How Social Media Can Impact Your Child

Cleveland Clinic Notes that Too Much Time Carries Serious Risks

Spending time on social media has become almost a way of life for most adults — scrolling through videos of cuddly cats and wacky dances for hours a day.

But is it healthy for your children to have the same habits? And how do you know if they're being safe on social media? Is social media good or bad?

Most social media apps require users to be at least 13 years old. But according to the U.S. Surgeon General, nearly 40% of children 8 to 12 years old and 95% of children 13 to 17 years old use social media apps.

In fact, the U.S. Surgeon General released an advisory on how social media affects children's and teenagers' mental health. One scary statistic? Teens who spend more than three hours a day on social media double their risk of depression and anxiety.

If your child is currently on social media or if they've been asking to join, it's important to talk to them about what social media is, what rules you have for it and how it doesn't always show an accurate picture of someone's life.

"Social media makes it easy to compare oneself to another," says child psychologist Kate Eshleman, PsyD. "Most people put on social media what they want you to see. And by using social media, all of us have the ability to access endless information anytime we want to, and that can be very hard for kids."

Dr. Eshleman discusses the negative effects of social media and — if you're allowing them to use it — how to talk to your kids about how to stay safe, not overdo it and not take a lot of what they see on there too seriously.

Negative Effects of Social Media

It can be overwhelming to think about all the negative ways your child may be affected by using social media.

While experts are just beginning to understand social media's impact on children, one study shows that children younger than 11 years old who use Instagram and Snapchat are more likely to have problematic digital behaviors like having online-only friends and visiting sites parents would disapprove of, as well as a greater chance of taking part in online harassment.

And it's not so easy to give up or limit your child's time on social media. According to a national survey, 33% of girls 11 to 15 years old feel addicted to social media and more than half of teens say it would be hard to give up social media. The fear of missing out, or FOMO, is real.

So, why can social media be so bad? Dr. Eshleman walks us through the potential risks of social media.

Body Image Concerns

Too much time on social media apps can lead to an increase in body dissatisfaction, eating disorders and low self-esteem. While this is particularly concerning for teen girls, reports show that 46% of teens 13 to 17 years old said social media made them feel worse about their bodies.

"It's important to realize that with high-tech phones and various apps, it's much easier to snap 'the perfect picture,' which is likely not a true representation of someone's appearance," says Dr. Eshleman.

"However, we all, and especially young people, look at these pictures and admire the beauty. This results in likely comparing oneself to an artificial image, and distress can result if we feel we don't measure up."

Cyberbullying We're all familiar with bullying — the kind that might happen on the school playground — but cyberbullying, which happens through technology, the internet and social media to harass, threaten or embarrass someone, is just as common.

Harmful language, images and videos are prevalent, with 64% of teens reporting they're often or sometimes exposed to hate-based content.

"The challenge to cyberbullying is that it's always there, making it much harder to walk away from the negative interactions," explains Dr. Eshleman. "It can also be spread much further, much more rapidly, resulting in negative attention being seen and heard far beyond one's close social circle."

Online Predators

Unfortunately, there are people on social media who target children and teens whether to sexually exploit them, financially extort them or sell them illicitly manufactured drugs. It can be challenging for children and teens to know what to share and what not to share online.

Another alarming stat? Nearly 6 out of 10 teen girls say they've been contacted through social media platforms by a stranger in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable.

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"As a parent, it feels nearly impossible to be aware of and manage all of this. A good place to start is communicating with your children about these potential dangers, letting them know what to be aware of and cautioning them not to share any information with those they don't personally know," advises Dr. Eshleman.

"It's also important to work to create a safe space for communication, allowing children to come to parents should questions or concerns arise."

Dangerous Viral Trends

You've probably heard of dangerous viral trends — and the devastating results from trying them, like being arrested, needing to be hospitalized and even death.

"Kids don't have the cognitive and executive functioning to think through harmful situations and why those might be a bad idea," says Dr. Eshleman. "So, sometimes they're placing themselves in physical risk."

Tics Another study talks about how children who use TikTok are developing tics and having tic-like attacks. They're experiencing a movement disorder brought on by stress and anxiety — presumably made worse by the pandemic and teens' increased social media consumption.

Changes in their Daily Behavior

In addition to problematic digital behaviors, there may be changes in children's daily behavior at home, like:

- Increased irritability
- Increased anxiety
- Increased depression
- Increased sleep issues
- Lack of self-esteem
- Lack of focus and concentration

"If kids are being asked to get off social media and do their homework, or any unpreferred task, then parents might see increased periods of irritability or frustration directed towards parents," notes Dr. Eshleman. "They're being asked to do something they don't want to do and stop doing something they enjoy. Further, there is evidence to show that extended screen time alone negatively impacts mood."

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