

The Children and Screens Guide *for* **Childhood Development** *and Media Use*

Adolescence Ages 11–18



Children
and Screens

Institute of
Digital Media and
Child Development

Adolescence (ages 11-18) marks a period of accelerated development, transformation, and transition from the younger years of childhood to adulthood, with hormonal surges driving changes in physical, social, cognitive, and emotional attributes. A changing sense of identity, preoccupation with self-presentation and peer acceptance, and expanding understanding of complex abstract ideas (like morality, purpose, and social norms) are common challenges during this period.

Today's adolescent typically spends eight hours a day online, and must grapple with these complex developmental changes both online and offline. In this guide, Children and Screens has summarized insights from leading experts and research in the field to help parents and caregivers support adolescents' well-being, growing autonomy, and healthy relationships with digital media.

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BIG DO'S and DON'TS

- Learn about the changes in the adolescent brain that make adolescent youth more vulnerable to problematic media use.

- Nurture regular, curious, judgement-free conversations about your adolescent's life, including their media use.
 - » *Actively listen to their perspective.*
 - » *Teach self-reflection – encourage your adolescent to notice how different types of media use make them feel both during and afterwards.*
 - » *Build empathy and connection – share your own challenges and regrets with media use.*
 - » *Leave judgement at the door – try to temper your own emotional responses to what they share.*

- Delay smartphone ownership until your adolescent displays signs of readiness – in general, later is better.
 - » *Review [signs of readiness](#) for a smartphone.*
 - » *Introduce “dumb” devices (e.g. flip phones, or locked down “smart” phones) first for safety and communication.*
 - » *Whatever phone you get for your child and whenever you get it, consider a smart phone agreement and modify it as you go along as needed.*

- Emphasize restraint over restriction – parent with the goal of developing critical thinking skills and eventual autonomy over their own digital lives.
 - » *Tie increased digital privileges to demonstrations of increased responsibility and self-regulation around media use.*

- Support quality sleep as a foundation for cognitive, attentional, and mental health.
 - » *Keep devices out of bedrooms as much as possible, but especially overnight.*
 - » *Minimize screen-based media use an hour or two before bedtime.*
 - » *Encourage sleep regularity - going to bed and waking up around the same time every night of the week.*

- Encourage use of media that is positive for mental and social health: actively engaging, meaningful, socially-connecting, or physically active.

- Discourage uses of media that act like “junk food” to the adolescent brain – long stretches of passive social media scrolling, or passive gaming – e.g. long stretches of passive social media scrolling, or passive gaming.

- Co-create a balanced daily routine and “media diet” that includes regular times for in-person socializing, physical activity, and other healthy routines along with media use.
 - » *Create routine “connection time” and “tech free” times and spaces for the entire family.*
 - » *Model accountability to the family plan.*

- Support adolescent attentional and cognitive health – discourage multitasking and minimize notifications and distractions during learning and study time.

- Know that the strongest predictor of your child's media use is your own. Put your own phone down and model paying attention to your child and others who are in your physical presence.

- Understand the impacts of social media use on adolescent body image for all genders.

- Have “the talk” to communicate your values and counteract unrealistic media images of sex and sexuality – almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of today's adolescents have intentionally or unintentionally come across pornographic content online.

- Watch for signs of [problematic media use](#) – impairment of normal mood and function in daily life.

- Educate yourself on teen use and risk of social AI companions.

- Beware of “not my kid” syndrome - make yourself and your child aware of extremely common and likely threats to their safety, including viral self-harm and other forms of social contagion, sextortion attempts, and illegal drug sales.

- Don't be overwhelmed – if changes need to be made to make media use healthier, it's best to make one change at a time.

BIG DO'S and DON'TS





What to Know About the Adolescent Brain and Media

The Adolescent Brain...

- ▶ **...Is Changing Rapidly and is Highly Responsive to Experience**

- ▶ **...Is Journeying to Independence**

- ▶ **...Is Reward-Sensitive**

- ▶ **...Can Fall Into a “Dopamine Loop”**

- ▶ **...Is Vulnerable to Problematic Media Use**

- ▶ **...Is Hardwired to Think About How Others Feel About Them**

- ▶ **...Is More Prone to Taking Risks**

...Is Changing Rapidly and is Highly Responsive to Experience

Adolescent brains are in a state of flux and change, and are very sensitive to their environment, says Eva Telzer, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at UNC, Chapel Hill. Adolescent experiences both offline and online can affect these changes and can both support and hinder positive social and cognitive development, says Kate Blocker, Director of Research and Programs at Children and Screens.

“In the span of just a generation, social media has dramatically changed the landscape of adolescent development, providing unprecedented opportunities for social interactions around the clock,” says Telzer. She notes that “this rise in social media use is happening at a critical developmental period when the brain is undergoing more development and reorganization, second only to that which we see during infancy.”



...Is Journeying to Independence

In adolescence, the job of the brain from an evolutionary perspective is to support furthering the child along a pathway to independence, where they are able to go into the world and navigate without so much dependence on that family unit, says Moriah Thomason, PhD, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at NYU, Langone. This is a gradual process, notes Blocker, that relies on regular opportunities to learn through age-appropriate freedoms and responsibilities, with guidance from trusted and experienced elders, like parents, siblings, peers, or mentors. Successful independence is important for building confidence and resilience.



Parents, caregivers, and educators can help adolescents redirect reward sensitivity towards positive behaviors and experiences to help them thrive.”

Eva Telzer, PhD

UNC CHAPEL HILL

...Is Reward-Sensitive

The human brain is hardwired to seek rewards, and the adolescent brain has particularly heightened “reward sensitivity” (responsiveness to pleasurable stimuli). When it comes to media use, this sense of “reward” is activated by stimuli such as “likes” on a social post, the notification of a new text message, or even swiping for the next random funny video. Parents, caregivers, and educators can help adolescents redirect reward sensitivity towards positive behaviors and experiences to help them thrive, says Telzer.

...Can Fall Into a “Dopamine Loop”

Among its many roles, the neurotransmitter dopamine is known as the “feel good” hormone. While many are familiar with the idea of dopamine release when a “reward” is attained, it’s actually more accurately the “anticipation and reward” chemical, says Abe Flanigan, PhD, Associate Professor of Curriculum, Foundations, and Reading at Georgia Southern University. “We don’t just get dopamine after we’ve done something enjoyable. We get dopamine in anticipation as well. So, just seeing the phone, and remembering that ‘That has Instagram, that has TikTok,’ it can bring pleasure and elevate the dopamine right then and there.”

The cycle of anticipation and reward can create a “dopamine loop” with online activities and phone use such that dopamine levels are elevated for an extended period of time. “Our phones are really good at giving us that” elevated dopamine, says Flanigan. “All you’ve got to do is just pick up a social media screen and start scrolling through it.” When the activities are stopped, it feels uncomfortable and the brain desires to return to the elevated dopamine state, says Flanigan.



The prefrontal cortex of the adolescent brain is still developing... This makes adolescents more vulnerable towards initiating and developing problematic or addictive behaviors.”

Marc Potenza

YALE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

...Is Vulnerable to Problematic Media Use

During adolescence, there are hormonal changes that impact brain structure and function, says Marc Potenza, MD, PhD, Director, Division on Addictions Research at Yale, Professor of Psychiatry, Neuroscience and Child Study at Yale University School of Medicine. The prefrontal cortex of the adolescent brain is still developing, which means that functions like planning, impulse control, decision-making and judgment are still not fully matured. This makes adolescents more vulnerable towards initiating and developing problematic or addictive behaviors including gambling, substance use, and problematic use of the internet, says Potenza.

Because digital media use by nature gives us what we want, quickly and continuously, dopamine release naturally occurs, and we need the “brakes” of the prefrontal cortex to help us get off at appropriate times, says Clifford Sussman, MD, Volunteer Clinical Faculty at George Washington University. “Unfortunately, in our teenagers and in our kids, their brakes are not as developed as when they get older.” When you have underdeveloped brakes and you’re on your screen, what can happen is that you just keep going and you don’t get off - that’s when you start to have problems, because when you finally do get out, you’re still craving it” he says.

...Is Hardwired to Think About How Others Feel About Them

The adolescent journey to independence is reflected by how the brain starts to respond to social information, says Thomason. “We actually transition to being more reactive or more responsive in terms of brain activation to others outside of the home, instead of to our parents.”

This heightened social cognition enhances adolescents’ concerns with what other people are thinking, says Telzer. Once adolescents start understanding other people’s distinct thoughts and feelings, “they might become preoccupied with the notion that other people’s thoughts are focused on their own behaviors, or their appearance. And this might cause greater feelings of self-consciousness: a greater attunement and concern over peers, concern about peer evaluation and peer acceptance.”



...Is More Prone to Taking Risks

Teenage years are “the risk years” and teenage brains are “driven to take risks, seek peer admiration, and novelty” says Shimi Kang, MD, FRCPC, Clinical Associate Professor at The University of British Columbia and author of *The Tech Solution*. The teenage brain’s inclination for novelty and greater risk-taking can last until around age 25, and can sometimes manifest through online addiction and other online risk-taking behaviors.



We don’t just get dopamine after we’ve done something enjoyable. We get dopamine in anticipation as well... just seeing the phone, and remembering that ‘That has Instagram, that has TikTok,’ it can bring pleasure and elevate the dopamine right then and there.”

Abe Flanigan, PhD

GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY



Tips to Support Social-Emotional Health

- ▶ **Use Media in Ways That Strengthen Rather Than Weaken Social Skills**
- ▶ **Avoid Using Media in Ways Linked to Mental Health Issues and Social Isolation**
- ▶ **Prioritize In-Person Interaction Time**
- ▶ **Watch for the Passive Social Media Use-Loneliness Cycle**
- ▶ **Understand the Lure of Social Media for Adolescent Brains – and How it May Be Changing Them**
- ▶ **Practice Putting Down the Phone and Giving Full Attention**
- ▶ **Discuss the Limitations of Text Communication Social Cues**
- ▶ **Encourage Teens to Nurture Strong Relationships**
- ▶ **Help Kids Interpret Peer Actions and Foster a Sense of Belonging**
- ▶ **Discuss What Healthy Relationships Look Like**
- ▶ **Utilize Helpful Online Modalities for Socially Anxious Teens**
- ▶ **Help Them Form and Evaluate Friendships**
- ▶ **Talk About “Likability” vs. “Popularity”**
- ▶ **Advise Against 24/7 Availability**
- ▶ **Prepare Them for Group Chat Dynamics**
- ▶ **Discuss Anonymity-Appropriate Behavior for Different Platforms and Contexts**
- ▶ **Teach the Difference Between Cyberbullying and Difficult Interactions**
- ▶ **Teach Accountability for Causing Harm**
- ▶ **Encourage Helping Behaviors at Home For Behavior in Other Contexts**
- ▶ **Educate Yourself and Your Child on the Limits and Risks of Social AI Companions**

Use Media in Ways That Strengthen Rather Than Weaken Social Skills

Adolescence is a time where expanded brain capacity can be used to develop emotionally intimate relationships with others, says Mitch Prinstein, PhD, ABPP, John Van Seters Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at UNC, Chapel Hill. These relationships form the “template” for successful long-term partnerships and professional relationships later in life, dealing with skills in disclosure, support, helping one another through difficult times, and nurturance, he says.

Media use can interfere with the development of these social skills - or it can be an aid, depending on how media is used. Being aware and thoughtful about what the benefit trade-offs are can help adolescents consciously use media in socially interactive ways, says Stephanie Reich, PhD, Professor, School of Education at University of California, Irvine. “Ask adolescents to make a commitment to making meaningful connections” with their media use, says Sheri Madigan, PhD, Professor, Department of Psychology at University of Calgary.

Examples of positive use of media time for meaningful social connection can include:

- Using the direct messaging feature to learn about people and form friendships that lead to in-person conversations
- Posting on social media to express your true identity and find connection with others who have similar interests or identities
- Meeting someone online to game together
- FaceTiming or video chatting with a supportive family member or friend

(Prinstein, Madigan)



Video chatting in particular has been shown by many research studies to be nearly as socially helpful as face-to-face interaction, notes Reich.



Ask adolescents to make a commitment to making meaningful connections with their media use.”

Sheri Madigan, PhD
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Avoid Using Media in Ways Linked to Mental Health Issues and Social Isolation

“Just like there are toxic foods, things we want to avoid, like spoiled milk and aspartame, there’s certain tech we actually would be better off just avoiding”, says psychiatrist Shimi Kang, MD, FRCPC, author of *The Tech Solution*, and Clinical Associate Professor at The University of British Columbia. Kang advocates for a “Healthy Tech Diet” - like junk food or sugar, toxic tech time won’t necessarily cause harm in the moment, but an accumulation over time will have effects.



Using social media in a “passive” way (scrolling, looking at posts without engaging) was found to be more harmful for well-being and create more heightened feelings of loneliness than active use of social media.



Prioritize In-Person Interaction Time

Large amounts of screen time can isolate teens from in-person connections that promote overall health and wellness, says Tracy Markle, MA, LPC, Founder & Director of Digital Media Treatment & Education Center at Collegiate Coaching Services. “We want to prioritize in-person activities over screen-based activities.”

Prioritizing in-person time does not mean screen time needs to be eliminated, note many experts, but does mean actively working to incorporate in-person time amongst the typically high amounts of daily adolescent screen time.



Watch for the Passive Social Media Use-Loneliness Cycle

Time on social media may be a lure for adolescents experiencing loneliness or FOMO (fear of missing out), but social media use may actually make a person feel more lonely long term, says Meredith David, PhD, Associate Professor at Baylor University. In a nine-year study of Dutch adults, “the data shows that social media use does increase one’s experiences and feelings of loneliness,” says David. In particular, this study found using social media in a “passive” way (scrolling, looking at posts without engaging) was found to be more harmful for well-being and create more heightened feelings of loneliness than active use of social media.

Understand the Lure of Social Media for Adolescent Brains – and How it May Be Changing Them

The social brain in adolescents is wired to seek social acceptance, crave social rewards, such as likes, and avoid social punishments, such as peer rejection, says Eva Telzer, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at UNC, Chapel Hill, and adolescents using social media “may have the potential to be exacerbating or enhancing an already sensitive brain, further tuning adolescents to seek out more social rewards online.”

This innate receptiveness of sensitive adolescent brains to the powerful reward mechanisms of social media can help explain the strong draw of these platforms for this age group, says Telzer. Research has shown that when adolescents receive greater likes on social media posts and pictures “they show greater activation in regions of the brain implicated in the social brain network, as well as regions involving reward, learning, and motivation.”

Other recent research indicates that adolescents around the age of 12 years old who were habitually checking their social media accounts showed differences in how their brains are developing over the next three years. For youth engaging in this repetitive behavior, “the brain is changing in a way that is becoming more and more and more sensitive to social feedback over time.”

Practice Putting Down the Phone and Giving Full Attention

The ability to continuously edit self-presentation online can sometimes lead to dissatisfaction and even avoidance of the messier and sometimes more uncomfortable interactions in-person that can strengthen social skills. “Face to face interactions with peers teach adolescents that when we stumble and lose our words, it’s uncomfortable, but we can come closer to each other. On the screen we feel less vulnerable,” says Sherry Turkle, PhD, Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology, and Founding Director, MIT Initiative on Technology and Self at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “We find ways around a certain kind of conversation, the kind that’s open-ended and a little scary.”

The decision to put away a phone deliberately in order to focus attention on a conversation “counts”, says Turkle. “People care about your offer of attention. Empathy is built on such small gestures - the ones that communicate that you don’t know what someone else has to say, but you want to learn.”

Teens should be encouraged to practice self-awareness and ask themselves ‘How has my phone use and multitasking impacted my relationships with my friends and other people?’ says Chia-chen Yang, PhD, Associate Professor of Educational Psychology, School of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Aviation at Oklahoma State University. Yang’s research with teens indicates that while there are prosocial ways of using phones together, teens can feel disrespected, dismissed, or ignored when their friends digitally multitask on irrelevant activities during important interactions, rather than using the device to support the matter at hand.





Discuss the Limitations of Text Communication Social Cues

Adolescents are more “connected” than ever to each other with some engaging in near-constant socializing through texting or DM-ing through social platforms. However, communicating by text eliminates tone of voice and the ability to see the impact of words on the other person - two of the most essential tools for human relationships, says Catherine Steiner-Adair, EdD, Clinical Psychologist, Consultant, and author of *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age*.

The inability to see impact or understand tone, or process feelings of social rejection from seeing what others post online out of context has led to “real psychological fallout” among adolescents spending a lot of time online, says Steiner-Adair. Pay attention to your child’s mood after their online socializing, and talk to them about what may be happening to help them process difficult situations or confusing social cues, she suggests.

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Catherine Steiner-Adair, EdD

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

AUTHOR, *THE BIG DISCONNECT: PROTECTING CHILDHOOD AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN THE DIGITAL AGE*

Encourage Teens to Nurture Strong Relationships

Building good relationships with friends and family is one of the most valuable, sustaining, nourishing, and meaningful things any person can do with their time, says Jeffrey Hall, PhD, Professor of Communication Studies at University of Kansas. Forming these close relationships are particularly important to young adults and adolescents.

Research shows strong friendships and peer support is the best way for girls to develop social resiliency and protection from bullying or cyberbullying, notes Elizabeth Englander, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Executive Director and Founder of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University.

Parents and caregivers can help their children find the activities and places where they can connect with peers and adults while doing something that gives them purpose and a sense of meaning, says Khadijah B. Watkins, MD, MPH, DFAACAP, Director, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Residency Training, Associate Director, The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds at Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard Medical School.



Help Kids Interpret Peer Actions and Foster a Sense of Belonging

Sensitive adolescents may have difficulty correctly interpreting social feedback, particularly online, and may assume negative intent after an uncomfortable or perplexing peer interaction. Parents and educators can help children see themselves as part of a community and see positive intent from members of their community to foster a sense of social belonging, suggests licensed school counselor, author and journalist Phyllis Fagell, LCPC.

Help your child practice cognitive flexibility by coming up with alternative explanations for why a peer didn't include them or acted a certain way, says Fagell.



Be curious. Ask your kid, 'What do you think of this?' when you're watching a show together.'

Megan Maas, PhD

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY.



