Teen Social Media Use: How to Help Youth Develop Healthy Social Media Habits

Being connected through smartphones and social media plays a big role in teen culture today. According to Piper Sandler's Taking Stock with Teens survey (2021), teens report they spend an average of 4.2 hours per day on social media. Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram are among the most popular social media platforms used by teenagers. There are positive aspects of social media, but also potential risks, including whether the excessive use of social media can ultimately harm youth mental health. Learning how to support kids in a digital world can pose challenges for parents, educators and other youth-serving advocates. In fact, two-thirds of parents in the U.S. say parenting is harder today than it was 20 years ago, with many citing technologies like social media or smartphones as a reason (Pew Research Center). When it comes to kids and social media, some of the top worries amongst parents include age appropriateness, mean behavior among peers, inappropriate photos or videos that can hurt reputations or attract negative attention, overuse, and privacy issues.

Many experts agree that social media is not inherently bad. Social media can encourage idea sharing, create a sense of community, serve as a means to connect to family and friends from afar, and create awareness of important social movements and involvement in civic causes that may be important to youth.   How teens use social networking, interact with it and interpret it can make a difference in how it affects them. Many studies have found an association between time spent on social media as well as the number of social media platforms used and various mental health concerns. Research suggests that young people who spend more than 2 hours per day on social media are more likely to report poor mental health, including psychological distress. Since social media isn't going away, it is important for adults and teens alike to acknowledge the risks associated with social media networking and learn how to manage those risks.

There are a number of health issues that may develop as a result of too much time online. Some of the adverse risks associated with social media use include poor sleep quality, cyberbullying, depression, high levels of anxiety, low levels of self-esteem and FOMO (fear of missing out). Social media's filtered sense of reality can lead to critically comparing and moments of envy, leading to lower self-esteem and depression. Additionally, excessive monitoring of friends' online behaviors can lead to feelings of exclusion and turn into increased social anxiety. Excessive social media use can also come at the expense of real-world interactions, resulting in more indirect communication. When kids learn to do most of their communication while looking at a screen, they are missing out on very critical social skills including learning how to read social cues. Speaking indirectly also creates a barrier to clear communication and can make it easier to be cruel.

Teenagers need support and education to develop the skills to manage their social media use. There is a great deal of brain development that takes place during the adolescent years. It is important to understand that individual strengths and vulnerabilities may predispose certain adolescents to engage with and respond to social media in positive or negative ways. There are steps parents and caregivers can take to encourage responsible use of social media and limit some of its negative effects. Consider some of the following suggestions:

- **Teach self-monitoring**- model healthy behaviors with your own social media use.

- **Talk about social media**- talk about your own social media habits. Have regular discussions about what your teen is experiencing online including what they see that is both positive and negative and how they feel when using social media.

- **Set reasonable limits**- talk to your teen about how to avoid letting social media interfere with their activities, sleep, meals and school work. Encourage a bedtime routine that avoids electronic media use (and set an example by following these rules yourself).

- **Explain what's not OK**- discourage your teen from gossiping, spreading rumors, bullying or damaging someone's reputation. Talk to your teen about what's appropriate and safe to share on social media. Encourage your teen to ask themselves the following questions before they post online: Is it true? Is it kind? Would I say it in person? Is it helpful or useful? Will I feel good about it tomorrow?

- **Teach teens how to balance social media with real-life experiences and friends**- encourage opportunities for face-to-face human connection, direct communication and involvement in activities outside of youth's digital world.

- **Monitor your teens social media use**- the more you know about how your teen is interacting on social media, the better you will be able to address any problems.

If you feel your teen is experiencing signs or symptoms of anxiety or depression related to social media use, is upset by what they see, or becomes involved with risky behaviors, talk to your pediatrician, family doctor, or a trained mental health professional. Additional information on social media use and online safety can be found below:

Common Sense Media
https://www.commonsensemedia.org/

Connect Safely
http://www.connectsafely.org/

Cyberwise
http://www.cyberwise.org/

Cyberbullying Research Center
https://cyberbullying.org

Family Online Safety Institute
https://www.fosi.org

References: American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; American Academy of Pediatrics; Childmind Institute; Common Sense Media; Mayo Clinic; Nemours Kids Health; Pew Research Center