (*Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 60, No. 6, 2017 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.01.009>)).

Cyberbullying is another source of worry, both for young people and their caregivers. Indeed, research shows that online bullying and harassment can be harmful for a young person’s psychological well-being. APA’s health advisory

cited several studies that found online bullying and harassment can be more severe than offline bullying. The research showed it can increase the risk of mental health problems in adolescents—with risks for both perpetrators and victims of cyberhate.

Ingrained racism

Search engines and social media algorithms can expose adolescents to other types of cyberhate, including racism. In fact, online algorithms often have structural racism and bias baked in, in ways that White users might not even notice. Sometimes, the algorithms themselves churn out biased or racist content. TikTok, for instance, has come under fire for recommending new accounts based on the appearance of the people a user already follows—with the inadvertent effect of segregating the platform. In addition to this form of “algorithmic bias,” people of color are frequently subjected to what some researchers call “filter bias.” In one common example, the beauty filters built into sites like Instagram or Snapchat might apply paler skin or more typically White facial features to a user’s selfies.

Like microaggressions in offline life, online racism in the form of algorithmic and filter bias can take a toll on mental health, said Brendesha Tynes, PhD, a professor of education and psychology at the University of Southern California, and a member of the APA advisory panel. In an ongoing daily diary study with adolescents, she is finding evidence that people who are exposed to algorithmic and filter bias are at increased risk of next-day depression and anxiety symptoms.

“I’m an adult who studies these issues and who has a lot of strategies to protect myself, and it can still be really hard” to cope with online racism, she said. Impressionable teens who haven’t learned such strategies are likely to experience even greater psychological impacts from the racism they encounter

every day on social media. “We’re just beginning to understand the profound negative impacts of online racism,” Tynes said. “We need all hands on deck in supporting kids of color and helping them cope with these experiences.”

Despite the drawbacks of technology, there is a silver lining. Tynes has found Black youth receive valuable social support from other Black people on social media. Those interactions can help them learn to think critically about the racism they encounter. That’s important, since her research also shows that youth who are able to critique racism experience less psychological distress when they witness race-related traumatic events online (*Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 43, No. 6, 2008 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2008.08.021>)).

Tynes said more research is needed to understand how online racism affects youth and how best to protect them from its harms.

“Different groups have vastly different experiences online,” she said. “We need more detailed recommendations for specific groups.”

A role for psychology

How to protect kids from online racism is just one of a long list of questions on researchers’ wish lists. Digital technologies evolve so quickly that kids are off to a new platform before scientists can finish collecting data about yesterday’s favorite sites. “There’s so much we still don’t know about this topic. That’s understandably frustrating for people because social media is impacting people’s lives as we speak,” Nesi said.

It’s likely some groups, and some individuals, are more susceptible than others to the negative effects of social media, she added. “We need more information about who is more vulnerable and who is more resilient, and what it is they’re doing online that’s healthy versus harmful.”

While there is a lot of work to be done, Nesi said, “we’re getting closer.” As APA’s recommendations make clear, there is ample evidence some types of content and online behaviors can harm youth. Adult role models can work together with teens to understand the pitfalls of technology and establish boundaries to protect them from dangerous content and excessive screen time.

Psychological research shows children from a young age should be taught digital literacy skills such as identifying misinformation, protecting privacy, understanding how people can misrepresent themselves online, and how to critically evaluate race-related materials online. One way to promote those skills may be to lean into teens’ inherent skepticism of grown-ups. “You can teach kids that a lot of people want something from them,” Alvord said—whether it’s a stranger trying to message them on Instagram, or TikTok earning money by collecting their data or showing them branded content.

That’s not to say it’s easy to help kids develop a healthy relationship with social media. “By necessity, adolescents disagree more with their parents—and they are formidable when they insist on having something, like phones or social media, that all their friends have,” McCabe said. “But parents are eager for guidance. There is an appetite for this information now,” she added—and psychological scientists can help provide it.

That scientific research can inform broader efforts to keep children safe on social media as well. “Parents can’t do this alone,” Nesi said. “We need larger-scale changes to these platforms to protect kids.”

There are efforts to make such changes. The Kids Online Safety Act, a bipartisan bill introduced in April, establishes a duty of care for social media companies to protect minors from mental health harms, sex trafficking, narcotics, and other dangers. Additionally, the bill requires social media companies to go through independent, external audits, allows researcher

access to platform data assets, and creates substantial youth and parental controls to create a safer digital environment. Even as legislators and tech companies consider those and other policies, researchers can continue their efforts to determine which actions might be most protective, said Nesi, who is currently leading a study to understand which features of social media are helpful versus harmful for kids at high risk of suicide. "For some kids, being able to connect with others and find support is really important. For others, social media may create more challenges than it solves," Nesi said. "The key is making sure we don't accidentally do any harm" by enacting restrictions and legislation that are not backed by science.

While researchers forge ahead, clinical psychologists, too, can add valuable insight for teens and their families. "Screens are a central part of adolescents' lives, and that needs to be integrated into assessment and treatment," Nesi said. "Clinicians can help families and teens take a step back and look at their social media use to figure out what's working for them and what isn't."

Someday, McCabe said, digital literacy may be taught in schools the same way that youth learn about sexual health and substance use. "I hope we'll come to a point where teaching about the healthy use of social media is an everyday occurrence," she said. "Because of this dialogue that we're having now among families and policymakers, we may see a new generation of kids whose entry into the digital world is very different, where we can use social media for connection and education but minimize the harms," she added. "I hope this is the beginning of a new day."

Social media recommendations

APA's Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence makes these recommendations based on the scientific evidence to date:

1. Youth using social media should be encouraged to use functions that create opportunities for social support, online companionship, and emotional intimacy that can promote healthy socialization.
2. Social media use, functionality, and permissions/consenting should be tailored to youths' developmental capabilities; designs created for adults may not be appropriate for children.
3. In early adolescence (i.e., typically 10–14 years), adult monitoring (i.e., ongoing review, discussion, and coaching around social media content) is advised for most youths' social media use; autonomy may increase gradually as kids age and if they gain digital literacy skills. However, monitoring should be balanced with youths' appropriate needs for privacy.
4. To reduce the risks of psychological harm, adolescents' exposure to content on social media that depicts illegal or psychologically maladaptive behavior, including content that instructs or encourages youth to engage in health-risk behaviors, such as self-harm (e.g., cutting, suicide), harm to others, or those that encourage eating-disordered behavior (e.g., restrictive eating, purging, excessive exercise) should be minimized, reported, and removed; moreover, technology should not drive users to this content.
5. To minimize psychological harm, adolescents' exposure to "cyberhate" including online discrimination, prejudice, hate, or cyberbullying especially directed toward a marginalized group (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, religious, ability status), or toward an individual because of their identity or allyship with a marginalized group should be minimized.
6. Adolescents should be routinely screened for signs of

“problematic social media use” that can impair their ability to engage in daily roles and routines, and may present risk for more serious psychological harms over time.

7. The use of social media should be limited so as to not interfere with adolescents’ sleep and physical activity.
8. Adolescents should limit use of social media for social comparison, particularly around beauty- or appearance-related content.
9. Adolescents’ social media use should be preceded by training in social media literacy to ensure that users have developed psychologically-informed competencies and skills that will maximize the chances for balanced, safe, and meaningful social media use.
10. Substantial resources should be provided for continued scientific examination of the positive and negative effects of social media on adolescent development.

[Read the full recommendations and see the science behind them \(/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use\)](#)

Further reading

[Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism](#)

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[Techno Sapiens \(https://technosapiens.substack.com/\)](https://technosapiens.substack.com/)

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