Discuss What Healthy Relationships Look Like

Much of adolescents' social interactions are happening, appropriately, outside parental supervision. How can you make sure your child is developing a sense of what healthy relationships look like? "Be curious," says Megan Maas, PhD, Assistant Professor of Human Development & Family Studies at Michigan State University. "Ask your kid, 'What do you think of this?' when you're watching a show together. 'What would you do if this happened to your friends? How's your friend's relationship?'" By starting these conversations you can offer "counter messages" such as "relationships are often really boring. Really healthy relationships are calming; they're comforting; they're caring. They're not necessarily tumultuous and really exciting and full of a lot of drama."

Utilize Helpful Online Modalities for Socially Anxious Teens

Teens who are socially anxious may benefit from using tech in specific ways that can help them build a bridge toward more confident in-person socializing, says Myruski. These could include using features like voice, video chat, and real-time communication tools that can feel less intimidating than in-person interactions, but also leave less ambiguous social cues than text-based digital communication, to help them build social skills.

This practice can be helpful for the socially anxious adolescent but should be utilized as a building block towards building in-person skills as well, cautions Kate Blocker, Director of Research and Programs at Children and Screens. "Teens that habitually prefer digital media might miss out on opportunities to hone their social skills, to get practice managing their emotions and real time interactions," says Myruski.



Recent research indicates that being liked by even a few peers makes a far bigger difference than popularity with many positive life outcomes including happiness, mental health, doing well in school, eventual job performance and even living longer.”

Mitch Prinstein, PhD, ABPP
UNC, CHAPEL HILL

Help Them Form and Evaluate Friendships

“Kids are constantly discovering what it is they need to do to be a good friend, to find a good friend,” says Fagell. Parents can help kids develop resilience to friendship drama by helping them understand that no one child may meet all their friendship needs. Fagell suggests asking your child questions like:

- Who is a friend with whom you have fun?
- Who is a friend you know you can trust to keep a secret?
- Who is a friend who always says yes when you want to hang out?

Answering these questions will help children embrace the idea that perhaps different friends can support different friendship needs, and be resilient to rejection or transitions from one specific friend.

Nearly half of youth in one study told researchers that their parents did not talk to them about their social media behaviors and their friendships, or how they were doing socially, says Englander. Yet this same research showed that when parents did talk to their children about these topics, about two-thirds of the time what their parents had to say was judged “really important” and “really impacted their behaviors,” she notes.

Talk About “Likability” vs. “Popularity”

Status-based popularity can activate brain circuitry to make one feel good in the moment and is of typical importance to the average adolescent, says Prinstein. However, recent research indicates that being liked by even a few peers makes a far bigger difference than popularity with many positive life outcomes including happiness, mental health, doing well in school, eventual job performance and even living longer, he says.

“Likability in some ways is the opposite of popularity because as anyone who went to high school knows, sometimes the kids who are the most popular are influential and powerful, but we don’t enjoy spending time with them, and they don’t make us feel good about ourselves. What we really want to do is foster the ability for kids to make others feel valued and included and happy, and that makes them likable,” says Prinstein. “It takes the pressure off kids when they realize that what’s really going to help them is not being the most popular kid at school, but being someone that a few others like.”



Advise Against 24/7 Availability

In the digital age, it's important to help young people realize that they do not need to be available 24 hours a day via electronic devices in order to be a good friend, says Lizzy Winstone, PhD, Senior Research Associate in Population Health Sciences at the University of Bristol. "That can be a real source of stress for young people — the expectation that they're available to respond to a message immediately. Have those conversations with young people that this constant availability is not an essential part of a friendship. At least that's not what should be considered most meaningful in a friendship. You could model this with your own behavior too."

Kids feel a lot of pressure to be accessible to their friends all the time, agrees Devorah Heitner, PhD author of *Growing Up in Public: Coming of Age in a Digital World*. If your child is feeling stress from that pressure, give them some boundary-setting language they can use with their friends, she suggests. For example, "Oh, I really can't do that until after homework" or "I really need my sleep." While kids may initially feel frustrated with setting these limits, they often feel relieved in the long run, says Heitner.



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Lizzy Winstone, PhD
UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL



Prepare Them for Group Chat Dynamics

Group chats are a hallmark of social life for many adolescents, yet the realities of interactions in these chats can often be "like a toxic nightmare stew," says Heitner. Prepare your child for some of the difficult social situations they may encounter in group chats, ideally before they have access to them, and help your child brainstorm how they might cope with these situations. For example, what if someone suggests starting a new group chat and leaving out just one current member? What if people start talking in a mean way about a teacher or other community member? Should you share a mean thing group chat members have said with another peer?

Parents do not necessarily need to come up with a "right or wrong" answer in these scenarios, but can help kids brainstorm possible responses they can use when things get a little uncomfortable, suggests Heitner. This can include establishing criteria of when they should leave a group chat that isn't safe or is causing too much stress.

Be aware that leaving a group chat can cause its own "disconnection stress" as well, says Heitner. Just telling a kid to "get out" is not enough - they often will need strategies, support, and even alternative activities to help take their mind off of the situation.



Discuss Anonymity-Appropriate Behavior for Different Platforms and Contexts

The ability to be anonymous makes young people much more willing to say things they wouldn't say face-to-face, notes youth advocate Trisha Prabhu, Founder and President of ReThink Citizens, inventor of ReThink, JD candidate at Yale Law School. "We need to be intentional about having conversations with our children about being thoughtful online. Encourage your kids to think before they post."

Different online spaces have different levels of anonymity, moderations, and norms for discourse. "A conversation you can have on Twitter is really different from a conversation you can have in a community on Reddit, like Change My View, which has norms of engagement and is moderated actively", says Ellen Middaugh, Associate Professor of Child and Adolescent Development in the Connie L. Lurie College of Education at San José State University.

Help your adolescent think about these differences when publicly engaging in these spaces, suggests Middaugh - "Where am I putting my voice out there? Who's there? What are the protections in place? How do I indicate active listening when they can't see my face? How do I indicate respectful disagreement?"

Teach the Difference Between Cyberbullying and Difficult Interactions

Kids may mean different things when they comment that they are being "bullied" by friends or other people online. It's important to find out exactly what this means in the situation, says Meryl Alper, PhD, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Northeastern University. Sometimes they are truly being bullied - which is serious, and for some children can be life-threatening - and sometimes it may be something relatively benign like someone disagreeing with your child in a group chat about liking something.

What is cyberbullying? Cyberbullying is a form of repeated cruelty online using some digital means - not a situation where one child is mean to another just once, or an accident, says Englander. "It's something done on purpose, and it's done over and over again to a target," she notes. Cyberbullying also involves a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim, whether that is social status, physical stature, or intellect, and is supported by peers, says Melissa Faith, PhD, Clinical Pediatric Psychologist at Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital. This can take the form of:

- **Spreading lies or rumors via text message or social media**
- **Posting photos or videos that embarrass or victimize the victim**
- **Hostile confrontations**
- **The bully posting online pretending to be the victim or someone the victim knows**
- **Bullying that happens both at school and online reinforcing each other**

(Englander, Faith)

Teach Accountability for Causing Harm

Kids online can not only be hurt by others - but may also be the ones causing hurt in others, whether intentionally or not. Internet anonymity and group chat dynamics can sometimes cause a well-meaning adolescent to go too far.

“Social media platforms love to trigger us,” says Kidscape CEO Lauren Seager-Smith, FRSA, “and it takes a high level of self-awareness to recognize those triggers and pause before we post.” Such awareness can be especially challenging for children, who are still learning how to engage with others and self-regulate. “It’s important as parents that we educate our kids about the consequences of what they like and share,” Seager-Smith explains, “but it’s equally important that we help them understand when they’ve caused harm to others and learn to apologize.”



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Lauren Seager-Smith, FRSA
KIDSCAPE

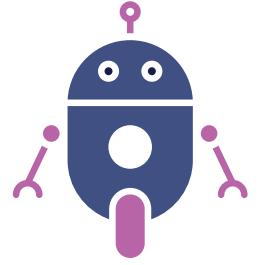
Encourage Helping Behaviors at Home For Behavior in Other Contexts

Research shows that children who help their family more at home in various ways are more likely to also help and have positive behaviors with peers, friends, and in school contexts the next day, says Telzer. Behaviors that are socialized in the home context can really impact children’s daily lives in other contexts, including online behavior as well, she notes.

Fostering helping behaviors and kindness at home does not necessarily mean forced helping or chores, notes Telzer. “Requiring your child to do chores is not the same thing as a child developing the competence and the meaning around why helping around the house is an important behavior. It’s really developing this character as opposed to forcing or requiring a behavior at home to occur.”

Educate Yourself and Your Child on the Limits and Risks of Social AI Companions

Recent data from Pew Research indicates that a third of teens are interacting with AI chatbots daily, yet these AI products are not regulated and not generally designed to account for youth well-being, note experts. Many adolescents are engaging socially with these chatbots in ways that may feel socially comfortable at the time but that may be contributing to social isolation or loneliness, says Annie Maheux, PhD, Assistant Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at UNC, Chapel Hill.

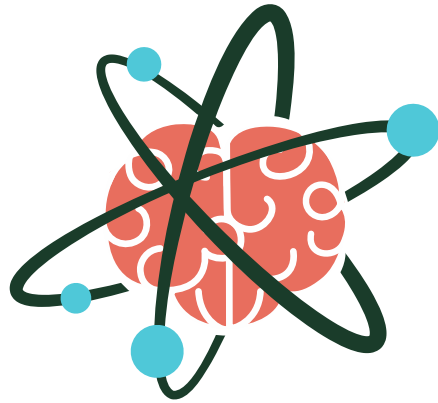


“Social AI” technologies are fairly new, and while there isn’t much research available yet on the social impacts of using these technologies, existing research indicates areas of concern. “In research with adults, people who are more lonely tend to seek out AI for emotional support and companionship, and that can decrease loneliness momentarily. But in the long term, actually, loneliness tends to increase,” says Maheux. “This actually makes sense if we think about the anxiety-avoidance cycle, where if someone is feeling lonely and seeking out companionship from an AI chatbot, that doesn’t give them the need to seek out companionship and build relationships with other human beings, so potentially the benefits in the short term actually lead to greater harms in the long term.”

Andrew Clark, MD, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine, conducted research using a “troubled teen” profile on many leading social AI products in 2025, and found that 30% of the chatbots would agree and even encourage some of the “worst ideas” this “teen” brought up, including dating a teacher, ending their life, or staying in their room for a month with no human contact (which 90% of the chatbots supported). This research indicates teens who are relying on social AI companions for friendship and social development are at risk for having unhealthy ideas and behaviors reinforced by these unregulated technologies.



Research indicates teens who are relying on social AI companions for friendship and social development are at risk for having unhealthy ideas and behaviors reinforced by these unregulated technologies.



Tips to Support Cognitive and Attentional Health

- ▶ **Know the Research on Digital Media Use and Attention**
- ▶ **Discourage Multitasking to Build Cognitive Power**
- ▶ **Sleep is King - Support Quality Sleep for Cognitive Health**
- ▶ **Minimize Interruptions/Notifications During Study Time**
- ▶ **Support Phone-Free Classrooms**
- ▶ **Help Plan Distraction-Free Study Time and Organization If Needed**
- ▶ **Monitor the Effects of “Information Overload” on Cognitive Skills**
- ▶ **Beware Cognitive Offloading Onto AI**
- ▶ **Convey the Value of Reading and Encourage Long-Form Reading**
- ▶ **Aim for More Print-Based Reading**
- ▶ **Media Use is an Inadequate Cure to Boredom**
- ▶ **Considerations for Children with ADHD**

Know the Research on Digital Media Use and Attention

Research conducted to date appears to support the following conclusions, according to Tzipi Horowitz-Kraus, PhD, Associate Professor, Educational Neuroimaging Group, Faculty of Education in Science and Technology, Faculty of Biomedical Engineering at Technion — Israel Institute of Technology:

- **Screen time is related to less stimulation of executive functions, less reliance on imagination and visualization, more interruptions, and greater attention load.**
- **Reading from a screen may be less efficient than from print as brain regions used during screen exposure may compete with those used for literacy in reading.**
- **Neurobiological correlates for attention and cognitive load are observed when performing a simple task in the presence of a smartphone.**

More longitudinal studies into long-term effects of digital media use on attention networks are needed, says Horowitz-Kraus.



Discourage Multitasking to Build Cognitive Power

Cognitive studies in adults and in children show that when you engage in a cognitively effortful task, such as reading or listening, and you really pay attention, you cannot multitask, says Martin Paulus, MD, Scientific Director and President, Laureate Institute for Brain Research, Adjunct Professor, Department of Psychiatry at University of California, San Diego.

While many people have the impression that they are able to multitask, what the brain is doing in these situations is switching attention from one thing to another and back again, costing the brain processing power, he says. “Building attention — being focused on one thing for an extended period of time and building deep experiences — cannot occur in a multitasking environment, it just cannot,” says Paulus. “It’s not true in adults, and it’s not true for children. I would really strongly urge parents to provide kids with the opportunity to not multitask, to give children time to just be with one thing. Paying attention to one thing builds depth of experience.”

A yearlong longitudinal study on 1,500 Dutch adolescents found that younger adolescents who multitask more frequently have higher levels of attention problems, are more easily distracted, and have lower grades compared to their peers, says Susanne Baumgartner, PhD, Associate Professor at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research. However, while the same study showed older adolescents also experiencing attention problems and academic distractibility, it did not show lower grades resulting from the increased distraction. This indicates that older adolescents can compensate, at least partly, for their multitasking behavior, she notes. Much longer longitudinal studies yet to be conducted may add more understanding to this picture.

“A growing body of evidence has found that children’s brains can structurally and functionally change due to prolonged media multitasking, such as diminished gray matter in the prefrontal cortex, where attentional control and complex decision making abilities reside, among other really important skills, like the development of empathy and understanding nonverbal social communication,” notes Tracy Markle, MA, LPC, Founder & Director of the Digital Media Treatment & Education Center and Collegiate Coaching Services:



Support quality sleep by making sure any media or tech use is cut off well before bedtime, and keep devices that might provide both temptation for use and notifications overnight out of the bedroom.”

Sleep is King - Support Quality Sleep for Cognitive Health

Sleep health is foundational for almost every other measure of health in children (and adults). “A lack of consistent and good sleep is associated with slower and different developmental trajectories in brain development, academic performance, academic failures, and many other aspects of child development,” says Eva Telzer, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at UNC, Chapel Hill.

Research shows that high quality sleep can foster attentional health and cognitive development in these areas, according to Markle:

- Attention and concentration
- Memory
- Problem-solving
- Creativity
- Emotional regulation



While there are many factors that may affect sleep quality, there is growing evidence showing that late night technology use impairs children and adolescents’ sleep, says Telzer. Support quality sleep by making sure any media or tech use is cut off well before bedtime, and keep devices that might provide both

temptation for use and notifications overnight out of the bedroom. “No screens one hour before bed,” cautions Kim West, LCSW-C, a child and family therapist, sleep coach trainer and author. Screens include background TV, phones, and tablets.

In 2024, a consensus panel of sleep experts agreed that screen use in general and the content of pre-sleep screen use can harm sleep health for both children and adolescents ages 5 to 18 years. Behavioral strategies and interventions to reduce screen use (both generally and in the evening) and reduce interactive screen activities at night were found to reduce negative impacts on sleep health.

Conversely, low quality sleep can contribute to:

- Poor attention span
- Hindered cognitive ability
- Impaired judgment/riskier choices
- Impaired memory
- Poor grades
- Mental health problems

Minimize Interruptions/Notifications During Study Time

Recent research on older adolescents and smartphone use in Europe showed an average of 5 hours of phone use per day, including 150 separate notifications and 85 individual actions to unlock a smartphone, shares Baumgartner. Usage at this rate means that smartphones are being used often while doing other things, like engaging in academic activities or other media activities.

Researchers are seeing a clear pattern of both short-term effects on task performance but also long-term effects on cognitive and focus abilities, says Baumgartner. Make sure notifications are muted when studying to guard against this intrusion on attention, suggests Marc Potenza, MD, PhD, Director, Division on Addictions Research at Yale, Professor of Psychiatry, Neuroscience and Child Study at Yale University School of Medicine.



Researchers are seeing a clear pattern of both short-term effects [of phone notifications] on task performance but also long-term effects on cognitive and focus abilities.”

Susanne Baumgartner, PhD
AMSTERDAM SCHOOL OF
COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Support Phone-Free Classrooms

The “task-switching” that people commonly label “multitasking” can have consequences in the classroom, says Abe Flanigan, PhD, Associate Professor of Curriculum, Foundations, and Reading at Georgia Southern University. “We know that multitasking isn’t really a thing. We can’t scroll through social media or text our friends while we’re paying attention to our teacher. We’re back and forth between paying attention in class, doing something on our phone, pay attention in class, do something on our phone. That constant task-switching and split attention is the mechanism that’s leading to lower student learning.”



This constant task-switching is behind the movement to ban phones from many classrooms nationwide, notes Flanigan. “At any point in time you might be engaged in a task, but a small part of you is thinking about what you could be doing on your device. The term that we use for that phenomenon in educational psychology is ‘motivational interference.’ Motivational interference is the detriment to on-task motivation that’s caused by the presence of a more available leisure alternative to that task,” says Flanigan.

For adolescents who are by nature focused on peer reward and motivation, the positive social feedback provided by phone use helps them meet their social goals, says Flanigan. “Students’ social goals oftentimes outweigh their academic goals when they are in the classroom,” he warns.

Current research indicates educators at schools with strict phone ban policies report learning improvement and better student focus and engagement during learning time.

Help Plan Distraction-Free Study Time and Organization If Needed

Development of executive functioning skills isn't "complete" until approximately age 25, when the prefrontal cortex fully matures. While some adolescents may have more advanced executive functioning, others may need help planning study time to reduce anxiety and procrastination, says parenting journalist and author Donna Tetreault. "Help your child get into these organizational routines as needed. Step back when they don't need you as much but when they need you to step in, help them." This could include helping set up a "homework spot" or providing an alternate to a typical chair/desk setup that feels more comfortable for them.



The adolescent brain draws towards rewarding, pleasurable stimuli, like receiving 'likes' on Instagram or obtaining a goal in a video game. These experiences release the neurotransmitter dopamine - which further encourages the brain to engage in pleasurable behavior. This reward system also drives teens away from behaviors that feel painful, mundane, effortful, and tedious, like doing homework, says Markle. "If allowed, digital devices and apps win out every time over homework and doing chores because they produce pleasurable stimuli that the brain seeks."

