

How Social Media Affects Children's Mental Health

In today's digital age, social media has become a central part of daily life—especially for children and adolescents. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat offer opportunities for connection, creativity, and self-expression, yet they come with risks that can significantly impact young minds. As children spend more time online, parents, educators, and mental health professionals are increasingly concerned about how these platforms influence emotional well-being, self-esteem and social development.

Mandy Jackson, MD, a pediatrician with Salinas Valley Health, provides helpful information surrounding the complex relationship between social media and children's mental health—examining both the potential benefits and challenges of growing up in a connected world.

The Pros and Cons of Social Media Use

Research increasingly shows that social media use affects not only children but also adults. When it comes to young people, studies have found a correlation between higher social media use and symptoms of depression, such as sadness, hopelessness, low self-esteem and social withdrawal.

However, researchers caution that it is unclear whether social media causes these symptoms or if children experiencing them are more drawn to social media in the first place. Encouragingly, newer studies are engaging with young people in open, nonjudgmental ways to understand their experiences better.

While excessive screen time is common, focusing on how social media is used is important. For many children, platforms offer meaningful ways to stay connected with family, build identity, explore interests and even pursue educational or entrepreneurial opportunities.

“On the flip side, there's a lot of dark material out there. Sometimes, they're looking at mostly violence or they're exposed to drugs or precocious sexuality or kids talking about and idealizing thoughts of self-harm,” warns Dr. Jackson.

Potential Long-Term Effects of Excessive Social Media Engagement

Reduced face-to-face interaction and less exposure to facial expressions and language can lead to language delays in young children, especially those from birth to age three. Many of these children show signs of delayed development, and it's often observed that their caregivers are distracted by phones during key bonding moments. While this isn't meant as a criticism—many adults are frequently on their phones—it highlights the importance of intentional interaction with young children.

Among teenagers, one of the biggest concerns is time management. With school, extracurricular activities, jobs, and social obligations, sleep is often the first thing to be sacrificed, which can negatively impact mental health by increasing irritability, anxiety and depression.

Another rising concern is body dysmorphia (excessive preoccupation with perceived flaws in one's appearance), especially among teens using social media. Constant exposure to unrealistic beauty standards—like flawless skin and very thin body types—can lead to dissatisfaction with their own appearance. While this affects girls more often, it impacts boys as well. In reality, most adolescents naturally experience fluctuating body weight and common skin issues like acne.

“When their skin isn't perfect and their body mass isn't matching up with what's portrayed on these platforms, I see a lot of kids who shy away from any real face-to-face interaction. I have kids in my clinic with their hoodies on because they are there for acne and they're covering themselves up. I also see kids who aren't eating anything and have diagnosable anorexia nervosa. They're covering their bodies up so their parents will stop telling them to eat,” shares Dr. Jackson. “These pictures and videos on social media are very powerful, and we have to help kids interpret them in a realistic way.”

Strategies to Keep Communication Lines Open and Productive

One of the most effective ways to support children's mental health is through regular, open communication. Checking in daily with kids is essential, but vague questions like “How was your day?” often lead to short or no responses. Instead, asking specific, open-ended questions—such as “What was the best part of your day?” or “What was the hardest part?”—can spark more meaningful conversations.

These talks can reveal what's going on socially and academically, both of which impact a child's self-esteem and mental health. If parents notice any signs of distress, they should act quickly by reaching out to school counselors or other support systems, recognizing that children may sometimes feel more comfortable opening up to adults outside the home.

“At the clinic, we have referrals to mental health counselors, and some kids need medications just to help keep their heads above water. It can be tough, but the most important thing is to communicate often with your child,” urges Dr. Jackson.

Create a Family Media Plan to Ensure Healthy Role Modeling

Ideally, children should have no more than two hours of recreational screen time per day, though it's important to consider the timing and quality of their media use. One effective strategy is creating a family media plan where adults and kids follow shared guidelines.

Involving children in setting these rules encourages buy-in and accountability. Examples include putting phones away during dinner, homework, family visits and especially at bedtime. Many families find success with everyone leaving their phones in a common area, like the kitchen, to ensure restful, uninterrupted sleep.

“This helps limit the ‘unlimited opportunity’ to access screen time. The goal is two hours or less, but it's also hard to calculate because they will be doing their homework on their phone, plus be on TikTok or messaging within their network. It's difficult to delineate how much time is being spent on what,” cautions Dr. Jackson. “Again, we need to be role models. So, if our kids see us on our phones, just as if we like a certain kind of shoes or brand of clothing, they're going to probably copy us.”

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