

Social Media and the Teen Brain

Fifteen years ago, teenagers were likely to have in-person or telephone conversations with friends and adults. However, since the explosion of smartphones and access to social media, the idea of being present or having to engage an individual in a verbal conversation, or simply offering a smile, has significantly changed. According to the U.S. Surgeon General's May 2023 report on [Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#), 95% of youth ages 13-17 use a social media platform. Additionally, teens today spend an average of 4.8 hours using social media apps such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube. (APA, 2024).

Socializing via social media is now the trend and has created non-stop engagement for the teen population. The days of strolling through the mall are gone and the need to have "likes" or staring at a screen has become the new concept of engagement. Due to the teen population easily accessing social media platforms, several concerns have arisen related to the impact it has on the teen brain, daily functioning and overall mental health status. Such concerns identified by academic scholars include the following:

- Poor sleep quality, difficulty sleeping, sleeping less, anxiety and depression in adolescents due to overall poor sleep hygiene (Alonzo et al., 2021)
- Poor mental health, poor well-being, decreased life satisfaction (Twenge et al., 2018)
- Poor social skills
- Behavior that presents similar to other addictive behaviors, such as using illegal drugs (Kuss et al., 2017)
- Poor self-esteem, including a need to compare their bodies to social media influencers, such as models or individuals who are trying to pursue careers in the modeling or show business industries (Vogel et al., 2014)

The adolescent brain is not fully developed and mature until the age of 25. Between the ages of 10 and 25, the brain undergoes changes that impact one's behavior. The positive feeling that adolescents feel when receiving a "like" on social media creates a similar feeling to winning money or eating chocolate (Lieberman et al., 2009). Adolescents receiving social rewards also crave peer feedback and acceptance. Adolescent emotions may be driven by how they process social media and how they rely on social media for social interactions. While the studies on social media are limited, more studies are needed to understand the true impact it has on mental illness, cognition and social interactions.

To that end, during the time of adolescent development, parents, caregivers or guardians need to understand how quickly adolescents will act or make decisions based on social media interactions.

What you can do to help:

- Talk to your children and ask questions to better understand what interests them.
- Talk with them about finding ways to engage their interests in the real world away from social media.

- Talk with them about their worries and their fears. Remember this may take time to gain their trust and for them to feel comfortable enough to open up to you.
- Remind them that what they see on social media is never the full story and is not an accurate representation of someone or their life.
- Work with your children to limit screen time, and remind them you love them and to not allow social media to control their behavior.
- Set an example for them to follow by limiting your own screen time and talking with them about the healthy ways you and other adults they know take a break from social media to process their thoughts and feelings, especially when they start to feel depressed or anxious.

The following resources can help you and your family work together to talk about social media and develop some guidelines and rules for when it is OK to engage with social media and when it is time to put the phone down.

[Yale Child Study Center's Parent Guide for Social Media Use and Teen Mental Health](#)

[Create or Update Your Family Media Plan, from the American Academy of Pediatrics](#)

MORE INFORMATION

Find more resources for caregivers and dealing with stress and burnout on our [Mindful Matters webpage](#).

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