"Many teens that I work with know homework is important and they need to complete it, but the fact that it's repetitive or boring makes it incredibly hard to engage in, especially if there is a phone anywhere nearby," says Taína Coleman, MA, MEd, Educational Specialist, Learning and Development Center at the Child Mind Institute. "Thus, setting up the environment for success is very important."



Monitor the Effects of "Information Overload" on Cognitive Skills

"Information overload" is one of five main types of digital media overuse by adolescents and is the most important type of digital media overuse to monitor, says Markle. What is information overload? "Information overload is the excessive input of information, which is more than the human brain can analyze, process, think deeply about, and comprehend, and this occurs on an immersive screen, like a smartphone and a computer," she shares.

Information overload has a direct relationship to teens and their ability to develop and access important cognitive skills required for academics and life management success, such as attentional control, cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation, says Markle. The 24/7 availability of devices for searching, posting, gaming, checking, bingeing, shopping, texting, viewing, and receiving notifications leads to overstimulation that causes mental fatigue and scrambled thinking, she says.

The 24/7 availability of devices for searching, posting, gaming, checking, bingeing, shopping, texting, viewing, and receiving notifications leads to overstimulation that causes mental fatigue and scrambled thinking."

Tracy Markle, MA, LPC

DIGITAL MEDIA TREATMENT &
EDUCATION CENTER

Beware Cognitive Offloading Onto AI

Teens (and adults) are using AI chatbots at high rates, with nearly a third of teens using them daily in 2025 according to Pew research (Dec 2025). While GenAI tools are providing bumps for adult and adolescent productivity, experts warn against doing too much “cognitive offloading” (outsourcing thinking or mental effort) onto these tools, especially for developing youth.

90% of high school students report using generative AI for homework, notes Adam Dubé, PhD, Associate Professor of Learning Sciences at McGill University. While only 10% appear to be using AI to “cheat,” it’s important for parents and educators to ask whether the help the student is receiving from AI is interfering with the student learning fundamental skills they need, he says. “These types of systems tend to help us learn better in the moment. They tend to help us write better in the moment. But once they’re gone, we actually didn’t learn the underlying fundamental skills. We didn’t learn how to generate ideas. We didn’t learn how to summarize and deeply read. We didn’t learn how to explain concepts to ourselves. We let these systems do it for us and they didn’t give us the opportunity to practice doing that ourselves. When we talk about cognitive offloading, it’s that actual effortful practice that doesn’t happen because we have a system doing it for us that results in us being less skilled in the long run.”



When we talk about cognitive offloading, it’s that actual effortful practice that doesn’t happen because we have a system doing it for us that results in us being less skilled in the long run.”

Adam Dubé, PhD

MCGILL UNIVERSITY

Convey the Value of Reading and Encourage Long-Form Reading

Parents who want their children to be “readers” with critical thinking skills should first and foremost find ways to make their children believe - and believe themselves - that developing these skills matters, says linguistics expert Naomi Baron, PhD, Professor Emerita of Linguistics at American University. “You can’t just preach, ‘It’s important for you to learn how to read, to do critical thinking, We have to give children reasons to believe that caring about reading (and writing) will be to their benefit.’” One way to do so is to convey that reading is actually fun rather than just required for school.

Research indicates that school-based reading comprehension scores in 7-16 year-olds are higher for children who frequently read book-length works for pleasure, notes Baron. Despite this, she says “an awful lot” of school-assigned reading is much shorter in length. Parents can help by encouraging and providing opportunities for extensive reading at home, including modeling longer reading themselves. Besides nurturing comprehension skills, longer texts invite readers to become absorbed in books, identifying with characters and developing an appreciation for plot development.

Aim for More Print-Based Reading

Research shows that adolescents commonly believe they comprehend more information when reading digitally, says Baron. “They will tell you, ‘I’m going to do better reading digitally’ — but most of the time they don’t.”

Reading comprehension tends to be significantly higher when using traditional methods versus digital devices or online, notes Sachin Maharaj, PhD, Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership, Policy and Program Evaluation Faculty of Education at University of Ottawa.



Smartphones and social media are a passive solution to boredom... Our minds are occupied, but it's not particularly meaningful and it's not particularly active. It's not allowing us to demonstrate our own agency.”

James Danckert, PhD
UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO



Media Use is an Inadequate Cure to Boredom

A 2020 study found a small but significant increase in reports of boredom between 2008 and 2017, a period of time where smartphones, social media, and the internet became much more prevalent in children’s lives, says James Danckert, PhD, Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience and Research Area Head at University of Waterloo. Despite the allure of media use for boredom alleviation, this correlation suggests that it may not be providing meaningful solutions.

“I see smartphones and social media as a passive solution to boredom,” explains Danckert. “When we go to our phones and doom scroll through Twitter, our minds are occupied, but it’s not particularly meaningful and it’s not particularly active. It’s not allowing us to demonstrate our own agency. For that reason, it’s not a particularly useful solution to boredom.”

Considerations for Children with ADHD

One in five children have a learning or attentional challenge, and the number may even be higher, says Coleman. When young adults with attentional problems say, “It’s hard for me to focus,” this often manifests in many ways on daily functioning, she says, citing poor self-control, poor delay of gratification, poor time management, disorganization, forgetfulness, difficulty with self-motivation, and difficulty initiating and sustaining motivation, as examples. Kids with attentional disorders like ADHD benefit from more support and coaching to cope with these issues.

Media use with children with ADHD should be monitored carefully. “When ADHD kids are overusing screens, we’re starting to see some general trends with this population,” says Coleman. “While screens may not cause ADHD, they could play a role in amplifying ADHD symptoms depending on the limits set. We tend to see the symptoms of ADHD are more exacerbated due to screen usage.” However, she notes that the tendency for children with ADHD to struggle with repetitive, effortful tasks that lack novelty can make it a challenge for these youth to choose non-preferred tasks over novel screen time experiences.



Tips for Physical Health

- ▶ **Maintain Eye Health with Proper Media Use**

- ▶ **More Screen Time is Associated with Higher BMI and Binge Eating**

- ▶ **Understand the Link Between Screen Use and Weight-Related Behaviors in Children**

- ▶ **Avoid Distracted Eating During Screen Time**

- ▶ **Understand the Power of Food Advertisements**

- ▶ **Encourage Physical Types of Screen Time**

Maintain Eye Health with Proper Media Use

High amounts of screen time are linked to youth eye health issues such as myopia (nearsightedness) development and progression. The four rules of visual hygiene around screens are proper distance, good lighting, rest breaks, and time outside, says Kenneth Sorkin, OD, FAAO at Long Island Pediatric Ophthalmology.

- **PROPER SCREEN DISTANCE** — Keep screens a good distance away — for larger screens this could be at least an arm’s length away; for smaller screens, arms should be in an “L” position rather than a “V” which brings the screen too close.
- **GOOD LIGHTING** — Lower screen intensity in balance with ambient room lighting. Avoid pitch black rooms.
- **REST BREAKS** — 25 minutes of “near work” (i.e., reading on a tablet) should be paired with approximately a minute of rest. Have the child close their eyes for 30 seconds and then look far away for another 30 seconds.
- **GET OUTSIDE** — Outdoor exposure is protective against development of myopia.

Look for signs that their ocular health is being adversely affected by screen use. These signs can include blinking too much, rubbing eyes, or getting headaches, says Sorkin.



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Kenneth Sorkin, O.D., FAAO
LONG ISLAND PEDIATRIC
OPHTHAMOLOGY

More Screen Time is Associated with Higher BMI and Binge Eating

Preteens in a large national study of almost 12,000 youth reported an average of four hours of recreational screen time per day, reports Jason Nagata, MD, Associate Professor, Department of Pediatrics at University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine. Each additional hour of screen time per day was associated with a higher BMI (Body Mass Index) percentile one year later. In particular, increases in time spent texting, video chat, and video games were the most strongly associated with BMI gains.

The link between screen time and higher BMI has multiple likely causes. More screen time generally means more sedentary time and less physical activity, says Nagata. Another study from Nagata and others examined links between screen time and binge eating disorder. Binge eating disorder is characterized by eating large quantities of food in a short period of time, a feeling of loss of control during the binge, and then experiencing shame or guilt afterwards. “We found that each additional hour of screen time per day was associated with 62% higher odds of development of binge eating disorder, one year later,” says Nagata.

Understand the Link Between Screen Use and Weight-Related Behaviors in Children

Screen time, particularly on social media, is linked to body dissatisfaction and weight-related behaviors in both girls and boys.

“Exposure to social media may lead to unattainable body ideals and images that children are exposed to, and particularly social comparisons between photos and videos of other teens or young people,” says Nagata. For girls, that means behaviors aimed at becoming thinner and losing weight, such as restrictive eating, whereas boys are more likely to engage in behaviors to become more muscular, like anabolic steroid use, excessive exercise, protein overconsumption while restricting carbohydrates and fats, or other muscle-building or performance-enhancing behaviors.



Exposure to social media may lead to unattainable body ideals and images that children are exposed to, and particularly social comparisons between photos and videos of other teens or young people.”

Jason Nagata, MD

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
SAN FRANCISCO, SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Avoid Distracted Eating During Screen Time



One pathway for increased body weight with increased screen time is through mindless or distracted eating in front of screens, says Erica Kenney, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Nutrition, T.H. Chan School of Public Health at Harvard University. “If you are watching a movie or a show and you have a bowl of snacks, you’re not necessarily as able to pay attention to whether you’re actually still hungry or not, whether you actually even still like the taste of what you’re eating. It’s harder to pay attention to those cues from your own body for how much you’re consuming and that can lead to overconsumption of foods.” In addition, the snack foods most often consumed in front of the TV or screen are often high-sugar, high-grain, processed foods that are difficult for the body to be aware of.

Understand the Power of Food Advertisements



Food advertisements on TV and online are “enormously effective” at changing the foods that youth eat, says Kenney. Adolescents are able to exercise more control over what they eat, or even go purchase food themselves that they have seen advertised. Ads for foods are strongly influential in these decisions, and are increasingly embedded in entertainment content for adolescents versus “traditional” ads, notes Kenney.

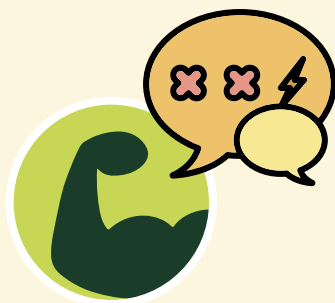
Today’s sophisticated marketing techniques enable advertisers to disproportionately target racial or other minorities for unhealthful content, notes Omni Cassidy, PhD, Assistant Professor of Population Health at NYU Grossman School of Medicine. “Research has shown Black youth are up to two times more likely to see food and beverage ads. The ads Black youth see tend to also be less healthy compared to other groups like their white counterparts.”

Ads for foods are strongly influential in decisions [about what to eat], and are increasingly embedded in entertainment content for adolescents versus “traditional” ads.”

Erica Kenney, PhD

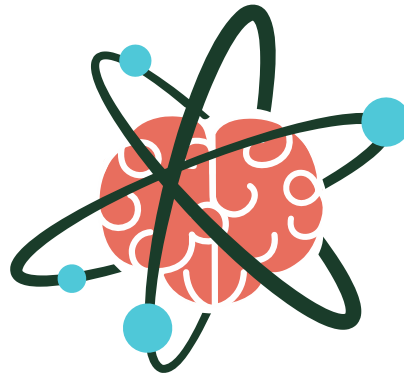
T.H. CHAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Encourage Physical Types of Screen Time



Screen time is often thought of as time where the body is sedentary, but it’s possible to use screens in a physically active way, say experts. When considering your adolescent’s media “diet”, encourage these less-sedentary uses of media. For example, there are interactive video games that require physical movement and “active media channels” that encourage audiences to move along, notes Amy Lu, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Communication Studies, College of Arts, Media & Design, Department of Public Health and Health Sciences at Bouvé College of Health Sciences Northeastern University.

Selecting quality, physically active screen products to replace sedentary screen media time can effectively reduce nonproductive, sedentary screen time, says Lu. However, active screen time cannot completely replace outdoor exercise and school PE activities, she notes.

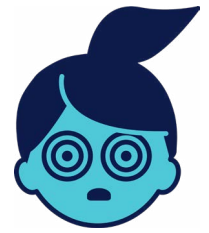


Tips to Support Mental Health

- ▶ **Recognize Problematic Anxiety**
- ▶ **Recognize Warning Signs of Depression**
- ▶ **Understand that Context Matters with Digital Media and Mental Health**
- ▶ **Look Beyond “Active” vs. “Passive” Use**
- ▶ **Strongly Discourage Doom Scrolling**
- ▶ **Teach Self-Monitoring Skills**
- ▶ **Communicate Concern with Calmness and Validation**
- ▶ **Know the Risks – Media and Self-Harm/Suicide**
- ▶ **Check In with Your Adolescent Regularly**
- ▶ **Evaluate Mental Health Technology Use**
- ▶ **Watch for Isolation**

Recognize Problematic Anxiety

“It’s normal for any parent to have anxiety and any kid to have anxiety,” says Erin Berman, PhD, Clinical Psychologist at the National Institute of Mental Health. Children may feel anxiety as a momentary, normal response at the beginning of a school year, after reading traumatic news or when experiencing stressful one-time social situations on- or offline.



When does anxiety cross into being problematic to teens? Berman suggests looking for the following signs of more serious distress from anxiety:

- Persistent (more than a few months) and intense feelings of anxiousness that interfere with normal functioning
- Irritability
- Sleep issues
- Problems being alone
- Not liking to be center of attention/ social anxiety
- Sudden school absences
- Disinterest in making friends
- Confining themselves to a bedroom most of the time
- Fight or flight symptoms such as: Stomachaches, headaches, nausea, frequent trips to bathroom, tightness and pain in chest, dizziness, sweating, heart racing

Recognize Warning Signs of Depression



Teens suffering from depression share some similarities to problematic anxiety and include sustained and persistent symptoms that may include:

- Sadness
- Disengagement from normal life activities previously enjoyed - school, activities, friends
- Self-injury

(Janis Whitlock, PhD, Scientist Emerita at Cornell University, Founder and Director of Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery)

Understand that Context Matters with Digital Media and Mental Health

“We know that there are many ways that we might see depression being associated with digital media use, including the ways in which mood might affect what teens choose to do online, what time they go online, what platforms they might engage in,” says Mitch Prinstein, PhD, ABPP, John Van Seters Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at UNC, Chapel Hill.

“The research in this area is continuing to suggest that there’s a combination of who a child is that interacts with what specific kinds of digital media activities and platforms they engage in that might be most important to understand any particular outcome. A resilient adolescent who uses digital media to chat with their friends and talk about the news might be fine. However, someone that’s experiencing social or psychological vulnerabilities and engages with the most harmful or addictive or concerning stimuli on digital media might have a much worse outcome,” explains Prinstein.



Going deeper into which types of use have positive or harmful effects on a specific child is recommended.”



Look Beyond “Active” vs. “Passive” Use

Much advice for healthy media use focuses on the positive aspects of “active” or interactive use over more negative outcomes from “passive” media consumption. However, Sarah Myruski, PhD, Associate Research Professor in Psychology, Associate Lab Director, Emotion Development Lab at Pennsylvania State University cautions against this limited view. “We’re finding that not all active forms are beneficial,” she says. Going deeper into which types of use have positive or harmful effects on a specific child is recommended.

For example, Myruski notes that active usage for socializing that comes at the cost of excluding face-to-face interaction wouldn’t necessarily be a positive net use of digital media. Conversely, there are some passive forms of tech use like receiving information, news, or entertainment that are not harmful, compared to passive use like “doom scrolling” through endless social media feeds.

For youth suffering from depression, passive social media use like listening to music and watching videos is common as a form of temporary distraction or escape in order to cope with distress or self-harm urges, says Lizzy Winstone, PhD, Senior Research Associate in Population Health Sciences at the University of Bristol. Yet some depressed teens who actively are help-seeking by messaging or posting online can sometimes be viewed by peers as attention-seeking and risk being bullied or ostracized as a result.

Strongly Discourage Doom Scrolling

“Parents need to know about doom scrolling,” says Berman, so that they can help their children understand how harmful that activity can be when suffering from anxiety or depression. Doom scrolling can be defined as persistently attending to negative information in news feeds about crises, disasters, and tragedies.¹ “When you’re depressed or down or anxious, I can’t tell you how many patients just fall into the doom scrolling trap. Knowing the difference [between normal and doom scrolling] is more helpful than just saying, ‘Don’t scroll!’” - because everyone scrolls.”

Algorithm-driven social media feeds can sometimes provide more and more extreme and harsh content as a way of keeping people engaged, says Anne Maheux, PhD, Assistant Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at UNC, Chapel Hill and Winston Family Distinguished Fellow at the Winston National Center on Technology Use, Brain, and Psychological Development. “This is different from cyberbullying,” she notes. “This is exposure to hate, exposure to violence, and exposure to potentially traumatizing content.”

¹ Sharma, B., Lee, S. S., & Johnson, B. K. (2022). The dark at the end of the tunnel: Doomscrolling on social media newsfeeds. *Technology, Mind, and Behavior*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tmb>



Monitoring how one feels before and after media use with something like a mood tracker can help with anxiety.”

Sarah Myruski, PhD

PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Teach Self-Monitoring Skills

Youth (and adults) have enormous demands placed on their attention by social media platforms designed to keep them scrolling. “Many young people, but especially those with mental health difficulties, can struggle to self-regulate their social media use, sometimes describing themselves as feeling ‘addicted,’” says Winstone.

Monitoring how one feels before and after media use with something like a mood tracker can help with anxiety, adds Myruski. “There’s evidence that simply self-monitoring our digital media use without even cutting back or trying to change anything else can help ease anxiety.”

Help teach your teen to self-monitor if they will allow it, encourages Myruski. “Browse the social media feed together. Ask them what’s drawing their attention, what are they thinking and feeling when they see this different content? And also ask them to talk about what they experience online in their day-to-day life. What’s fun about it? What’s worrying about it? What do they wish was different?”

Communicate Concern with Calmness and Validation



Many parents concerned about digital media use that may be contributing to symptoms of anxiety or depression do not know how to approach their child with their worries. “Kids and teens want the parent to be interested and validating, and to stay calm,” says Sandra Whitehouse, PhD, Senior Director and Senior Psychologist of the Anxiety Disorders Center at the Child Mind Institute. “An easy manner seems to really help.”

