Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory (Executive Summary)

Social media use among young people is nearly universal, with up to 95% of teenagers, and even 40% of children aged 8-12, on social media.[1,2] Despite this widespread use among children and adolescents, we do not yet have enough evidence to determine if social media use is sufficiently safe for them — especially during adolescence, a particularly vulnerable period of brain development.

Social media has both positive and negative impacts on children and adolescents

Different children and adolescents are affected by social media in different ways based on their individual strengths and vulnerabilities and based on cultural, historical, and socio-economic factors.[3,4] Social media can provide benefits for some children, including by serving as a source of connection for youth who are often marginalized, such as the LGBTQ+ community and people with disabilities, providing positive or identity-affirming content, creating a space for self-expression, and helping youth feel accepted. However, increasingly, evidence is indicating there is reason to be concerned about the risk of harm social media use poses to children and adolescents. Children and adolescents on social media are commonly exposed to extreme, inappropriate, and harmful content, and those who spend more than 3 hours a day on social media face double the risk of poor mental health including experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety.[5] This is deeply concerning as a recent survey of teenagers showed that, on average, they spend 3.5 hours a day on social media.[6]

What's driving the growing concerns?

Social media can expose children to content that presents risks of harm:

- Social media may perpetuate body dissatisfaction, disordered eating behaviors, social comparison, and low self-esteem, especially among adolescent girls.[7,8,9,10]

- When asked about the impact of social media on their body image: 46% of adolescents aged 13-17 said social media makes them feel worse, 40% said it makes them feel neither better nor worse, and only 14% said it makes them feel better.[11]

- Roughly two-thirds (64%) of adolescents are "often" or "sometimes" exposed to hate-based content.[12]

- Some social media platforms show suicide- and self-harm-related content including even live depictions of self-harm acts, content which, in certain tragic cases, has been linked to childhood deaths.[13,14]

Social media use can be excessive and problematic for some children:

- On a typical weekday, nearly one-in-three adolescents report using screens (most commonly social media) until midnight or later.[11]

- Studies have shown a relationship between excessive social media use and poor sleep quality, reduced sleep duration, sleep difficulties, and depression among youth.[15]

- One-third or more of girls aged 11-15 say they feel "addicted" to certain social media platforms and over half of teenagers report that it would be hard to give up social media.[1,16]

1. Vogels et al., 2022.
2. Rideout et al., 2022.
3. Beyens et al., 2020.
4. Hollis et al., 2020.
5. Riehm et al., 2019.
6. Miech et al., 2022.
7. Lonergan et al., 2020.
8. Meier and Gray, 2014.
9. Thai et al., 2023.
10. Vogels et al., 2014.
11. Bickham et al., 2022.
12. Rideout et al., 2018.
13. Dyer, 2022.
14. Carville, 2022.
15. Alonzo et al., 2021.
16. Nesi et al., 2023.

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There are critical gaps in our understanding of mental health risks to children and adolescents posed by social media

There is broad concern among the scientific community that a lack of access to data and lack of transparency from technology companies have been barriers to understanding the full scope and scale of the impact of social media on child and adolescent mental health and well-being. While more research is needed to fully understand the impact of social media, this gap in knowledge cannot be an excuse for inaction.

A Way Forward: The Surgeon General's Advisory outlines some immediate actions we can take to make social media safer and healthier for youth

This burden cannot simply fall to parents and children. We must engage in a multifaceted effort to maximize the benefits and reduce the risk of harm posed by social media, with actions taken by groups across the spectrum: policymakers, technology companies, researchers, families, and children and adolescents themselves.

- **Policymakers can** take steps to strengthen safety standards and limit access in ways that make social media safer for children of all ages, better protect children's privacy, support digital and media literacy, and fund additional research.

- **Technology companies can** better and more transparently assess the impact of their products on children, share data with independent researchers to increase our collective understanding of the impacts, make design and development decisions that prioritize safety and health – including protecting children's privacy and better adhering to age minimums – and improve systems to provide effective and timely responses to complaints.

- **Parents and caregivers can** make plans in their households such as establishing tech-free zones that help protect sleep and better foster in-person relationships, teach children and adolescents about responsible online behavior, and model that behavior, and report problematic content and activity.

- **Children and adolescents can** adopt healthy practices like limiting time on platforms, blocking unwanted content, being careful about sharing personal information, and reaching out if they or a friend need help or see harassment or abuse on the platforms.

- **Researchers can** further prioritize social media and youth mental health research that can support the establishment of standards and evaluation of best practices to support children's health.

For more information on social media and youth mental health, read the Surgeon General's Advisory:

surgeongeneral.gov/ymh-social-media

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