

Promoting Positive Social Media use among Youth



Nearly all youth (ages 13-17) in the United States have access to a computer or a smartphone and go online daily. Youth and adults generally have different motivations for using these technologies. Adults often view technology as instrumental in purpose (e.g., scheduling appointments, ensuring safety, completing homework), while youth primarily see technology as a tool to facilitate social interactions. This is validated as most youth in the U.S. use one or more social media platforms, with the order of popularity being YouTube, TikTok,

Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter. Parents, caregivers, and professionals have expressed concern about the impacts of social media on the social, emotional, and physical well-being of youth. There have been mixed research results about the impacts of social media on youth, with some studies highlighting negative outcomes and other long-term studies showing no major negative outcomes. While it is not certain what the social media use impacts are on youth, some research highlights that youth expect parents and caregivers to monitor their use.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND PERSONAL INFORMATION

The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) prevents websites (including social media) from knowingly collecting personal information from children under the age of 13 without the permission of their legal guardians. Most popular social media sites require youth to be 13 years or older to join. However, this does not prevent youth from joining sites by falsifying age, sometimes with parental knowledge. Some sites, like YouTube, do not require accounts to view the content (e.g., videos) because they are not collecting personal information. All caregivers who have youth using social media (or are considering allowing use) should discuss what personal information means (e.g., location/address, birth month/year, phone number, travel plans) and agree on guidelines for what should or should not be shared on social media.

CAREGIVER FAMILIARITY WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Ideally, before youth join a new social media site, caregivers should familiarize themselves with the social media platform. If the caregiver has a lower technological skill level, they can ask the youth to assist them in joining and navigating the platform. This can start conversations and questions about the specific platform. Of particular interest should be understanding social media’s privacy policies and features. If the platform has “following” or “friending” features, the caregiver should set the expectation that they will be a follower or friend on the youth’s social media account. Caregivers should regularly review posts and interactions on the youth’s social media profile.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR POSITIVE SOCIAL MEDIA USE

In past research, youth have reported how they would like parents/caregivers to monitor their technology use. These recommendations can guide caregivers in establishing their own monitoring plans for youth’s social media use.

- The caregiver should show authority over the youth’s social media use by actively monitoring use, being present when the youth is using social media (which could include being “friends” on the platform), and enforcing consequences if misbehavior on social media occurs. Youth have indicated they want to be a part of the process of deciding appropriate rules and expectations for use. Typically, these

rules and expectations are more restrictive upon the youth’s initial use of the social media platform and then become less restrictive as the youth ages or demonstrates appropriate use.

- Rules could include time limits, location limits, or restricting use. For instance, many youth access social media on a smartphone, tablet, or computer. Most of these devices now have parental control features that allow setting time limits for using specific applications on the device. A caregiver and youth could agree to an amount of time or times the apps should be blocked (e.g., late at night). If this technique is beyond the technical skill level of the caregiver, another approach can include a family charging station. This means all devices used for social media access are to be charged in one location at a certain time each day (e.g., after 8 p.m.). The location could be in a public place like the kitchen or the caregiver’s bedroom if more restriction is perceived to be needed.
- In addition to rules and expectations, caregivers and youth should collaboratively determine what reasonable consequences will be if the rules and expectations are violated. Some consequences could be blocking social media apps (using parental control features) on devices for a specified time, temporarily preventing access to devices that are used to access social media, or more related to the specific misbehavior (e.g., if the youth was cyberbullying—studying news articles about the consequences of cyberbullying). It is critical to follow through on the established consequences if rules and expectations are challenged to maintain caregiver authority. It is recommended to periodically evaluate the rules, expectations, and consequences with the youth to see if they are promoting healthy social media use and to adapt if needed.

CONCLUSION

Social media likely has the potential to provide both positive and negative impacts on a youth’s life. In order to promote healthy use, caregivers should take an active role in youth social media use.

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