“Treat teens as experts in this and let them lead the conversation,” says Henry Willis, PhD, Assistant Professor, Clinical Psychology Program at University of Maryland, College Park. “They may know a better roundabout to curb their use than you do.”

Know the Risks – Media and Self-Harm/Suicide

Suicide is now the second leading cause of death for 10–14-year-olds and the third leading cause for 15–24-year-olds, says Vicki Harrison, MSW, Program Director of the Center for Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University School of Medicine. “Almost a quarter of high school students reported seriously considering suicide in the past year.”

While some young people who self-harm find viewing self-harm imagery helpful in managing their urges, for others this can lead to exposure to content where they can learn about new methods of self-harm and run the risk of being inadvertently exposed to triggering or increasingly extreme material, explains Winstone. In addition, viewing images of self-harm can lead youth to compare their own self-harm with others, sometimes leading to feelings of competition for more severe injury and supporting development of a “self-harm identity,” she says.

Parasocial attachment to certain celebrities or media personalities may exacerbate “social contagion” risk to vulnerable youth if those personalities engage in suicide or self-harm behavior and are subject to media coverage of it, says Harrison. “The greater the media coverage and/or the closer they are to the individual whose behavior they’re observing, the more intense the exposure to that, the more the effect. They may be identifying with an individual, especially if it’s a celebrity or someone very well-known.”

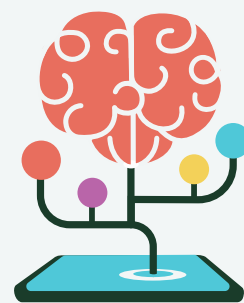
Media or social media coverage that exacerbates “social contagion” of suicide content include sensational headlines, descriptions of specific methods used to die by suicide, and pictures of detailed descriptions of the deceased individual. If individuals choose to share or post online about a suicide, they can avoid amplifying and adding to the effect on young and vulnerable people, says Harrison. “You don’t want to include details, you don’t want to sensationalize, and you don’t want to speculate as to reasons behind a death.”

Check In with Your Adolescent Regularly

Increased peer interaction is a hallmark of adolescence, and some parents may find it hard to find times to have regular chats and check-ins with their teens. While peer friendships are exceptionally important to adolescents, parents should still be touching base as much as possible with teens about how they are doing and doing basic “mental health checks,” says Julianna Miner, MPH, Adjunct Faculty in Global and Community Health at George Mason University and author of *Raising a Screen-Smart Kid*.

Evaluate Mental Health Technology Use

Adolescents and adults alike are starting to use mental health apps, GenAI chatbots and other technologies for assistance with mental health issues. Try to stay aware of the technologies your child may be using for therapy or mental health help as not all are created with well-being or wellness as a priority. AI products particularly can be a mixed bag, says Elsa Friis, PhD, Head of Mental Health at Alongside. “We hear these horrible stories of horrible outcomes of children engaging with an AI chatbot, yet AI is also the only reason that I’m actually able to identify kids who need more support,” she says. “The same technology isn’t always good or bad. It’s about how you use it and apply it.”



For teens who might be using digital tools for therapy, checking in often is still a recommended course of action, says Stephen Schueller, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Informatics at University of California, Irvine. “Digital therapeutics are not replacements for face to face therapy. These are tools for expanding the portfolio of what we might be able to offer teens and adolescents. If a youth is using a tool, check back in on them, follow up, and see if it benefits them,” he urges.

Friis encourages parents and caregivers to evaluate mental health technology use by investigating the purpose behind the tool - was it created with health care or emotional wellness in mind, or for entertainment? “If it is a wellness or a digital therapeutic program, you should be able to find a website behind that helps understand what is the goal, how is it supporting youth? Who’s behind this digital program or product?”

Watch for Isolation



Adolescents typically start spending more time alone in their rooms as they mature. Watch for dramatic increases to this alone time as a possible cause for concern, says Khadijah B. Watkins, MD, MPH, DFAACAP Director, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Residency Training, Associate Director, The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds at Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard Medical School. A significant deviation from their norm or baseline, like not coming out of their room for dinner, or to watch a movie, or chat as they might normally do, is a sign something could be off, she says.



Adolescent Body Image and Social Media

Current research indicates that specific uses of media by youth during adolescence is associated with impacts to body image and restricted eating disorders. These impacts can include:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor body image and body dissatisfaction • Disordered weight and shape-related behaviors • Disordered eating behaviors • Feeling a negative mood in general • Valuing appearance over competence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-worth tied to weight • Developing depressive symptoms or even a clinical depressive disorder • Health risk behaviors such as indoor tanning and use of skin bleaching creams • Decreased academic motivation and engagement in STEM fields for girls |
|--|--|

- ▶ **How Social Media Creates and Intensifies Body Image Issues**
- ▶ **Social Media Use Can Impact Body Image for All Genders**
- ▶ **Specific Uses of Social Media and Body Image Impacts**
- ▶ **Understand the Role of Selfies, Filters, and Avatars on Body Image**
- ▶ **Encourage Social Media Content Curation**
- ▶ **Foster Positive Self Image Before Getting Into Social Media Use**
- ▶ **Build Awareness of How Media Can Affect Body Image**



Several features inherent to social media combine together with adolescent preoccupation with self-presentation and peer social feedback to affect body image.”

Sophia Choukas-Bradley, PhD

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

How Social Media Creates and Intensifies Body Image Issues

Social media can be a “perfect storm” for adolescents who generally report feeling worse about themselves after going online, says Mitch Prinstein, PhD, ABPP, John Van Seters Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at UNC, Chapel Hill. Adolescents by nature look to others’ feedback to create a stable self-image, and now have access to social media feeds where that feedback and comparison is based on a highly edited version of someone else’s life or appearance. The fact that these images are cherry-picked and highly curated is often forgotten by adolescents, notes Prinstein.

Several features inherent to social media combine together with adolescent preoccupation with self-presentation and peer social feedback to affect body image, says Sophia Choukas-Bradley, PhD, Associate Professor of Psychology and Director of the Teen and Young Adult Lab (TAYA Lab) at University of Pittsburgh.

These include:

- **Quantifiability - visibility of likes, friends, and followers**
- **Visual emphasis on highly curated photo/video content**
- **24/7 availability**
- **Algorithms that serve increasingly extreme content to adolescents searching for more innocuous beauty or body content**

Social media increases the focus on one’s appearance by encouraging social comparisons with idealized or even fake images from AI, says Choukas-Bradley, who notes research indicating beauty standards have changed since the advent of social media towards increased “perfection” in all aspects of face, hair, and body.





Boys who spend more time on Instagram or other image-based social media platforms have a higher risk of body dissatisfaction, muscle dissatisfaction, and even use of anabolic steroids in the future.”

Jason Nagata, MD

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
SAN FRANCISCO, SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Social Media Use Can Impact Body Image for All Genders

It’s important for parents of adolescents to be aware of the importance and centrality of body image during this developmental period, says Choukas-Bradley.

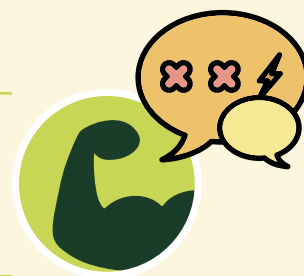
Adolescence is a critical time for identity formation, and girls of this age are particularly vulnerable to effects on body image from social media due to combined influences from their developmental stage (importance of peer approval, self-consciousness, puberty), gender (social fixation on female appearance, objectification), and social media features (peer-edited images, quantified feedback, public content available 24/7).

While body image is commonly thought of as a concern primarily for girls, there is increasing evidence that adolescent boys are also experiencing body image issues from social media use. “Boys who spend more time on Instagram or other image-based social media platforms have a higher risk of body dissatisfaction, muscle dissatisfaction, and even use of anabolic steroids in the future,” says Jason Nagata, MD, Associate Professor, Department of Pediatrics at University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine.

Specific Uses of Social Media and Body Image Impacts

Research indicates specific types of social media use to be associated with specific body image impacts to adolescents, including:

- Exposure to sexualized Instagram images - Valuing appearance over competence
- Social media exposure to idealized bodies - Poor body image, body dissatisfaction
- Problematic social media use - Poor body image, body dissatisfaction
- Engagement in body talk on social media - Weight-related restrictive eating
- Cyberbullying victimization - Poor body image, body dissatisfaction





Unfollowing, blocking or muting social media accounts that depict narrow, unrealistic standards of beauty can be helpful in protecting body image.

Elizabeth Daniels, PhD

CENTRE FOR APPEARANCE
RESEARCH AT UNIVERSITY OF THE
WEST OF ENGLAND BRISTOL

Understand the Role of Selfies, Filters, and Avatars on Body Image

Research indicates different impacts to adolescents from use of specific social media features:

- Selfies
 - » *Taking and editing selfies is more harmful to body image than posting selfies.*

FILTERS

- » *Adolescent girls who used body and face filters were more socially motivated to undergo cosmetic surgery than girls who did not use these filters.*
- » *Analysis of beauty filters has shown that filters have ethnocentric (white) biases by whitening skin color and altering facial features to be more Eurocentric.*

AVATARS

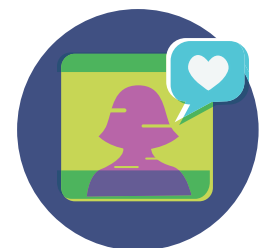
- » *Creating body avatars with idealized body shape and size associated with improved body satisfaction for adolescents compared to those who didn't adjust their avatars to fit their body ideals.*

Experiencing a virtual body larger than one's actual body is associated with greater body disturbances and body anxiety during adolescence and young adulthood compared to participants' experiences with a virtual body their actual size.

Encourage Social Media Content Curation

Unfollowing, blocking or muting social media accounts that depict narrow, unrealistic standards of beauty can be helpful in protecting body image, says Elizabeth Daniels, PhD, Professor and Director, Centre for Appearance Research at University of the West of England Bristol. In addition, simply taking a break from social media can have beneficial effects. In Daniels and colleagues' research, teen girls who took a three-day break from social media reported less body surveillance behaviors, less body shame, and more positive mental states.

Research also indicates that focusing on body positivity digital content has more potential for improving youth body image than digital "fitspiration" content which can worsen body image.



Foster Positive Self Image Before Getting Into Social Media Use

Having a positive view of the body before getting into social media can buffer the negative effects on body image, says Daniels. She cites a definition of body image from leading researchers as “an individual’s willingness to accept, appreciate, respect, care for, and respond compassionately towards the body regardless of its appearance, functionality, comfort, and or health.”

Daniels notes that positive body image does not mean feeling positively about one’s body all the time, which is unrealistic, and it is not just an emotion. It is more holistic, including respect, care, and compassion for one’s body. Recent research with girls ages 12-16 has found that body appreciation, a component of positive body image, is related to less dieting, less alcohol consumption, and less smoking, as well as greater intuitive eating, says Daniels.



For girls and boys, ages 9 to 11, research indicates body appreciation is related to higher body esteem at this age, as well as positive affect, less dieting, lower internalization of appearance ideals and less body surveillance, notes Daniels.

The more comments and praise a girl hears about her external characteristics, the more value she will place on these characteristics over other traits, says psychologist and author Lisa Damour, PhD. “We have to be very mindful as the adults in kids’ environments, how we talk about their ‘containers’ versus how we talk about their ‘content,’” she says. “Every moment that we are talking about what a kid looks like, we are not talking about who she is inside. I’m not saying you can’t tell your daughters they’re cute. I love telling my daughters they’re cute. We also have to spend a lot of time talking about how smart, interesting, funny, sardonic and all of that they are.”

Build Awareness of How Media Can Affect Body Image

Many of the negative effects of social media result from making unfavorable comparisons with idealized, manipulated or carefully selected images of a person or their lifestyle, notes Susan J. Paxton, PhD, Emeritus Professor of Psychology and Public Health at La Trobe University. Help your adolescent by challenging the reality of the posts they see to reduce the comparisons made with them. This can lessen negative self-evaluation by your child, she suggests.



While it’s important to build awareness of how online media affects girls’ body image and mental health negatively, this awareness itself does not erase the impacts from exposure to media completely, warns Choukas-Bradley. She cites research showing that even when adult women, with fully-developed brains and decades of experience looking at media images, are fully, cognitively aware that an image has been digitally altered, and is not real, exposure to those mass media images still leads immediately to poorer body image.

Recent research with youth also indicates that when young people are shown images that they know have been Photoshopped or edited, it doesn’t change their desire to look like the images they see, notes Jennifer Mills, PhD, Professor in the Department of Psychology at York University.



Parenting Tips for Supporting Adolescent Health and Critical Thinking Around Media Use

- ▶ **Engage Often to Encourage Critical Thinking and Protect from Harm**

- ▶ **Emphasize Restraint over Restriction**

- ▶ **Co-create Rules and Schedules with Your Children**

- ▶ **Define Family “Tech Free” Times and Spaces**

- ▶ **Reduce/Eliminate Parental Control Apps with Older Teens**

- ▶ **Link Calm Transitions and Responsible Behavior to Increased Privileges**

- ▶ **Delay Smartphone Access – Watch for Signs of Readiness**

- ▶ **Talk About Goals with Media Use When Setting Boundaries**

- ▶ **Overcome Feeling Technically Overwhelmed**

- ▶ **Build Trust and Hold the Judgment – They are Listening**

- ▶ **Know What Your Kids are Doing**

- ▶ **Know Where You Stand and Convey Your Values**

- ▶ **Teach About Permanence and Consequences of Online Communication**

- ▶ **Specifically Address Social Media Use**

- ▶ **Share Your Own Struggles with Media Use**

- ▶ **Role Model Healthy Media Use**

- ▶ **Teach About How Algorithms Manipulate Behavior and Time Online**

- ▶ **Cultivate Self-Reflection Habits**

- ▶ **Encourage Turning Off Features That Feel Unhealthy**

- ▶ **Utilize Peer Influence and Community Power**

- ▶ **Keep a Healthy Balance of Dopamine in Adolescent Brains**

- ▶ **Help Kids Balance “Junk Food” Tech Time with Healthy Screen Uses**

- ▶ **Promote Sleep – Remove Screens from All Bedrooms – Even Yours**

- ▶ **Center Discussions on Health vs. Safety**

- ▶ **Keep Sleep Schedules Consistent All Week Long**

- ▶ **Beware of Over-Sharenting**

- ▶ **It’s Not Too Late - Make One Change at a Time**

- ▶ **Strategies for Co-Parenting Situations**

- ▶ **Help Teens Find Self-Calming Routines Without Screens**

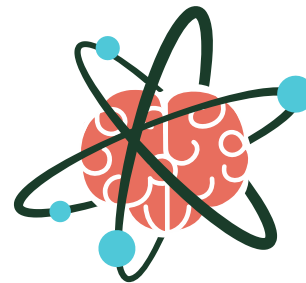
Engage Often to Encourage Critical Thinking and Protect from Harm

Research is very clear that “active mediation” is the best way to monitor your child’s media use to support the best outcomes for your child, says Douglas Gentile, PhD, Distinguished Professor of Developmental Psychology at Iowa State University and editor of *Media Violence and Children*. Active mediation involves ongoing discussions that invite your child to think critically about their media content and use, discussing topics and questions such as:

- What content do they like/not like
- Why you as caregiver do or do not want them to see certain things
- What points of view are being represented in the content
- What points of view are not being shown - and why that might be
- What effects specific media or games might have on your child or other people
- How they notice feeling after watching types of shows/games
- What they think the makers want people to think or feel after viewing - is there a message or manipulation?

The more children talk about what they are seeing and doing online, the more they are going to reflect and question that, says Stephanie Reich, PhD, Professor, School of Education at University of California, Irvine.

“The literature is very clear,” says Gentile. “Active mediation is the absolute best for kids and is a powerful protective factor for children” against risks from online media. Active mediation can take place at any age, though teens are going to be able to more easily and fully answer difficult questions, he notes.



The literature is very clear. Active mediation is the absolute best for kids and is a powerful protective factor for children against risks from online media.”

Douglas Gentile, PhD
IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

Emphasize Restraint over Restriction

Taking a phone away or revoking social media access as a first reaction to concern about media use will make it harder for adolescents to build and sustain healthy media habits and will make them less eager to participate in your family's media plan, says Vicki Harrison, MSW, Program Director, Center for Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University School of Medicine. "Instead of jumping to saying 'You spend all of your time on your phone and never talk to your family,' you might instead try suggesting that they use time management apps or other self monitoring strategies, or ask how you can help them be sure they finish tasks and attend to their priorities while also spending time on their phones."



Restricting adolescents with time use cutoffs for screen time is not associated with positive outcomes for adolescents as much as the conversations that encourage critical thinking about media use, says Eva Telzer, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at UNC, Chapel Hill. "Having these discussions about the content of their social media rather than restricting the time that they're spending online can be very positive."

High levels of restriction often leads to more teens hiding their use, as well as increasing their stress and anxiety, notes Sarah Myruski, PhD, Associate Research Professor in Psychology, Associate Lab Director, Emotion Development Lab at Pennsylvania State University.

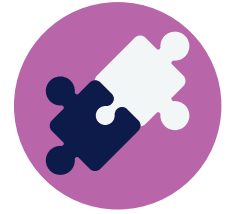
Co-create Rules and Schedules with Your Children



Rules and schedules for family life and media use that incorporate your children's perspectives and buy-in are often more successful than more authoritarian "top-down" directives, say many experts. "Don't forget to involve the kids in the rule setting itself," says Stephen Balkam, Founder and CEO of Family Online Safety Institute. Focus on what the child and family prioritize such as family time, low-dopamine "down time," homework time, meal times, and build in agreed-upon windows for media use that fits within the priorities.

Family media plans for adolescents should be a result of the conversations between parents and teens, agrees Chia-chen Yang, PhD, Associate Professor of Educational Psychology, School of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Aviation at Oklahoma State University. Once the plan is implemented, both teens and parents should follow the rules, she stresses.

Middle schoolers and high schoolers are likely to disable any safety setting you might set unless you explain the reason why it's important, notes Diana Graber, MA, Founder of Cyber Civics and Cyberwise, and author of *Raising Humans in a Digital World*.



Define Family “Tech Free” Times and Spaces

Much as many family media plans include “tech time,” family routines can also include designating spaces that are for engaging without any devices at all, suggests Sherry Turkle, PhD, Founding Director, MIT Initiative on Technology and Self at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “Decide that there are places in the home where there is talk, not text. The easiest ones to do are around meals and meal preparation, and in the car,” says Turkle. Adolescents are likely to resist, but creating these “sacred spaces” and showing teens what has been lost by constant attachment to devices is worth it, she notes.

