

Social Media

Challenges and Concerns for Families



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KEYWORDS

- Social media • Cyber-bullying • Sexting • Family media plan • Texting
- Applications • Games

KEY POINTS

- Social media is everywhere and used by adults and children.
- Social media can have a positive impact on child development in terms of fostering communication, socialization, and learning.
- Social media can have a negative impact on child development with such issues as bullying, sexting, and inappropriate content contributing to additional issues.
- Social media can have positive and negative issues on family health and needs to be used within a family with attention and care with a focus on the ages of the children at home.

INTRODUCTION

“What’s the harm?” That’s the age-old rhetorical question parents ask when trying to convince themselves that the new shiny toy or gizmo on the block is safe for their children. In the age of electronics, this question has been asked about every new device: video cassette recorders, televisions, radios, Walkmen, MP3 players, cell phones used as phones, smart phones, tablets, gaming systems, apps, and now social media. As with issues in the nondigital world, safety with social media is a balance between common sense and understanding the rules of what one is using. Social media is a tool. Like all tools, whether there is harm or not depends on how it is used. Used correctly, there should not be a need for concern. Used incorrectly, problems could arise.

Technology is faceless so it is tempting to forget that issues can occur from its use. Technology seems like a mere tool, an extension of the ability to connect and communicate. With a device in hand, we forget that there are people at the other end. With interactions with people, however, complications can arise from miscommunications to true harm, such as privacy breaches and bullying.

With face-to-face connections, we are not so brazen. We take more care in how we interact. We are careful in our choice of words and our mannerisms. We teach our

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children the social norms and behaviors expected for negotiating the world. We do not allow our children into certain situations until they are old enough. Some of these situations we determine, but others are determined by society, such as the drinking age and driving age.

So, why do we allow our children to use social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, Kik, Twitter, and others, before their privacy policies allow? Why do we let them lie about their ages to use these sites? What is it about technology that lets us bend these rules in a way we would never do in the unplugged world?

Gaining insight into the answers to these questions and what is positive and negative about social media and the digital world allows us to talk to families about this world, allay their concerns, and keep children of all age safe when using social media. We live in a social media-focused world, a world that will only become more digitally connected. Our job is to help parents stop thinking about digital life and nondigital life and just think about life. Parents already know how to parent. What we need to help them do is parent with digital devices and social media with the same good sense they use for all other areas of their children’s lives.

TODAY’S FAMILY: DIGITAL USE

Today’s family is digital. Knowing the trends of use within a family can assist a health care provider in helping families adjust their use to more age-appropriate limits when necessary.

Parents Today

Parents use of digital media, especially social media, often sets the tone for use within a home. Today’s parents are online and are heavy social media users. According to the Pew Research Center, parents use Facebook much more than all other social media platforms followed by Pinterest, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter. With the exception of Twitter, mothers use these platforms more frequently than fathers.¹

Use by parents is largely informative. Parents use apps and social media to stay connected and up to date. Although documentation via pictures and video is important, it provides a personal goal as opposed to the need to be seen by a wide audience as with their children. Parents “friends” are very personal. Their children’s “friends” may not be so.

Parental Concerns

Parents top health concerns have been stable over the last few years, as documented by the CS Mott Children’s Hospital National Children’s Health Poll. Although the rank order has changed slightly, obesity, bullying, and Internet safety have remained in the top 10 with sexting entering the list most years.² These concerns are not surprising because all have a considerable impact on child health, directly and indirectly, and all are related to an ever-growing dependency on digital devices. Obesity, for example, has been linked to children who are heavy game users and digital technology users, in addition to their lack of exercise and poor nutrition. Bullying has an online and offline component. Sexting is a unique online and digital issue that can have lasting consequences. Internet safety has been a stable concern as the digital world has become more prevalent in everyone’s lives.

The underlying cause of all concerns related to the digital world, such as those concerning social media use, is a fear from parents that they are in the dark about what their children are doing. Nearly 30% of parents are concerned about technology

use in general.¹ The less they know, the more they feel out of touch. This has been occurring at a greater pace as society has become more mobile.

Another major issue is the gap between what parents think their children are doing online and the reality. Parents typically underestimate how much time children are using social media and are not as aware as they think about what they are using for applications.³ With new applications emerging so quickly, many parents simply cannot keep up and teenagers have learned to be a step ahead of parents by using applications that seem innocent, but are not, and to actually hide what they are doing.

Parents, feeling uncertain, want to lock down technology, but that is not progress for anyone. As with nondigital issues in parenting, helping them foster a forum for communication and parenting with a reasonable approach to the issue at hand produces much better results. This is discussed in more detail later.

Teenage Social Media Use

Teenagers are as digitally tuned in as their parents. Teenage activities fall into distinct groups: communication (texting, messaging), pinboards, gaming, video calls and chats, and photograph documentation. The social media group comprises 15% of all teenagers and tweens.⁴

This is a group that thrives on being involved and their app and social media use centers around these issues. As with their parents, Facebook is the main social media application used, followed by Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Google+, and a variety of others. A total of 95% of teenagers 12 and older are online with 80% owning a computer and 77% owning a cellphone.⁵ Their digital use is highly mobile with visual apps increasing in use compared with prior surveys, according to Pew Internet.

In addition to the social media applications that their parents use, teenagers gravitate to another group of social media sites that allow for different types of communication. Some of these sites, however, also are also used by young adults and older adults and can be a source for inappropriate contact and cyberbullying. It is important to note these sites and inform parents about them. The more popular sites include Kik, Vine, and YikYak.⁶

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The positive aspects of social media are well documented. Connection with peers and family, creation of video and pictures, and information gathering are all positive activities, especially for teenagers. Older teenagers and college-age students have also found social media valuable in keeping abreast of activities at school and important safety alerts.^{4,7}

Social media is used by middle school and high school students in a variety of ways. Some teachers use social media for assignments. Students use social media to swap homework. School groups use social media to post about activities. Blogs and video creation are also popular activities in these age groups.

THE DARK SIDE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media applications are just tools. Negative situations occur because of misuse of the tool. This may be because a child is too young to use the tool or it is a situation the child is not ready for developmentally. This is no different than when something goes awry from any tool out of the digital sphere. For example, someone trained in electricity would not have the knowledge typically to work with plumbing. A child, for example, would not have the experience to use an electric tool unsupervised or cook in a kitchen until old enough to use the tools in the kitchen and appliances

unsupervised. Society goes to great lengths to make sure people have the correct training in technical fields and that children are not in harm's way in their homes when young.

Imbedded in every negative issue is the age of the child. Children are always developing errors of judgment, and vulnerability because of age may increase the chances that some of these situations may occur. At the same time, it is important for parents to understand that one of the most important ways to keep teenagers and younger children safe when using social media is ensure they are the proper age to use it. As with any tool, most mistakes and harm come when using it improperly or at a younger age than it is meant to be used. Would you give a 5 year old the keys to your car? Social media, as with many areas of life, has age-restrictions that are important for parents understand.

Why Age Matters

All social media sites have a minimum age of use, usually age 13. This is set by the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), which protects the information of children younger than 13 from being collected from Web sites and applications. This important Act protects the interests of children too young to negotiate the online world without the supervision of parents.⁸ Children 13 and older are teenagers. They have the developmental skills to use sites and applications designed for them, including the faceless communication that these sites embody. This is not simply about stranger danger. This is about everything that comes with a site, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, to name a few of the more popular sites. These sites all have advertisements, content, and posts. Children 13 and older are developmentally ready to understand these concepts and find an adult if something is not appropriate or seems overwhelming. A younger child is not developmentally equipped to negotiate the many paths these sites can take a child down.⁷

To sign up for a typical social media site, a box must be checked that says a person is older than 13. If a child is younger than 13, to get onto a site, that child or the parent must lie about that child's age. If a parent is unsure about whether a social media site complies with COPPA and what the minimum age for having an account is for that site, the parent can check the privacy policy page for that site. The links for the more popular sites are as follows:

Facebook⁹: <https://www.facebook.com/help/157793540954833>

Instagram¹⁰: <https://help.instagram.com/154475974694511/>

Twitter¹¹: <https://twitter.com/privacy?lang=en>

Snapchat¹²: <https://www.snapchat.com/terms>

Kik¹³: <http://www.kik.com/privacy/>

Google Sites, including YouTube¹⁴: <https://support.google.com/accounts/answer/1350409?hl=en>