Habit-stacking daily family time with tech-free time, such as family dinner time, can confer many benefits to children and families, says Shimi Kang, MD, FRCPC, author of *The Tech Solution*, and Clinical Associate Professor at The University of British Columbia. “One of the most robust findings in human development is when children eat dinner with the family, looking at and seeing each other, not only do we see better mental health, we see better academic performance as well. There’s a lot of daily habits that we can use to have a bit of that detox or fasting.”

Another option is a “phone free day” for the entire family once a week, suggests Mitch Prinstein, PhD, ABPP, John Van Seters Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at UNC, Chapel Hill. Talk about how hard this may be for both the children and the adults - it helps create important dialogue about media use and the features of phones and apps that are designed to keep users attached and prevents adolescents from just having to “figure it all out” by themselves, he notes.

Reduce/Eliminate Parental Control Apps with Older Teens



Research indicates parental control apps can be beneficial for younger teens when they are first getting online, but for older teens, they are perceived as invasive of privacy and hurting

the trust relationship between parent and child, says Pamela Wisniewski, PhD, Principal Research Scientist at International Computer Science Institute. Aim to reduce the use of restriction and surveillance-based parent control apps as your adolescent earns trust and shows they can make good decisions with their existing privileges.

It is also better to be upfront with your children about the use of any parental control apps, as hiding them from your teen (at any age) could violate their trust, notes Wisniewski.

Bolstering your adolescent’s resiliency through regular open, judgment-free conversations and fostering healthy friendships with peers is far more important than using parental controls for avoiding harm from online experiences, says Elizabeth Englander, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Executive Director and Founder of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University. “You want to make sure their foundation is really strong, and that will help your kids no matter what happens.”



Like a learner’s permit for driving, gradually expanding digital access based on demonstrated responsibility feels safer and more comfortable for both parent and child.”

Link Calm Transitions and Responsible Behavior to Increased Privileges

Once boundaries and expectations are set for tech-free times, let kids know that non-combative behavior around transitions from screen time to non-screen time will result in more responsibility and privilege with their own media use, suggests Englander. “Make sure kids understand that the better they behave during the transition, the more privileges and freedom and choices they get. These two things should be linked. It really helps.” Set your family up for success by having predictable, consistent times of the day when kids know you are with them, paying attention, screen-free, she notes.

Revisiting rules based on a child’s demonstrated behavior helps align expectations with their developmental readiness, says Adam Pletter, PsyD, child and adolescent psychologist, Founder of iParent101.com. Every child communicates their strengths, sensitivities, and limits through their choices and actions—they’ll show you what they can manage and what overwhelms them. Like a learner’s permit for driving, gradually expanding digital access based on demonstrated responsibility feels safer and more comfortable for both parent and child.



Delay Smartphone Access – Watch for Signs of Readiness



95% of US teens 13+ report having access to a smartphone. While the average age of smartphone ownership in 2025 is age 11, recent research indicates more negative health outcomes for adolescents who own a smartphone before age 13. While it may be hard to buck the trend, try to delay full smartphone ownership until your adolescent has displayed signs of readiness, which include:

- Is your child able to regulate their emotions and behavior around screen time (TV, tablet, gaming) and transitions?
 - Is your child showing maturity and restraint about being able to turn off screens themselves at agreed upon times?
 - Does your child understand there should be rules around smartphone use?
 - Can your child handle conversations about rules around device use calmly/without emotional outbursts?
 - Is your child following your screen use rules like not downloading from the internet without permission, or keeping screens out of the bedroom?
 - Does your child demonstrate impulse control and is able to keep track of time spent on activities?
- Do they have competence when it comes to interacting with peers and extracurricular activities that they find enjoyable and they like to do?
 - Are they responsible and taking ownership in other areas of their life?
 - » *Do they do chores?*
 - » *Are they able to get themselves out of bed and get ready in the morning to go to school?*
 - » *Do they make their own lunch?*
 - » *Are they responsible for transporting themselves to and from places in the community via transit or bike?*
 - Academically, are they connected at school? Do they feel like they fit in and that they have a sense of identity in their school environment?

(Jenny Radesky, Tracy Markle, Devorah Heitner, Elizabeth Englander)

If the answer to more than a few of these questions is “No,” then discuss with your child and set up a plan for what milestones you’d like them to achieve before allowing them a device.

For more on assessing readiness, preparing for healthy use, and guiding healthy use, see the Children and Screens smartphone tip sheet series online: [Smartphones: Assessing Readiness](#), [Smartphones: Preparing for Healthy Use](#), and [After the Smartphone: What Now?](#)



Total mastery of the teen internet might be too difficult, but at a minimum try to be familiar with the restrictions, the media balance features, and the good citizenship rules and practices of platforms your adolescents are using.”

Janis Whitlock, PhD

CORNELL UNIVERSITY

Talk About Goals with Media Use When Setting Boundaries

As children become older, the freer their access to technology becomes. How can parents practically prepare children for critical thinking and increased autonomy with healthy media use? Start by speaking to your adolescent about what their goals are for their media use, says Alok Kanojia, MD, MPH, President & Co-Founder of Healthy Gamer.

After finding some common ground to talk about why they like their media and what they like about it, you as a parent can empathize with their goals (i.e. “I get that you want to play with your friends and everyone is playing that game”) while also having the conversation about boundaries around the behavior (“It’s my job as your parent to make sure you get enough sleep and get your homework done. How do we work together to make sure you have fun and also get all of those other things done?”), suggests Kanojia.

Overcome Feeling Technically Overwhelmed

There’s a lot of risks and dangers to adolescents online, many of which are evolving quickly. Many parents feel that they are “behind” and ill-equipped to understand or discuss what their children are doing, says Telzer. Parents should aim to navigate uncharted waters together with children via open and honest conversations, she says.

“By far the most important skill that we find in our research is just parents who talk to their kids and are interested in what they’re doing,” says Englander.

Try your best to keep up with the platforms and technologies adolescents are using in order to better understand how they are being used, and what the benefits and risks might be, says Jun Sung Hong, PhD, Associate Professor, School of Social Work at Wayne State University.

Total mastery of the teen internet might be too difficult, but at a minimum try to be familiar with the restrictions, the media balance features, and the good citizenship rules and practices of platforms your adolescents are using, says Janis Whitlock, PhD, Scientist Emerita at Cornell University, Founder and Director of Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery.

Build Trust and Hold the Judgment – They are Listening

Do whatever you can to foster a trusted parent-child relationship—that’s the best protective factor a child can have against harms from media use, says Lara Wolfers, PhD, Faculty of Psychology at University of Basel. Knowing they can come to you if they encounter something upsetting, instead of hiding it and fearing punishment, is the outcome you want to see, say many experts.

Adolescents are often listening - even if it seems they are not, says Meenakshi Gigi Durham, PhD, Professor and Collegiate Scholar at University of Iowa. Her work with 13-15 year-old girls in middle schools indicates that adolescents are absorbing the information about media and critical thinking that parents are discussing with them at home.

When talking to adolescents about their media, make sure to hold the judgment on their media preferences. It’s “really important not to ‘harsh’ on their taste culture and say what they care about is stupid,” says Devorah Heitner, PhD, author of *Growing Up in Public: Coming of Age in a Digital World*. Even rolling your eyes at something that they are interested in can shut down the conversation and keep them from being honest and open.

“Top down” approaches with teenagers “do not work,” says psychologist and author Lisa Damour, PhD. Lead with curiosity in order to uncover how they are feeling about media use and how they might problem-solve to change behavior.



Know What Your Kids are Doing

Research also indicates that the most responsible teens who are least likely to engage in risky behaviors have parents who know where their kids are and what they are doing, says Thomas Lickona, PhD, author of *How to Raise Kind Kids*. “Supervision matters a lot.”

Online, this could involve finding out which influencers your adolescent follows and checking out that feed to get insight on the norms and expectations your particular child is navigating, says Yang.



Knowing they can come to you if they encounter something upsetting, instead of hiding it and fearing punishment, is the outcome you want to see.”

Know Where You Stand and Convey Your Values



Teens are actively in the process of trying to understand themselves and the universe around them, and are now doing this primarily through use of digital media. It's important to first understand what your family's important values are, and convey these to your child, says Edward Spector, PsyD, Psychologist at SpectorTherapy. "Be present. If you are not present, what happens is there's a parental vacuum that happens around the technology and then someone else comes in and teaches your kid their values."

The only people who can communicate your family's values to your children are you as the parents and caregivers, says Englander. "Don't leave it to the internet to educate them about things like AI girlfriends and boyfriends and whether or not they're healthy or whether or not changing photos of other people is okay. Bring in your own values about whether these things are right and wrong and offer to talk to your kids about this."

If you object to aspects of your child's preferred content because of these values, know why and be able to explain that to your adolescent in a "teaching moment" way, not in a reactionary "take it away" response, notes Spector. "Educate about what your concerns are and what you think the impact is going to be."

Teach About Permanence and Consequences of Online Communication

Parents should teach their children the "Golden Rule" of the 21st century - "Am I OK with whatever I'm posting/communicating online being public and permanent?" says Richard Guerry, Founder and Executive Director of Institute for Responsible Online and Cell-Phone Communication (IROC2). Anyone using digital devices to communicate or spending time on the internet must assume their words and behavior could become public, perhaps at a date far into the future, he stresses. Take your children through some possible scenarios and consequences so they can understand the full power of their communication online - both for possible positive and negative consequences.

For adolescents who have grown up interacting online, it's also important to remind them that there are human beings on the other end of all of their digital interactions - and they are accountable for not causing harm to them, says Heitner.



Be present. If you are not present...then someone else comes in and teaches your kid their values."

Edward Spector, PsyD
SPECTORTHERAPY

Specifically Address Social Media Use

As adolescents begin using social media and have more autonomy over their media choices, talk to them often about how they are using social media in order to gauge whether their media use is healthy for them, suggest many experts. “Simply telling teens what not to do doesn’t fully prepare them for the complicated digital world they’re facing,” says Yang. “The key element is to help teens develop social media literacy – the skills needed to safely create content, critically evaluate content, and understand the implications of one’s own and others’ media behavior.”

“If we’re not talking to them about what they’re seeing, if we’re not asking them questions about who they’re following and why they’re following them, then we’re going to miss whole swaths of what’s happening,” says Desmond U. Patton, MSW, PhD, PIK University Professor and Waldo E. Johnson Jr. Professor of Communication, Department of Psychiatry - Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia & Perelman School of Medicine.

Questions you can start with:

- **What’s going on in your social media?**
- **Who are you talking with? Where and how?**
- **How do you feel about it? Why do you think that is?**
- **What are you posting? Why?**
- **What influencers are you following? Why?**
- **What would you do if you saw something hateful, harmful, or dangerous online? What have your friends done when that has happened to them?**

(Chia-Chen Yang, Jeffrey Hall, Mitch Prinstein)

Share Your Own Struggles with Media Use

Being transparent about your own struggles to maintain healthy media use can help your adolescent learn critical thinking and self-reflective techniques, says Meryl Alper, PhD, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Northeastern University.



Adolescents “love it” when parents apologize, and are accountable to not meeting expectations with media use, says Catherine Steiner-Adair, PhD, clinical psychologist and author of *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age*. Being a little vulnerable and saying, “You know, I’ve been doing this way too much. Help me understand when I should stop,” can help strengthen family resolve, problem-solving, and relationships, she says.

“Explain why you were compelled by your TikTok Reel. Explain why it’s so hard to disconnect from email,” says Jeffrey Hall, PhD, Professor of Communication Studies at University of Kansas. Explaining these personal struggles to your kids helps them understand that you too are going through the process of figuring out how to manage your media use, he says.

Role Model Healthy Media Use



Your media use matters - a lot. One of the single biggest predictors of adolescent screen use is parents' screen use, says Paul Weigle, MD, Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, Associate Medical Director of Ambulatory Services at Natchaug Hospital, Chair of the Media Committee at American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

This modeling can and should include:

- Putting the phone down and paying full attention to your child or other people in the room
- Keeping phones and devices away from mealtimes
- Demonstrating civil behavior online and offline
- Pointing out when working through your own difficult online social situation in a constructive way
- Not keeping your devices in your bedroom
- Not focusing discussions about yourself and others on appearance and weight
- Explaining why and when you must check your phone for an important reason
- Not using phones as primary means of emotional regulation
- Demonstrated verbal reflection about how media is affecting your mood or behavior

If you're on your mobile phone at the table or when you're talking to your child, you can't be surprised if they're going to prioritize that behavior as well, says Naomi Fineberg, MBBS, MA, MRCPsych, Professor of Psychiatry at University of Hertfordshire and Consultant Psychiatrist in Highly Specialized Service for Obsessive Compulsive and Related Disorders at Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust.

"The number one complaint that we get from kids when we work in schools is 'We can't get our parents' attention. Mom's always on Facebook. Dad's always just checking his email at dinner,'" says Balkam. "Parents, please start with yourself. Curb your own addictions, put things down and give your kids eye contact, give them hugs, whatever it is, and be present for them."



One of the single biggest predictors of adolescent screen use is parents' screen use."

Paul Weigle, MD

NATCHAUG HOSPITAL

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRY

Teach About How Algorithms Manipulate Behavior and Time Online

Gone are the quaint earlier days of the internet, when adolescents or adults might find themselves in a rabbit hole searching for information on a topic of interest. With the powerful algorithms these days, “kids are dragged down rabbit holes now,” says Damour.

Talk to teens about how algorithms work to extract data on users, manipulate their attention and even their beliefs. “Teenagers do not like to be manipulated... Teenagers will change their behavior when they understand they’re manipulated,” notes Damour.



Talk to teens about how algorithms work to extract data on users, manipulate their attention and even their beliefs.

Cultivate Self-Reflection Habits

Encourage teens to monitor their psycho-emotional reactions to various digital media behaviors on their own. Teens are the ones who are directly impacted by their social media experiences, so they should be checking in with themselves frequently, says Yang.

This may not come naturally - ask your adolescent about their goal for using any given piece of media or technology to start the process of reflection. “It’s helpful for adolescents to be asked questions about their preferences to use digital media or technology for social or emotional goals. They’ve never really thought about it before, like whether they prefer one or the other and just thinking about it helps them be more introspective,” says Myruski.

Encourage Turning Off Features That Feel Unhealthy

It's important to help adolescents understand that along with increasing responsibility and autonomy in their general life, they also have authority and agency over their social media spaces, whether that be unfollowing someone toxic or removing an app altogether, says Jimmeka Anderson, MA, Project Manager at New America.

These actions can include:

- **Unfollowing someone toxic or negative**
- **Removing an app that makes them feel negatively**
- **Hiding metrics such as likes, comments and saves to reduce pressure and feelings of judgment or scrutiny**
- **Disable autoplay on video platforms to reduce unintentional media overconsumption**
- **Changing phone screens to monochrome to make it less appealing to look at**

(Jimmeka Anderson, Chia-chen Yang, Lisa Strohman)

Early users of social media aren't as skilled at proactively selecting or deselecting features, notes Harrison. Parents and caregivers can help them build these skills and help them develop agency by controlling settings and usage depending on how their social media makes them feel.



Utilize Peer Influence and Community Power

Adolescence is a time when the influence of peers and friends is extremely strong. This power can be utilized to create a family network with “peer compacts” so that your child knows that limits are being enforced on everyone together, suggests Prinstein. This strategy makes you able to say ‘Don't worry, all of your classmates have to get off at 6:30, that's the policy among all the parents,’ he says.

This strategy can be used for smartphone introduction as well, says Balkam. While it's isolating to be constantly told by your child that “everyone in my class” has a device, starting a school-wide organization like “Wait Until Eighth” forms a social agreement with other parents in your community to wait as a group for device introduction, which is a real help to parents and adolescents feeling peer pressure.



Keep a Healthy Balance of Dopamine in Adolescent Brains

Engaging in pleasurable activities releases the neurotransmitter dopamine in the brain. Dopamine reinforces behaviors a person finds rewarding and motivates them to do more of it. Balancing “high-dopamine” activities with “low-dopamine” activities could help avoid problematic or addictive use of media in adolescents, says child and adolescent psychiatrist and internet addiction specialist Clifford Sussman, MD, Volunteer Clinical Faculty at George Washington University.

What is a high-dopamine activity? Something that is instantly and continuously stimulating, such as playing a video game or scrolling on TikTok, says Sussman. Low-dopamine activities are those that require patience and effort to get what you want, or delayed gratification, such as homework (for grades awarded later), exercising, or playing a musical instrument. When children continuously engage in “high-dopamine” activities, the brain increases its desire and neurochemical craving to continue the activity, creating a feedback loop that makes it harder to return to a low-dopamine state.



Parents should help adolescents learn to balance the “high-dopamine” activities that act like “junk food” with screen activities that release other more beneficial neurotransmitters, such as endorphins through self-care, oxytocin through positive social connection or community building, and serotonin through learning, play, and creativity.”

Shimi Kang, MD, FRCPC

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
AUTHOR OF *THE TECH SOLUTION*

Help Kids Balance “Junk Food” Tech Time with Healthy Screen Uses

When thinking of a child’s “tech diet,” parents should help adolescents learn to balance the “high-dopamine” activities that act like “junk food” with screen activities that release other more beneficial neurotransmitters, such as endorphins through self-care, oxytocin through positive social connection or community building, and serotonin through learning, play, and creativity, says Kang.

Examples of this include using screensavers of nature, listening to waves or bird sounds, and using apps for problem-solving, breathing exercises, or mindfulness. “Wire and fire” this healthy use of tech so that young people start associating tech use with something that is serving them for their benefit, health, or social connectivity, says Kang.



Promote Sleep – Remove Screens from All Bedrooms – Even Yours

Instead of being “anti-screens”, families should think about what they are “for,” notes Damour. The first thing parents should be “for” is quality sleep, and in order to achieve this, technology should not be in any bedrooms, ever, she says.

Healthy sleep is foundational for all other aspects of health, including cognitive development and mental health. “Make and enforce a policy to keep screens out of the bedroom. That’s the easiest thing to do. The second level, which is not as easy to do, is model it yourself,” says sleep health expert Lauren Hale, PhD, Professor of Family, Population, and Preventive Medicine at Stony Brook University. Experts agree that teenagers should be getting between 8 and 10 hours of sleep a night, with some sleep scientists saying 9 hours as a minimum, yet somewhere between 50% to 90% of teens are not getting this amount, says Hale.