The question a parent must ask at this point in the enrollment process is simple: would he or she ever allow that child to lie about his or her age in another setting? For example, would the parent allow the child to lie about his or her age to get into a camp or to get a driver's license or a passport? Typically, the answer to these questions is no. We teach our children to not lie about one's age. This is because we are our age. To lie is to misrepresent who we are. It gives the impression to the people who run the site that the child is able to handle the site and interact with the people on the site.¹⁵

When we lie about our child's age, and allow our child to lie about his or her age, we also give the message to our child that we can bend some big rules in life when it suits

us. Our children remember that and use it again. We lose credibility in our children's eyes.

Safety is important. Our children crawl before they walk and run. They get a learner's permit before a driver's license. They learn to make Jell-O and pudding before baking a cake alone. The digital world is the same way. We should allow them to use age-appropriate apps and games before putting them on social media sites for children older than 13. Everything in its proper time is a lesson that they have to learn.

Parental Mixed Signals

One of the biggest issues in families today is parents who try and place limits on children while overusing technology themselves. The limits have to make sense for what parents are trying to achieve. Punishing a child of any age by taking away technology has never been found to be effective. Instead, a more reasonable family use plan that holds everyone accountable and has parents held to the same rules as adults is the best strategy.^{7,15,16}

This concept has been reinforced in society by a variety of "unplugged" campaigns, such as the Sabbath Manifesto's National Day of Unplugging Campaign and Chick-Fil-A unplugged container and the unplugged stacking game.^{17,18} All of these campaigns are aimed at helping people become more aware of the need to talk more in their lives and become active in the world without technology. A recent survey of parents by the University of Michigan also drives this concept home by surveying students. The results indicate they want parents to be more present and use technology less.¹⁹ In all the studies the message is clear: parents and children believe the other is too distracted by technology.

Parents Unaware of Online Behavior

Many parents believe they are aware of their children's and teenagers' online activities. However, studies continue to confirm that children and teenagers are savvy at hiding their online activities. This is particularly true for social media. A 2012 study by McAfee showed that although 49% of parents surveyed installed some sort of control, 71% of teenagers did something to hide their online behavior with only 56% of parents aware.³ For example, according to the study, 53.3% of teenagers "clear browser history" with 17.5% parents aware, 22.9% of teenagers lied about behavior with 10.5% parents aware, and 19.9% teenagers manipulated social media privacy settings to block parents with 8.1% parents aware. There were also many teenagers with duplicate email addresses, with many parents unaware. A more recent study has shown that 44% of children and teenagers hide their information from parents.²⁰

iPhone Thumb

This condition emerged with the popularity of hand-held devices and gaming systems and has gone through several name changes. Initially known as "Nintendo-itis," today it is best known as iPhone thumb and is an overuse phenomenon of the hands and wrists. With the rise of smartphones and texting, the fingers and thumbs have become especially susceptible.

Patients usually complain of pain, swelling, and decreased range of motion in the affected area. Sometimes there may be redness and warmth. Treatment is supportive with rest, reducing the amount of time with the offending activity, ice, and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory agents.²¹

Back and Neck Problems

Hands are not the only part of the body impacted by technology use. Researchers and clinicians have long observed people complaining of back and neck straining as technology has consumed greater proportions of our lives. The more people have complained, the more researchers have taken an interest in these issues. Recently, researchers have noted that as people have become more mobile, their posture has changed, looking down more and changing how we hold our spines. This has created a great force on the neck, shoulders, and spine.²² A study out of New York Spine Surgery revealed that adults can spend 2 to 4 hours looking down, which amounts to 700 to 1400 hours a year. This research group estimates that high school students may extend this amount by 5000 hours. These researchers postulate that the longer everyone stays in these abnormal positions, the more we are all at risk for cervical scoliosis and breakdown of cervical tissues. The concern is not academic. There could be the need for surgery if the dysfunction becomes great enough over time.

The solution to this problem is uncertain. However, with experience from other technologies and health, it is known that balance and moderation are always part of a good lifestyle. Teaching our children to take breaks from technology goes a long way in breaking bad habits. We can be good role models. One good practice is to balance hand-held devices with computer use, take stretching breaks, and use tablets mixed with phones.

Social Media Distractions

Distractions from social media are becoming a new health issues as mobile technology has become a larger part of every generation's digital lives. As a result, injuries from using mobile technology while doing routine activities, such as driving, walking, or even biking, are starting to become a bigger concern.

Driving

One of the most dangerous activities while driving is texting. Studies have found that texting while driving distracts a driver in such way that his or her impairment is worse than if impaired by alcohol.²³ One of the earliest studies done by Car and Driver compared texting and reading with being intoxicated by alcohol as defined by legal breathalyzer limits. Both texting and reading were found to impair a driver worse than alcohol intoxication.

Most states now have legal remedies to deal with this dangerous issue. A total of 46 states now have bans on texting while driving for all drivers, with 38 states banning texting for novice drivers.²⁴

Walking

Walking with a mobile device, especially while trying to text or use another app, is as dangerous as driving while texting. SafeKids reports that one in five high school students and one in eight middle school students is distracted while crossing the street.²⁵ Emergency room visits for accidents to people using phones while walking are steadily increasing with more than 1500 visits reported in 2010. This is a doubling in injuries over the last decade.²⁶

Body Image and Self-Esteem

Social media is a huge shaper of body image today, especially in teenage girls. It acts as a mirror for comparison and can have a positive and negative impact. Social media can impact self-esteem positively and negatively depending on how a picture of a girl

is received online.⁴ Educating teenagers about the impact of social media in general, and specifically on body image, and being aware of body image issues in a teenager is how to help parents with this issue.

Digital Dangers: Cyberbully, Sexting, and Inappropriate Content

Digital dangers, such as cyberbullying, sexting, and accessing inappropriate content, are well documented in other reports.⁷ They are common dangers with any social media use and something parents need to be aware about. However, studies continue to document that parents underestimate that their teenagers can get into trouble online at all, let alone by these significant dangers. McAfee reports that only 21% of parents believe their children are at risk of danger online.³

These are concerns that parents have annually.² There is a disconnect in parents thinking about the digital lives of their children. For them to understand their link to social media, the first step is helping them understand the data on how many children are impacted by each issue.

SUMMARY

Parents seek information on problems they fear are impacting their children's lives. Technology, however, is impacting the entire family. Parents, too, are affected with the same issues as their children. Parents use and overuse social media. Parents are distracted at home, while walking, and while driving. Parental engagement with others has decreased as society has become more about digital connections and less about social connections. The solution for parents to help their children with technology and gain more control over everyone's digital lives is to unplug more, and regain true family connections.

As health care providers, it is important to help allay parental concerns about social media. To do so, adding pertinent digital parenting advice, especially about social media, to all health care visits is a necessary first step. In addition, the following recommendations may assist in helping parents as they work to keep their children safe and healthy in today's evolving world:

1. Reinforce to parents that they already have the parenting skills they need to parent a digital child. Parenting a digital issue requires the same skills as a nondigital issue. The first step is knowledge about that issue followed by a reasonable approach for that problem.
2. Help parents recognize that one of the most powerful ways to help children in every issue today is to be a good role model. For social media, moderating their own use, practicing good social media habits, and being away from their devices when true social connections with family and friends are needed are the starting points.
3. Help parents know the privacy rules and about COPPA. Parents should understand that if it is not acceptable to break a law offline, it is not acceptable online. The digital world now has laws that apply to its use. For children and teenagers to understand those laws, parents need to as well, and need to follow those laws. If parents keep crossing those lines, children will, too.
4. A family digital use plan is one of the best ways to help parents and children of all ages follow the appropriate rules. Have one available to hand out for your families to use as a starting point.
5. Inform your families that you are available to help for digital issues, such as cyberbullying and sexting. If they know these tough issues are today's new health issues, they will call you if an issue arises.

The collective goal is to help families achieve a happy medium from a place of understanding, not fear. As they reconnect, they will find that place, especially if we help them get there.

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