Screens in bedrooms can contribute to later sleep timing, shorter sleep duration, and worse sleep quality, says Hale, which has consequences for later life outcomes as well as current well-being.

Devices in bedrooms are an “important battleground” for adolescents and caregivers, says Balkam. Making the bedroom ban apply to yourself - and consistently following the rule - will help create and reinforce the behavior for your adolescent. “Kids will do what you do, not what you tell them to do. So don’t use your phone as an alarm clock, which means that’s going to be the first thing you see as you wake up, the last thing you look at before you go to bed. They’ll copy you straight away and they’ll want their devices in their bedroom,” he notes.



Instead of framing rules around online safety, frame them around health.”

Elizabeth Englander, PhD

MASSACHUSETTS AGGRESSION
REDUCTION CENTER AT
BRIDGEWATER STATE UNIVERSITY

Center Discussions on Health vs. Safety

While there are real threats to your adolescent’s safety online, constantly talking about online risks may backfire. Research indicates that kids are receptive to the idea that there are issues around health with social media and screens, but they think that adults exaggerate the “grave dangers” online from predators, says Englander. More effective ways to bring up concerns about screen use would be to emphasize health, saying things like “Maybe it’s not healthy to always stare at a screen,” or “Maybe it’s not healthy to just lash back if somebody says something that seems like they might be mad at you,” says Englander.

This can also apply to rule-setting, she notes. Instead of framing rules around online safety, frame them around health such as “How can we focus our rules so that you have time to go outside, play games with the family, or other alternative healthy activities?” she suggests.

Keep Sleep Schedules Consistent All Week Long

Sleep regularity, consistency across the week, not just during the weekdays, is at least as important as sleep duration in terms of physical health, says Hale. “You should be approximating, within an hour or so, the same bedtime and wake time on weekend nights as well as weekday nights. That’s really hard for teenagers,” she says.

Consistency in sleep schedules is very important for health, agrees clinical psychologist Wendy Troxel, PhD, Senior Behavioral and Social Scientist at the RAND Corporation. When starting a sleep schedule, for example at the beginning of a school year, Troxel notes you should start a few weeks before when you want the schedule to be established, not the night before.

“When I’m asked for the one piece of advice to give to parents, it’s ‘no tech use after eight or nine pm.’ Cut it off completely,” says Telzer.

Beware of Over-Sharenting

Many parents are used to sharing important or even small moments of their children’s lives on their own social media. As adolescents start to have autonomy over their own image and social media presence, “we have to be really really careful about what we share and try not to overshare,” says Kara Bagot, MD, Medical Director, Addiction Institute at Mount Sinai Center on Addiction Alliance, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. “We have to be really careful about sharing information about our teens’ lives that they may not want shared.”



It’s Not Too Late – Make One Change at a Time

Research on habit change strongly suggests not making lots of changes to lifestyle habits at once, says Heitner. If your family is stuck in unhealthy media patterns, pick just one habit to start with, such as a consistent bedtime for a better school day, and focus on that one habit for a few weeks. After that, you can introduce another incremental change to layer on top of the new habit so that eventually you can move all the habits to where you want them to be. Make sure to include your adolescent in the process of making these changes, she notes.

Many parents worry that the “ship has sailed” when it comes to the impacts to the social brain of adolescents and young adults from problematic media use. Telzer says it’s actually the “perfect time” to intervene and help direct adolescents to more positive social and developmental trajectories. “The adolescent brain is in a state of flux and change and is very sensitive to its environment. This is the time to help direct adolescents to more positive online experiences or events, to help them engage in more real life social interactions. This time is when we can make those changes, and “undo” the potential things that might have started to occur in the context of negative online or technological experiences.”

Kang agrees that “it’s never too late. We humans have what’s called neuroplasticity...the ability to learn and change our habits and behavior at any time.” While young people may resist changing habits around media, particularly if they are showing signs of addictive media use, Kang notes that the science and tools are available to move youth into positive action.

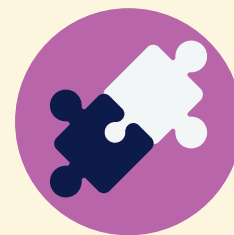
Strategies for Co-Parenting Situations

Navigating screen time rules can be difficult in co-parenting situations where different parents or caregivers may not see eye to eye on what's appropriate for the child. It's a challenge that is best navigated without playing out the conflict in interactions with your child, says Reich. "Co-parenting is a really robust area of research where parents really need to have communication skills, they have to find ways to support each other and not undermine each other, especially in front of children, and they should be aligned on their rules." It's a stressor on the child to comment on the other parent's rules negatively, so try to work it out amongst the adults.

If arriving at the "same page" with media use is impossible and there is conflict, utilize strategies much like when your child goes to a friend's house. Keep consistent to your own media rules at home, and convey to the child that the media rules at their

other home do not affect your own. Do so in a consistent, responsive, warm way so that your child can maintain a sense of security and predictability, says Reich.

Another strategy for navigating co-parent conflict on media rules is to focus on goals rather than rules, says Elizabeth Milovidov, PhD, JD, Founder of DigitalParentingCoach.com. "I sometimes find that parents are more likely to share goals than they are to want to share specific rules. You can easily come up with very different rules. But if your goal is to avoid certain situations or to make sure the kids aren't gaming with strangers or whatever your goal is, if you start with that, it may be easier to come to a place where you have even slightly different rules, but you agree that that's the goal of the rules."



It can be hard to find alternatives. You really need to say 'Let's figure out a routine that's going to work for you.'

Lauren Hale, PhD
STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY

Help Teens Find Self-Calming Routines Without Screens

Typically the kids who have problems sleeping at night tend to get more anxious at night, and cope with that anxiety by scrolling their phone, says Henry Willis, PhD, Assistant Professor, Clinical Psychology Program at University of Maryland, College Park. Just taking the phone out of the bedroom will not help improve their sleep, he says, in fact it might be aggravating the problem. One intervention he has found helpful is to allow audio books or another kind of speaker to provide soothing sleep-promoting distraction without the interactive, notification and dopamine-rich social media apps on the phone.

It can be hard to find alternatives, admits Hale. "You really need to say 'Let's figure out a routine that's going to work for you. Maybe reading is not your thing, but maybe we could go for an evening stroll, or have tea outside, or do something where you can be emotionally available and open to a calming bedtime routine that isn't involving screens.'"



Talking with Teens Conversation Tips and Starters

- ▶ **Start with Curious “Drive-By” Conversations**
- ▶ **Acknowledge the Importance and Positive Role of Media to Teens**
- ▶ **Problem-Solve Power Struggles Around Media Time**
- ▶ **Talk “With” Not “At” Adolescents**
- ▶ **Listen and Ask Open-Ended Questions**
- ▶ **Minimize Your Reactions and Consequences for Honesty**
- ▶ **Focus on Facts for Tough Topics**
- ▶ **Start with the Positive**

Start with Curious “Drive-By” Conversations

Adolescents often respond more easily and honestly to conversations that occur naturally in everyday moments like car rides, waiting in line, or dinner time, instead of a more structured (and intimidating) “it’s time to talk about X” approach, say many experts. These informal moments have “real power in them,” says Ranjana Das, PhD, Professor in Media and Communication at University of Surrey.



You can start the conversation by casually asking about what they are enjoying online — and why.

Some conversation prompts:

- What are you watching?

 - What is your favorite TV show?
What other media do you like?

 - What’s something new you are into?

 - Why is a particular video coming up in your media feed?

 - Why do you watch a certain YouTube influencer?

- What’s the funniest thing you’ve heard about or seen on YouTube?

 - What’s the most upsetting or cringey or disturbing thing you have seen?

 - Who are you following on YouTube and why?

 - What parts of TikTok are you exploring... who’s on your ‘For You’ page and why?

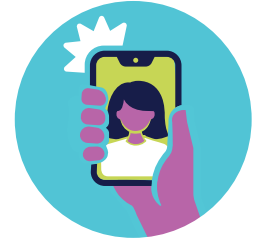
(Ranjana Das, Soraya Giaccardi, Ed Spector)

“Light” and interesting conversations about media will be more effective than “problem” conversations in learning what your adolescent is struggling with and who they are, notes Elaine Uskoski, video gaming addiction speaker, author, and family coach.



Adolescents often respond more easily and honestly to conversations that occur naturally in everyday moments... instead of a more structured (and intimidating) approach.”

Acknowledge the Importance and Positive Role of Media to Teens



When adults diminish youth culture, it builds barriers rather than connection, says Chia-chen Yang, PhD, Associate Professor of Educational Psychology, School of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Aviation at Oklahoma State University.

Instead of dismissing media use as bad or meaningless, first ask about it more curiously. “Don’t assume digital media use to be bad. It gives teens the impression that we don’t appreciate the importance of digital media in their social lives, and that we’re just there to take away their autonomy, and then they don’t want to talk to us,” she cautions.

For many adolescents, their experiences online are a significant opportunity to find or enhance relationships, relieve stress, grow skills, and build community, particularly for more marginalized or vulnerable youth, note many experts. Recognition of this importance will build common understanding and connection.



Adults often diminish youth culture when talking about it, which builds barriers rather than connection.”

Chia-chen Yang, PhD
OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

Problem-Solve Power Struggles Around Media Time

Learning to collaboratively problem-solve with your adolescent when there are parent-child issues around screen time builds trust and a sense of personal agency with children, and will help them develop the skills to eventually better regulate their behavior around screen time. To do so, start with stating the problem in specific solvable terms, says Dan Shapiro, MD, Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrician; Creator of Parent Child Journey. That means, ask the “5WH” questions:

- **What’s the problem?**
- **Who’s it with?**
- **Where are you having it?**
- **When does it tend to happen?**
- **Why is it a problem for you?**
- **How big is the problem for you?**

From there, both you and your child can come up with possible solutions to collaboratively evaluate the best mutually acceptable one, as well as agree to get back together at a later date and see if it’s working, says Shapiro.

Talk “With” Not “At” Adolescents

It is absolutely the wrong approach to talk at teenagers - you have to talk with them, and you have to get them empowered and inspired to kind of join that conversation, says psychologist, attorney, and author Lisa Strohman, JD, PhD, Founder and Director of Digital Citizen Academy.

Teens are extremely sensitive to pitch and tone of voice in discerning your attitude when talking with them. Start your sentences with the “three magic words - ‘I get it’” to help adolescents feel understood, says Joani Geltman, MSW, Adjunct Faculty at Curry College. “There is nothing that feels better in life than to feel understood.”

If you find yourself in “lecture” mode without engaging in back and forth dialogue, just know that “you’ve lost them way back in the beginning” says Geltman. “If you want teens to listen to you, connect with them before you correct them,” agrees internet safety expert Fareedah Shaheed.



Adults need to bridge the gap to the “teen world” and be available and willing to listen.”

Richard Weissbourd, EdD

HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Listen and Ask Open-Ended Questions

Adults need to bridge the gap to the “teen world” and be available and willing to listen, says Richard Weissbourd, EdD, Senior Lecturer on Education, Faculty Director, Human Development and Psychology at Harvard Graduate School of Education. When you approach conversations about media use and health with an agenda, you assume that you know why your child is doing what they’re doing and that you have a solution prepared. These conversations are likely to go poorly, says Andrea Hussong, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience, Family Journeys Co-Lab at UNC, Chapel Hill.

Instead, listen to your child and use an approach called “share and care”, suggests Hussong.

This includes first trying to understand their point of view:

- **Focusing on the child** (“What is going to make you feel better tomorrow?”)
- **Ask open-ended questions** (“What is hard about trying to do that? What is easy? What can I do to help you with that?”)
- **Share your thoughts and feelings as you ask questions** (“I’m a little worried about you getting enough sleep, do you have a plan?”)

Minimize Your Reactions and Consequences for Honesty

It can be hard to contain a negative reaction when you hear about your child seeing or doing something questionable online. As much as possible, try not to “freak out” when your child talks to you about social media habits and experiences, as that is a sure way to end the conversation for good, says Paul Weigle, MD, Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, Associate Medical Director of Ambulatory Services at Natchaug Hospital, Chair of the Media Committee at American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. “The purpose of us having a conversation about social media experiences is for us to have another one in the future. And if we impose consequences on them if they tell us they looked at online pornography and we consequence them by taking their phone away, that just ends the conversation. We need to make sure they know that there will not be negative consequences from what they share.”



Provide accurate information without any values, judgments, or opinions.”

Sarah DeGue, PhD

EVOLVE VIOLENCE PREVENTION, LLC

Focus on Facts for Tough Topics

Talking about sensitive or tough topics like online sexual content, drug or alcohol use, or other safety concerns can be quite difficult for both the parent and child. Several experts recommend starting with facts. “Provide accurate information without any values, judgments, or opinions,” says Sarah DeGue, PhD, Founder & Principal, EVOLVE Violence Prevention, LLC.

After presenting the facts (e.g. what are condoms, how are they used, how do they protect against pregnancy and STIs), then you can follow that with a statement of your values and your own personal perspective or expectations around that issue, she suggests.

Start with the Positive

Often parents initiate conversations about media use with adolescents when they think there is a problem, which can put the child in a defensive mode that makes them feel cut down and is unhelpful for honest and collaborative problem solving. Instead, start the conversation by asking your child what they think is going well with their media use first, suggests Meryl Alper, PhD, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Northeastern University.

“Start off with putting your kid in a place where they’re confident, where they feel like, ‘I’m doing a good job with this. I’ve handled this responsibly.’ Then ask, “What could be better?” This starts the conversation with building confidence and rewarding whatever maturity your child has developed so far.





Is My Child Addicted to Screens? Signs of Problematic Media Use and Tips for Digital Addiction

High rates of screen use by the vast majority of adolescents may make it difficult for many parents to ascertain the difference between heavy use and a true problem, or even an addiction. Learn how to spot the warning signs of addictive media use, and what to do if you think there is a problem.

- ▶ **Does My Kid Have a Problem? Signs of Problematic or Addictive Media Use**

- ▶ **Video Gaming – Evaluate Quality of Game Play vs. Quantity for Health**

- ▶ **Youth with ADHD are More Susceptible to Digital Media Overuse**

What To Do if You've Determined There is a Problem

- ▶ **Avoid Lecturing - Help Youth Take Ownership of the Problem**

- ▶ **Reduce Harm Rather Than Go “Cold Turkey”**

- ▶ **Limit Temptations and Cues in the Home**

- ▶ **Work Toward Establishing Healthy Routine and Schedule**

- ▶ **De-Escalate Power Struggles**

- ▶ **Build New Community**

- ▶ **Find Balance in Your Parenting Approach**

- ▶ **Develop Individualized Sensory Regulation Alternatives for Neurodivergent Youth**

- ▶ **Get Professional Help When Needed**

Does My Kid Have a Problem? Signs of Problematic or Addictive Media Use

Use the questions below to help determine if your child has a true problem with their digital media use - but also pay attention to your parental instinct, says Alok Kanojia, MD, MPH, President & Co-Founder of Healthy Gamer. If your parental instinct, which has been honed over millions of years of evolution, tells you that something is wrong, that's the first reason you should start investigating, he says.

Addictive media use patterns can begin at any age of child. The longer problematic media use goes on, the more ingrained the behavior becomes and the more significant the impacts to your child's health and development. Signs of problematic media use usually involve impairment of normal function. Evaluate for the following:

- Is the child unable to control the starting, stopping, frequency and duration of their media use?
- Does your child exhibit withdrawal symptoms like moodiness and extreme agitation when unable to engage in their digital media use?
- Is the behavior interfering with the ability to do schoolwork?
- Is it interfering with professional lives (if adult)?
- Is it interfering with physical health or remembering to eat?
- Is it preventing good sleep habits and durations?
- Is it interfering with mental health?
Are moods worse?
- Is it interfering with relationships?
- Is there a substantial change to the personality?
- Is the child engaging less with friends or only seeking friends that also game?
- Is there increased isolation and withdrawal into games and gaming behavior?
- Is the child attempting to hide or lie about their media use?
- Is the child giving up other activities they enjoy like sports or music or other after school activities?

(Alok Kanojia, MD, MPH, President and Co-Founder of Healthy Gamer, Douglas Gentile, PhD, Distinguished Professor in Liberal Arts and Sciences, Department of Psychology at Iowa State University. Chia-chen Yang, PhD, Associate Professor of Educational Psychology, School of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Aviation at Oklahoma State University)



Video Gaming – Evaluate Quality of Game Play vs Quantity for Health



“There are lots of ways that games can affect mental health for better and for worse,” says Nick Ballou, PhD, Postdoctoral Researcher at Oxford Internet Institute. “Research shows that play time is less important than the quality of that play,” he notes. “There are people like speedrunners or streamers that have really healthy, positive relationships with games and gaming communities despite really high play time.”

When evaluating youth game play to determine whether it falls into “healthy” use or “problematic” use, Ballou suggests looking at factors such as:

- **BUSINESS MODEL/MONETIZATION FEATURES** – Are there gambling or loot box features that encourage problematic play or behaviors?
- **GENRE OF GAME** – What type of game is it – for example, a story-focused role-playing game, a fast-paced strategy game, a creative simulation or building game, or something else?
- **MODE OF GAME** – Is the game being played as a team or in solitary mode? Are there randomized elements?
- **CONTENT OF GAME** – What themes does the game include? For example, sexualized characters, drug use or gambling, fantasy violence, and so forth.
- **WHEN THE GAME IS BEING PLAYED** – Is the game being played after school/weekends or before school? (Some research indicates that before-school gaming is associated with lower school performance.)
- **WHAT THE PLAY IS DISPLACING** – Is the child gaming to the exclusion of homework, reading a book, or other activities available to them?
- **PHYSICAL POSITION OF PLAY** – What is the body doing while in video game play?
- **SOCIAL CONTEXT OF PLAY** – What communities or relationships is the gamer engaging in through video play?
- **PLAY STYLE** – What is the child doing in the game? What kind of roles are they adopting in the game? Are they taking more of a leadership role or a follower role, or are they playing a support role?
- **PURPOSE OF PLAY** – What is the gamer trying to get out of playing the game?
- **INDIVIDUAL FACTORS** – What are the identities or personality traits of the gamer that affects how they experience game play?
- **EMOTIONAL FACTORS** – How does the game make the player feel during and after play?



Youth with ADHD are More Susceptible to Digital Media Overuse

TENDENCIES TOWARDS STIMULATION AND PROCRASTINATION – The desire for constant stimulation, as well as struggles with procrastination and delaying gratification, which are common in ADHD youth, are precisely what makes these youth more susceptible to becoming attached to digital media and difficulty disconnecting from it, says Carey Heller, PsyD, Licensed Psychologist at Heller Psychology Group. This can create an effect of media use worsening the symptoms of ADHD and of emotional dysregulation in these children, he notes. For example, a child may throw a temper tantrum when needing to disconnect from their video game to do homework, because both the highly stimulating nature of the game and its role in helping to procrastinate work feed into existing vulnerabilities in the ADHD brain.

DIFFICULTY WITH DELAYED GRATIFICATION – Success in the “real world” involves a lot of patience, toleration for boredom and difficult tasks, as well as long-range planning with delayed rewards, notes Clifford Sussman, MD, Volunteer Clinical Faculty at George Washington University. “If you go into the video game world and the virtual world, you have a world of instant gratification, constant stimulation, and constant rewards.” Digital media becomes an easy escape for youth who struggle with this delayed gratification.



Digital media becomes an easy escape for youth who struggle with delayed gratification.

What to Do If You’ve Determined There is a Problem



Avoid Lecturing – Help Youth Take Ownership of the Problem

Parents should avoid the “head-on attack” approach when dealing with a child with digital addiction, says Sussman. “They may just run the other way.”

Sussman notes that it’s much better if you can get your child to tell you what problems they are having versus being told by an authority figure what problems they are having or what they need to do about it. “They’re often going to do the opposite of what they feel an authority figure is telling them to do.” In his clinical practice, Dr. Sussman uses the “motivational interviewing” approach, which encourages children to become their own authority figure and puts the adult more in a listening and reflective role that can more helpfully add insight.

Reduce Harm Rather Than Go “Cold Turkey”

“I generally start with harm reduction” when working with children and families coping with a digital addiction, says Elaine Uskoski, video gaming addiction speaker, author, and family coach. This involves reducing rather than eliminating the time spent online and attempting to introduce other activities into the child’s life, as well as talking about why they may be using it as a form of escapism from something else. In some cases, “detox is required to heal the brain for a little time and then we can reintroduce gaming at a moderate amount afterwards,” she says.



Dr. Sussman also recommends against a “cold turkey” approach and instead suggests retraining the child brain to acclimate to both “high-dopamine” activities and “low-dopamine” activities. “By high-dopamine activity, what I’m talking about is activities that are instantly and continuously stimulating, like playing a video game or being on TikTok, whereas a low-dopamine activity is an activity that requires more patience, where we have to put more effort in to get what we want, where there’s more delay in our gratification such as doing homework or doing exercise or maybe playing a musical instrument,” he says, as the goal of treatment is helping patients find a balance between the two.

Dr. Sussman is careful to note that some screen activities can still be “low-dopamine” activities. “The reason I don’t just separate it into screen activities and non-screen activities is because you can actually do a load of other activities on a screen – coding, for example, or making PowerPoints could be a low-dopamine activity that you do on a screen,” says Sussman. However, it’s usually more effective to find non-screen low-dopamine activities, as the temptation to switch to the other problematic behaviors while on an Internet-connected screen may be too great.

Limit Temptations and Cues in the Home

“Cues are a big factor,” says Dr. Sussman. “The brain starts to release dopamine even before it gets what it wants from the cues because it’s about to receive what it wants. When someone with alcohol use disorder walks into a bar, they get all the sight, smells and sounds of the bar, and that’s what causes their brains to release dopamine before they even had their first drink. A lot of the work I do with kids and families is about adjusting the cues in the house and trying to separate high-dopamine cues from low-dopamine cues,” says Dr. Sussman. Heavy family device use and a proliferation of devices and screens in the home can act as these cues for digitally-addicted children.

Take a hard look at your own device use as well. “If you’re on your mobile phone at the table or when you’re talking to your child, you can’t be surprised if they’re going to prioritize that behavior as well,” says Naomi Fineberg, MBBS, MA, MRCPsych, Professor of Psychiatry at University of Hertfordshire and Consultant Psychiatrist in Highly Specialized Service for Obsessive Compulsive and Related Disorders at Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust.

Work Toward Establishing Healthy Routine and Schedule

Dr. Sussman emphasizes to families the importance of having a structured day, preferably with a schedule and consistent routines. When low-dopamine activities are scheduled into the day, such as sports or band practice, there is a natural reduction in the amount of unstructured time that will require more effort to keep balanced.



Parents can help teens identify other fulfilling experiences that they can build into their routine – activities like extracurriculars, hobbies, even volunteering, notes Kate Blocker, Director of Research and Programs at Children and Screens. Talk with them about their interests and their goals, and how they can incorporate that regularly into their weekly or yearly schedule.

De-Escalate Power Struggles

Children dealing with a digital addiction may engage in power struggles or become aggressive when caregivers try to intervene or interrupt screen time. Dr. Sussman advises parents and caregivers that these situations “come with the territory” in dealing with digital addictions, and advises to plan and get strategies in place beforehand. “A general rule of thumb for de-escalating is to just try to see if you can avoid all physical types of interventions – sometimes you just have to get away until the risk of aggression has subsided,” he says. In some cases these strategies may need to include consulting professionals for medication or psychotherapy approaches to minimize aggression, depending on the individual.

Try taking a contextual approach when limits are exceeded, taking into account the situation before requiring immediate compliance, suggests Fineberg. “If they’re playing a game where it’s important that they finish a certain game and they’re on it with all their friends across the world, if you make them stop in the middle of the game, that’s just never going to work,” she says. “Negotiate that with your child and let them get to the end of the game before stopping and in other similar situations.”



“Building a new community outside of the online world was the most important step for my gaming-addicted son.”

Elaine Uskowski

VIDEO GAMING ADDICTION SPEAKER,
AUTHOR, AND FAMILY COACH

Build New Community

For digital addictions like gaming addiction, the child may be isolating from family and in-person relationships, but likely has an online social community entirely based around their online behavior. Building a new community outside of the online world was “the most important step” for her gaming-addicted son, says Uskowski. “He realized that he could leave his room, he could spend time with people, and it could be just as meaningful as it was online.” Online friendships are real friendships, but developing social relationships outside of a space that provides constant cues for engaging in problematic behavior can be a helpful step towards more balanced use.



Find Balance in Your Parenting Approach

Parents may zigzag between extremes on both sides of the parenting spectrum when dealing with a digital addiction, says Dr. Sussman, approaching the problem either with extreme limit-setting that leads to micromanaging, or “giving up” and providing zero oversight, which can lead to enabling and discourage the development of the self-regulation skills kids need for healthy adult functioning.

“I’m trying to help parents balance their approach to how to deal with this problem, because I find that parents have trouble finding a balance between knowing what limits to set and what sort of natural consequences to put in place to encourage their kids to self-regulate and be more independent and set their own limits,” says Dr. Sussman. “As their kids go from younger to older teenagers, I’m trying to help parents start out with more limit-setting and go gradually towards more self-regulation” to set up older children with the skills they need to self-manage once they leave the home.

Parents have trouble finding a balance between knowing what limits to set and what sort of natural consequences to put in place to encourage their kids to self-regulate...and set their own limits.”

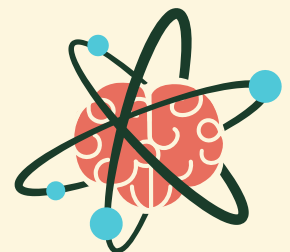
Clifford Sussman, MD

GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Develop Individualized Sensory Regulation Alternatives For Neurodivergent Youth

It’s a “very, very difficult endeavor” to reduce screen time for neurodivergent children using digital media for sensory regulation if that child does not have other sensory supports in place, says Kristen Harrison, PhD, Richard Cole Eminent Professor at Hussman School of Journalism and Media, UNC, Chapel Hill. “To reduce conflict, we need to talk with our kids as individuals because each of them lives in a different body about what kinds of places make them feel safe, comfortable, and settled and work with them to construct or design alternatives at home or in nature, so they have non-screen options when they feel dysregulated,” she says. “This doesn’t mean that they’re always going to choose those options, but they need to have them available so screens are not the only way they can bring their bodies back to a state of regulated calm.”

How to go about finding these alternatives? Harrison suggests taking stock of all available options inside and outside the home for activities that involve the body in an engaging way and/or provide a space of comfort. This could be sports, a quiet place outside where you could put a hammock, or a comfortable seat. Bring the child to the space and ask the child how they feel. “When you find a place that is kind of special to them, then that stays with them as a place that they’re going to choose to go,” she says. “It’s so much easier when you can say, ‘Let’s go do that thing you really like,’ rather than ‘No more of this other thing that you really like’ without giving them some alternative.”





Get Professional Help When Needed

It's okay if the problem is bigger than you can handle by yourself as a parent. Professional therapists and clinicians may be able to address the problem more effectively, says Uskoski. These professionals can also help identify other possible problems or core issues that may be contributing to the digital addiction.

If confused about where to go or who to see, a pediatrician or primary care doctor is a good first step, as they should be able to make appropriate referrals based on the child's needs, says Jason Nagata, MD, Associate Professor, Department of Pediatrics at University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine.

Dr. Sussman recommends assessing how dysfunctional the behaviors have become or how large the associated problems it's causing have grown. "It's difficult because you have to make sure that even kids who don't say they have a problem or are in denial still get the help they need. Sometimes it's better to err on the side of seeking help."

It's very common for children and anyone with a compulsive use problem to be ambivalent and resist getting help, says Dr. Sussman, "but if you're having these types of problems, I think it really is important to call a professional psychologist or psychiatrist to try to schedule an intake appointment. You often can't do it with the information you have by yourself," he says.



It's difficult because you have to make sure that even kids who don't say they have a problem or are in denial still get the help they need. Sometimes it's better to err on the side of seeking help."

Clifford Sussman, MD
GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY



Key Online Safety Concerns for Adolescents

- ▶ **Get the Facts – Exposure to Harmful Situations/Content is Common**

- ▶ **Talk About Privacy Settings and How They Should Be Used - More than Once**

- ▶ **There are No 100% Effective Shields**

- ▶ **Beware of “Not My Kid” Syndrome**

- ▶ **Discuss Sexting**

- ▶ **Look for Signs a Child is Experiencing an Unsafe Situation**

- ▶ **Adolescents are More Susceptible to Social Contagion**

- ▶ **Address the Harms of Viral Social Media Challenges Without Sensationalizing**

- ▶ **Break It Down By Apps and Functions**

- ▶ **Understand the Common Scenarios of Online Sexual Exploitation and Sextortion**

- ▶ **Staying Safe – Quick Do’s and Don’ts**

- ▶ **Suicide Contagion: The Role of News Coverage and Fictional Portrayals of Suicide**

- ▶ **Teach Kids to Respect Red Flags**

- ▶ **Drug Content Online is Pervasive and Directed at Adolescents**

- ▶ **Consider Family Pairing of Media Accounts**

- ▶ **Be Mindful of Unique Vulnerabilities of Neurodivergent Children**

Get the Facts – Exposure to Harmful Situations/Content is Common



An adolescent with a smartphone has access to the full spectrum of internet content – the good, the bad, and the ugly. The harms they encounter “are not theoretical,” says Marc Berkman, JD, CEO of Organization for Social Media Safety. “They are, by the clear evidence, severe, and they are pervasive.” Berkman cites recent research that has found:

- 43% of young adults had seen self-harm content on Instagram.
- 32.5% indicated that they had performed the same or similar self-harming behavior as a consequence of seeing self-harm content.
- 20% of teens have sent or received a nude or semi-nude photo or video of themselves.
- 25% of young people see illicit drugs advertised for sale on social media.
- 5% of middle and high school students reported they had been the victim of sextortion.
- 323% increase in online enticement of children between 2021 and 2023 reported by National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.
- 12,600 sextortion victims were reported by the FBI from October 2021 to March 2023, at least 20 of whom died by suicide.

Talk About Privacy Settings and How They Should Be Used – More than Once

Risk-taking during adolescence is a perfectly normal part of development and identity formation, and these risk-taking behaviors are now partly taking place online, says child and adolescent psychiatrist Tracy Asamoah, MD. Adolescents don’t always understand that they need to use the settings available to them to protect themselves and their privacy online as much as possible, and adults in their lives can help show and model using these settings for them, she says.

Sit down and talk to your kids about what apps they have on their phone and the privacy settings on each one, suggests Caley Arzamarski, PhD, NCSP Psychologist, Clinical Assistant Professor, Child & Adolescent Psychiatry at Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University.

Privacy and safety settings are not just “set it and forget it” the first time your child gets their phone - continually review privacy and safety together, says Meryl Alper, PhD, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Northeastern University. As your child matures and uses different apps and features, reviewing them and their effects is recommended.



There are No 100% Effective Shields

Privacy settings have limits and may create a false sense of security online. “There is no such thing as a privacy setting in a world that was built from the ground up for communication. This is a pipe dream,” says Richard Guerry, Founder and Executive Director of Institute for Responsible Online and Cell-Phone Communication (IROC2). What people commonly think of as “privacy settings” are really visibility or transparency settings with limited capabilities that should not be relied upon for child safety, he notes.

“There is no way in this world that you can guarantee 100% that your kids won’t see something,” agrees Elizabeth Englander, PhD, Executive Director, Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, and Professor of Psychology at Bridgewater State University. “You can lock down your own network, you can lock down your kids’ devices. But there are devices and networks everywhere. And the idea that you can shield kids from this is not always possible.”

What is more protective than locking everything down is making sure your kids are willing to communicate with you when they see something online that makes them feel “icky” or scared, suggests Englander.



*Please don't think
'not my kid'
or 'my kid would never.'
Good kids make
bad choices."*

Titania Jordan

BARK TECHNOLOGIES

Beware of “Not My Kid” Syndrome

All children are at potential risk of online harm or exposure to bad actors, not just children who historically have made risky choices or have less impulse control. Expecting adult-level decision-making from even the most well-behaved adolescent is dangerous, cautions Titania Jordan, Chief Parent Officer at parental monitoring software platform Bark Technologies. Jordan has seen too many families who didn’t think their children were at risk. “Please don’t think ‘not my kid’ or ‘my kid would never.’ Good kids make bad choices. The frontal lobe of their brains that’s responsible for emotional regulation and impulse control and decision-making, it’s not fully formed until they’re in their early to mid 20s. They’re not capable of making the adult decisions that we expect.”



Pay attention to signs that your child isn't thriving."

Discuss Sexting

"You need to have conversations around sexting," says Jordan, who notes experienced educators referring to sexting as "the new first base." Just because it's common does not mean it's appropriate for children, and they need to know about safeguards for sexting experiences that go wrong, she says. In addition to familiarizing yourself with local laws where you live, be aware that in the US, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has a service called Take It Down that can help children get "nudes" taken down offline if necessary.



Look for Signs a Child is Experiencing an Unsafe Situation

How can you know if something that warrants parental attention or intervention is happening in the realm of an adolescent's private internet use? Jordan urges parents to pay attention to signs that your child isn't thriving:

- How is their appetite?
- How is their sleep?
- How are their grades?
- How is their demeanor?
- Are they more or less interested in things that they used to be interested in or not?
- Is there any indication in your child that something has changed with them, that they're not thriving and your gut tells you something's "off?" Trust your parental instinct.

Adolescents are More Susceptible to Social Contagion

Social contagion is how exposure to a behavior by one or more people influences others to engage in the same or similar behavior, says Vicki Harrison, MSW, Program Director, Center for Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University School of Medicine. Just as biological pathogens spread through exposure, emotions and behavior can also spread in the same type of way, she says.

Examples of social contagion that spread through digital media include non-suicidal self-injury and suicide, viral challenges, and the self-diagnosis and adoption of symptoms of specific medical or mental disorders.

Typical characteristics of adolescent brain development such as sensitivity to peer influence, proneness to impulsivity and risk-taking, and heightened need for a sense of belonging make adolescents particularly susceptible to social contagion behavior, says Harrison. "The adolescent stage is different from being a fully formed adult." Adding these tendencies to the amplification of messages that is made possible by the saturation of digital media into modern adolescents' lives can have a real impact, she says.



Familiarizing oneself with the particular functions and risks of popular online platforms can help parents and caregivers understand where potential problems may lie.”

Steven Grocki

CHILD EXPLOITATION AND OBSCENITY SECTION
(CEOS) AT THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Address the Harms of Viral Social Media Challenges Without Sensationalizing

Viral social media challenges are often a source of socially contagious behavior that may involve real risks to health and safety. “Talk to youth regarding the potential physical harm of participating in viral social media challenges, but balance it out with acknowledging some of the potential benefits as well,” says Pamela Wisniewski, PhD, Associate Professor of Computer Science, Flowers Family Fellow in Engineering at University of Vanderbilt.

However, Wisniewski notes that when reporting or sharing negative consequences of viral social media challenges, caregivers should avoid fear-based narratives that sensationalize the behavior. “The best way to get a teen to tune out is if we take this fear based approach and abstinence based approach of just telling them no to everything instead of giving them some practical ways to keep themselves safe,” she says.

Break It Down By Apps and Functions

Familiarizing oneself with the particular functions and risks of popular online platforms can help parents and caregivers understand where potential problems may lie, says Steve Grocki, Chief of the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section (CEOS) at the Department of Justice. Grocki cites these examples:



- TikTok is a heavily consumed platform by youth that restricts direct messages (DMs) to known minors – check whether your child’s profile identifies them as a minor or as an adult. Parents can restrict posting capabilities for minors’ profiles on TikTok and may want to do so.
- Minor-age users of Instagram are often “sitting ducks” for bad actors if they have not restricted access to posts that often disclose personal information and photos – parents can sign on to another account and test their child’s profile visibility.
- Snapchat allows users to find other strangers based on interests, and can also be exploited by perpetrators using the text function where the texts and evidence of solicitation or grooming disappear.
- Popular youth gaming platforms like Discord and Roblox are also used by strangers to gain access to children if the child is participating in open play environments instead of closed-play servers with known peers.

Understand the Common Scenarios of Online Sexual Exploitation and Sextortion



- **ONLINE SEXUAL GROOMING** – requires the formation of a relationship or building of trust, which often happens over a period of time, and may lead to online sexual solicitation or real-life contact and abuse.
- **ONLINE SEXUAL SOLICITATION** – contact and soliciting of nudes, partial nudes, or child sexual abuse material (CSAM) – may happen one time or repeatedly.
- **SEXTORTION** – a type of blackmail in which the victim is enticed into sharing intimate images then coerced into continually sharing more and often increasingly sexually extreme images or videos, or financially sextorted by paying money to prevent the sharing of the images.

Scenario 1: Online sexual grooming leading to online sexual solicitation

A common scenario for online sexual grooming involves a perpetrator lurking in a chat room, looking for signs of vulnerability from a young community member, such as seemingly not being supervised, using more sexualized language, or using a sexy screen name, says Elizabeth Jeglic, PhD, Professor of Psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. The perpetrator attempts to gain 1:1 access as well as contact offline, isolating the victim from the chat and encouraging the minor to hide the relationship from their family. Just before the abuse occurs (abuse can include online solicitation and exchange of child sexual abuse material, in-person sexual abuse offline, online sexual talk), the perpetrator will introduce sexualized language. Online sexual grooming develops more quickly than in-person grooming, and research indicates this “red flag” behavior of introducing sexualized language will often occur within 24 hours of first contact, says Jeglic.

Scenario 2: Online sexual solicitation leading to financial sextortion

Typically, perpetrators will use a photo stolen online or an AI-generated image (often of an attractive woman) as bait to approach the victim (often male) via Instagram or Snapchat, says Dorrian Horsey, JD, attorney at Minc Law. Small talk becomes conversation steered toward sexual topics and the perpetrator will suggest mutual exchange of intimate photos. Once the victim shares a photo, the perpetrator quickly becomes threatening in tone, often claiming they will “ruin your life” by sharing with parents or law enforcement. This is terrifying to victims who are coerced into financial payments to keep the perpetrator from sharing their intimate images.

Staying Safe – Quick Do’s and Don’ts

► Make Sure Kids DON’T:

- Share their name, age, or location with anyone.
- Share a picture online.
- Chat with adults or strangers online.
- Agree to meet anybody that they meet online.



► Make Sure Kids DO:

- Review and understand the signs of online grooming (sexualized conversation or shared imagery) with your children.
- Get youth to think critically – explain why the guardrails are in place, not just “don’t do it.”
- Let your children know you are there for them no matter what, even if mistakes are made.
- Set social privacy settings to maximum for younger adolescents.

(Elizabeth Jeglic)

Suicide Contagion: The Role of News Coverage and Fictional Portrayals of Suicide

Researchers have identified direct effects to rates of suicide after certain types of media coverage of suicides, coined the “Werther Effect.” There is a typical increase of about 13% in suicides in the months after there is sensationalist reporting about suicide from a celebrity says social contagion expert Thomas Niederkrotenthaler, PhD, MSc, Professor of Public Health, Head of the Public, Mental Health Research Unit, Deputy Head of the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine at Medical University of Vienna.

It’s not just news coverage of famous deaths by suicide – fictional portrayals in content popular with adolescents has also been seen to have an effect on suicide rates, notes Niederkrotenthaler. “We found that in the three months after the release of *13 Reasons Why* [a popular drama with a plot centered on a teen’s suicide], there were about 94 additional suicides among 10 to 19 year olds in the United States, an increase of about 13%,” says Niederkrotenthaler. This increase was stronger in young women in this age range at 22%, while there was a 12% increase in boys and young men.

Guide your child away from media portrayals or news coverage of suicide that focuses on suicide methods, advises Niederkrotenthaler. Instead, encourage content that focuses on help-seeking and resources on where to get help for those who are at some risk of crisis and suicidality, he says. “It’s also important to discuss any celebrity suicide news with adolescents who might be part of the fanbase and very much affected by the reporting,” notes Niederkrotenthaler.

Teach Kids to Respect Red Flags



Communication with youth is critical in helping them build the skills to recognize “red flag” situations and act upon that information to keep themselves safe from common sexual exploitation scenarios, says Horsey. “I often hear kids say, ‘I saw that was a red flag, but I kept going because I was bored,’ or ‘I just want to see what happened,’” she says. Helping them understand some of the real consequences of “red flag” situations may help them resist this behavior when someone online takes the conversation to a sexual place, she says.

Adults cannot always protect youth themselves, especially as children age into adolescence and beyond, notes Jeglic. “We want to give them the skills to think critically, because we cannot always protect them. When they inevitably encounter things that are challenging for them, they will think critically about them and hopefully think twice about them.”

Drug Content Online is Pervasive and Directed at Adolescents

Though many social platforms claim to protect minor accounts, tests from industry watchdogs reveal a different story. “Instagram pledges to make all under 16 accounts private by default,” says Robert F. Lawlor Jr, MS-ADPP, MS, BSCJ, Drug Intelligence Officer at New England HIDTA. “However, the Tech Transparency Project found that a lot of the under 16 accounts created through the Instagram website were public by default, which means your 14, 15, 16 year-olds’ Instagram account is public, open and for anybody to see.”

Lawlor notes that though Instagram has banned some drug-related hashtags like “#MDMA” for the party drug Ecstasy, “If teens search for MDMA, Instagram will autofill alternative hashtags for the same drug into the search bar and bring the children right to these videos and these Instagram stories,” effectively steering them directly to drug content.

Parent activist Samuel Chapman, Director at Parents for Safer Children, says “the drug dealers go on to Snapchat, which is the dark Web for children now. They pretend to be 15 or 14 years old and they network inside of a school, some place where they think the kids will have money. My son was presented with a drug menu with colorful emojis and different prices and told he could get it for free if he helped the guy network and adjust his menu.”

What is the “dark web?”

The dark web is a set of web pages on the World Wide Web that cannot be indexed by search engines, are not viewable in a standard Web browser, require specific means (such as specialized software or network configuration) in order to access, and use encryption to provide anonymity and privacy for users.

Consider Family Pairing of Media Accounts

As you work together with your adolescent for increased awareness of safety concerns and eventual increased autonomy over their online presence, consider doing “family paired” accounts when setting up a new platform or app access. “When your child turns whatever age you think is appropriate, at least 13, open these things together,” suggests Diana Graber, MA, Founder of Cyber Civics and Cyberwise, and author of *Raising Humans in a Digital World*. By doing so, you can have ongoing conversations about appropriate or inappropriate content or interactions you’re seeing on the app. This can work, for example, by you and your child each downloading TikTok and then going into settings and setting up “family pairing.”



Be Mindful of Unique Vulnerabilities of Neurodivergent Children

Neurodivergent children may have particular susceptibilities and vulnerabilities to online harms, including cyberbullying, online grooming, viral social media challenges or social contagion behavior.

Neurodivergent youth who have trouble interpreting social cues may not understand when someone is grooming them or engaging in inappropriate conversations online, says Jeglic.

There is an increased vulnerability for neurodivergent youth to be victimized by cyberbullying, but also an increased risk to being a cyberbullying perpetrator, says Abigail Phillips, MLIS, SLIS, PhD, Assistant Professor, School of Information Studies at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. “Because of the way they communicate with themselves or communicate to themselves and with others, they may be extra vulnerable to being cyberbullied. They can also be the cyberbullies, it’s very common.” A neurodivergent youth may unknowingly be a victim or a perpetrator in some cases due to a reduced ability to pick up on social cues that harm is being caused, she notes.

For social contagion behavior, parents should consider the following, says Wisniewski:

- **Neurodivergent children might pick up new psychosomatic symptoms or stim from social media based on their level of stress.**
- **Overliteral interpretation of instructions or language that may make participation in viral social media challenges more harmful.**

It's Happening – Adolescent Porn Exposure and Sexuality Development Online



It's common and developmentally appropriate to develop increasing sexual curiosity in adolescence, often before one has any personal experience to draw on. The anonymity and ease of accessing sexual content online exerts a strong lure for adolescents seeking information about sexual topics, and research indicates that 3 in 4 (73%) of adolescents have been intentionally or inadvertently exposed to pornographic content online.

- ▶ **Have “The Conversation” – It’s Protective**
- ▶ **Most Kids are Seeing Sexual Content – Intentionally or Not**
- ▶ **Get Over the Discomfort – Yours and Theirs**
- ▶ **Sexual Content in Media Affects Teen Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors**
- ▶ **Rough Sex Behaviors/Choking is Increasing Online and Offline**
- ▶ **Educate Youth on Challenges of AI-Based Relationship Bots**
- ▶ **Moderate Your Reactions – Reduce Shame**
- ▶ **Counter Media Messages and Scripted Content with Reality**
- ▶ **Communicate Your Values**

Have “The Conversation” – It’s Protective

It may be uncomfortable for many parents but it’s necessary. Research says that talking to your kids about relationships and sex does not increase the likelihood that they will become sexually active, says Sarah DeGue, PhD, Founder & Principal, EVOLVE Violence Prevention, LLC. “In fact, talking to your kids about sex and relationships will decrease the likelihood that they will engage in sexual activity. Open, responsive parent-child discussions can postpone or reduce sexual activity in teens and may reduce their risk for experiencing or engaging in sexual and dating violence.”



Having talks about sex with children is protective, as it gives them a space to learn while also showing them that you know what you’re talking about and that they can trust you and talk to you, says Amy Lang, MA, Sexual Health Educator at Birds & Bees & Kids.

Don’t tell yourself that your kids won’t see porn. “One hundred percent they will see porn,” says Lang. “Think about it in terms of preparation. Talking with your kids about sexuality is really important in terms of helping them manage their pornography exposure. Talking about it decreases curiosity about it.”

Children themselves report these conversations as valuable, says Elizabeth Englander, PhD, Executive Director, Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, Professor of Psychology at Bridgewater State University. “Kids who told us that their parents had conversations with them about these kinds of issues – about two thirds of them said that conversations with their parents were really helpful.”

Older youth and young adults who had conversations about sexual content with a parent or trusted adult described them as “protective well into adolescence and adulthood” says Debra Herbenick, PhD, MPH, Provost Professor and Director of the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at the Indiana University School of Public Health-Bloomington, “because they really understood at a young age about how those social spaces worked.”

Most Kids are Seeing Sexual Content – Intentionally or Not

Children and adolescents who are not necessarily looking for sexual information are still seeing this content regularly, noted several experts. “Depictions of sexual talk and behaviors are quite frequent in entertainment media for youth,” says Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, PhD, Professor of Communication at University of Arizona.

“We did a national study where we actually looked at what teens were consuming and what they were being exposed to on online content. We found they were being exposed to sexual content, and they were also being exposed to pornography. Children were pretty disturbed about what they were seeing,” says Carolyn West, PhD, Professor of Clinical Psychology at University of Washington.



Having talks about sex with children is protective.”

Amy Lang, MA
BIRDS & BEES & KIDS

Get Over the Discomfort – Yours and Theirs

“The research confirms that kids and teens want to know what their parents think, even if they act otherwise or are uncomfortable discussing a topic,” says author and sexuality educator Cindy Pierce, MEd. “Parents should demonstrate courage by digging into awkward conversations with their kids. Over time and with practice, parents feel more at ease, and kids feel less fazed as they become tenderized by ongoing conversations.”

“To parents who feel overwhelmed at the thought of talking to their kids about sex, it’s okay if you’re not good at this. You don’t need the perfect words and you don’t need to have all the answers. Anything you say is going to be better than the porn they are going to see, and you will have begun to establish yourself as a resource that they can count on. So get the information you need, think through your values and start the conversation, no matter how uptight you are,” says psychologist, educator, and founder of Polestar Parenting, Sharon Maxwell, PhD.

“One helpful way to get over resistance from your child in talking about sex-related topics is to tie the concepts of digital privileges and responsibilities together,” suggests Pierce. “It is a privilege to be able to watch anything online, to have a phone, to be given access to a device without adult supervision. The responsibility that goes along with having those privileges is to engage in conversations with parents and caregivers.”

Another way of approaching this conversation with a resistant child is sharing with them that this is your responsibility as a parent, suggests Maxwell. “Tell them this: ‘At the end of the day, as your parent, I have to look in the mirror and know that I’ve done the best job I could do. Right now, my job is to give you important information and tell you what my values are about this. So as painful as it is for you, you’re going to have to sit down and listen because when I go to bed tonight, I’m going to look in the mirror and know I did the best job I could.’” This approach establishes a bigger framework that emphasizes the importance of holding oneself responsible for one’s own actions, even when those actions are difficult and annoying.

Sexual Content in Media Affects Teen Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors

Research suggests that teens who consume more sexual screen media have more permissive sexual attitudes and also describe their peers as being more sexually active than they actually are, says Aubrey. They are also more likely to endorse a “double standard” attitude for mixed-gender sexual relationships, including:

- Consequences of sex: Girls should be punished and boys rewarded for having sex.
- Romantic relationship sexual expectations: For girls, to control timing of sex; for boys, to control the amount of sex.
- More lax perceptions of sexual aggression.

The sexual behavior of teens who consume more sexual media is also different; they tend to start having sex at an earlier age, have a greater number of sexual partners, and more engagement in risky sexual behaviors, shares Aubrey.





Many young women talk about learning about choking from seeing it in internet memes and in online fanfiction. Some of these memes mock the idea of getting consent for choking and conflate it with blurry lines around aggression and violence.”

Debra Herbenick, PhD, MPH

INDIANA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH-BLOOMINGTON

Rough Sex Behaviors/Choking is Increasing Online and Offline

The last decade has seen a marked increase in what experts call “rough sex behaviors,” including practices commonly referred to as “choking,” notes Herbenick. Rough sex is an “imperfect umbrella term” used for a range of behaviors that can include light and hard spanking, sexual choking (which is actually a form of strangulation), smothering, name-calling, slapping, and many other kinds of sex, says Herbenick.

Sexual choking (strangulation) in particular is “never zero-risk,” she says. “Because it involves external pressure to the neck that can restrict blood flow or airflow, it is technically strangulation, and can lead to short-term and long-term health consequences.” Her research indicates around two thirds of women, nearly a third of men, and more than half of transgender and non-binary college students report having been choked, usually consensually. “Our most recent data show that it’s becoming more frequent, more of a normalized part of their sexual repertoire,” she says. “Among random samples of college students who have engaged in choking – 1 in 3 report first engaging in it between the ages of 12 and 17.”

Herbenick’s research indicates that many young people can’t remember where they first heard or learned about choking, because they can think of so many different places they’ve seen or heard about it, from popular TV shows like Euphoria and The Idol to large numbers of TikTok videos on the subject to number one songs that define choking as “vanilla” behavior. Many young women talk about learning about choking from seeing it in internet memes and in online fanfiction. Some of these memes mock the idea of getting consent for choking and conflate it with blurry lines around aggression and violence, says Herbenick.

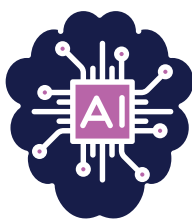


Educate Youth on Challenges of AI-Based Relationship Bots

Part of the new era of widely available online and powerful AI tools is the development of personalized AI chatbots for the purpose of having a relationship. These chatbots are designed and programmed to be emotionally supportive and trainable. While usually designed to be a safe environment, romantic relationships with bots are possible, and may offer nudity and sexuality, says Englander. Because humans are used to train these chatbots, they can be quite realistic, notes Englander.

“Kids really need to be aware of how AI boyfriends and girlfriends work,” says Englander. Help them understand that the developers of AI chatbots are trying to get people to download their app, share personal information, and allow trackers on their devices, she says. Also make youth aware that the apps or “boyfriends” or “girlfriends” are going to try to increase engagement by pushing users towards sexual topics, sharing photos, or revealing private information.

In addition, “it’s important to understand that these are not real relationships in the sense that they’re never challenging,” notes Englander. An AI chatbot won’t have needs or moods, and are always catering to the user. This doesn’t create conditions for developing the social capacity for a human relationship.



Make youth aware that AI “boyfriends” or “girlfriends” are going to try to increase engagement by pushing users towards sexual topics, sharing photos, or revealing private information.”

Moderate Your Reactions – Reduce Shame

“Your most important job as a parent is to keep your child talking to you,” says Maxwell. Any reaction or nuance of judgment on your face when your child talks to you about sensitive topics will guarantee that your adolescent won’t come back for another conversation, many experts warn.

You are the best resource your child has so keep the lines of communication open. You may feel shocked or disturbed by what you hear, take a deep breath and put on a neutral mask. Ask questions. Listen. Be curious, not judgmental. If you can keep them talking and feeling like you are a safe place to share their concerns you’ve given them the best protection you can. By creating this safe space for honest conversation, you are also maximizing your chances of them listening to your thoughts and considering your values,” says Maxwell.

Counter Media Messages and Scripted Content with Reality

“There is a rather dramatic overrepresentation of teen sexual behavior in mainstream media,” says Aubrey, in that the percentage of sexually active teens in entertainment media is significantly greater than the percentage of teens who actually have had sex. In addition, portrayals of teen sex in media often depict casual sex relationships or “hookups”, sometimes called “friends with benefits” relationships, she notes, and the sexual behaviors are largely unencumbered by discussions of risks, like the contraction of an STI, for example, and responsibility, which would include taking precautions like using condoms while having sex.

Parents can use media portrayals of sexual content to counter these perceptions as well as continue to convey values on what constitutes healthy (and unhealthy) behavior and relationships. Talking about sexual topics by using media examples also helps ground the discussion and makes it less embarrassing for the teenager, notes Aubrey, because the discussion isn’t centered around their own experiences or behavior.

When educating your adolescent about porn, it’s very important to convey to them that this content is 100% staged, says Stacey Honowitz, Supervisor in the Sex Crimes and Child Abuse Unit at Broward State Attorney’s Office. “Adolescents often don’t realize that pornography is on a set and they are being directed and told what to do.” Using this information can help parents explain how behavior seen in porn is fairly unrealistic and does not translate to more common sexual relationships and behavior in real life, she notes.



The percentage of sexually active teens in entertainment media is significantly greater than the percentage of teens who actually have had sex.”

Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, PhD
UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Communicate Your Values

“When we talk about sex, we are always talking about values. And values are one of the most fundamental things we can talk about with our kids because it gives them a place to start,” says Lang. “Stick to your values and to what you think is right and wrong,” says Englander.


Lead these values-based conversations with calm and curiosity, suggests Herbenick, focusing on the positive, respectful, and safer approaches to sexuality and relationships that you envision for them.

Being specific about what you mean by a healthy relationship to sex and sexuality will help give your kids a frame of reference of what “healthy” can look like, says Lang, and should include examples of unhealthy relationships.

This guide/tip sheet was created based on content shared in Children and Screens’ [#AskTheExperts](#) webinars and [“Screen Deep”](#) podcast episodes from 2020-2025.


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