



# THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUTH

## OVERVIEW

Social media is an integral part of daily life for most young people. Recent data demonstrates that youth widely and frequently use social media apps. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 30% of teens reported using social media more than once per hour, and 77% reported frequent social media use (typically more than 3-4 hours per day).<sup>1</sup> Despite age restrictions on many social media apps, nearly 40% of children between ages 8-12 use social media daily.<sup>2</sup> The increase in social media use correlates to increases in bullying, feelings of sadness and hopelessness, and suicide risk among young children and teens.<sup>3</sup> Studies show that less frequent social media use is associated with higher life satisfaction, as well as improved social-emotional health and academic performance.<sup>4</sup> While more research is needed to determine the full impact of social media use on youth mental health, the current alarming associations are cause for concern.

## KEY POINTS

- The growth of social media correlates with a sharp rise in depression and anxiety among young people.
- Social media use releases dopamine (the feel-good hormones) in the brain, making it potentially addictive.
- Between 5% and 20% of teenagers are addicted to social media.
- Social media can facilitate social relationships that build support networks, maintain friendships, and share hobby interests.
- Establishing limitations on youth social media use is the best option as research into its impact on developing brains continues.

<sup>1</sup> Young, E., McCain, J.L., Mercado, M.C. et al. (2024). Frequent social media use and experiences with bullying, victimization, persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and suicide risk among high school students—youth risk behavior survey, United States, 2023. *Supplements, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, October 10, 2024, 73(4); 23-30. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/73/su/su7304a3.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Vidal, C., Katzenstein, J. (2025). Social Media and Mental Health in Children. Johns Hopkins Medicine. Retrieved from <https://www.hhr.virginia.gov/initiatives/safe-kids-strong-families>.

<sup>3</sup> Young, E., McCain, J.L., Mercado, M.C. et al. (2024). Frequent social media use and experiences with bullying, victimization, persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and suicide risk among high school students—youth risk behavior survey, United States, 2023. *Supplements, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, October 10, 2024, 73(4); 23-30. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/73/su/su7304a3.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Office of the Surgeon General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). Social media has both positive and negative impacts on children and adolescents. Bookshelf ID: NBK594763. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK594763/>.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE DEVELOPING BRAIN

Social media impacts developing brains more acutely. The prefrontal cortex brain regions are not fully developed in preteens and teenagers. The prefrontal lobe contributes to cognitive processing and emotional regulation, and the underdeveloped prefrontal cortex can prevent youth from fully processing the long-term impacts of their actions.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, research shows cerebellum volume decreases slightly with increased social media use.<sup>6</sup> The cerebellum makes up only 10 percent of the physical brain, yet includes over half of the entire brain's neurons with possible cognitive functions, so social media may prevent or delay development. Social media also influences the brain's reward system through unpredictable and rapid gratification. Social media notifications, likes, and comments cause the brain to release dopamine and repeatedly crave engagement.<sup>7</sup> This pattern can ultimately lead to a cycle of obsessive behavior and addiction, which has been noted to look "remarkably similar to your brain on cocaine."<sup>8</sup> This is especially worrisome for young, developing brains exposed to the dopamine-addictive nature of social media.

## POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

When used responsibly, social media can provide young people with opportunities for interpersonal connection, self-expression, and learning. Youth can utilize social media to build support networks and share hobby interests. These benefits especially extend to young people who may feel geographically or culturally isolated.<sup>9</sup> Social media platforms can spark creativity for young people who can express their emotions through photography, music, and other media. Creative outlets expressed through social media present opportunities for youth to develop a sense of identity during their formative years. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory from 2023 also notes that social media can provide a gateway for youth to learn about mental health and pursue proper care.

## RISKS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Recent research into youth social media use identifies potential harms and links excessive social media use with poor mental health. Youth aged 12-15 participating in a longitudinal study who spent over 3 hours per day on social media showed a twofold increase in negative mental health outcomes, including symptoms of depression and anxiety. Similarly, several studies on college-aged youth have found a relationship between social media use and increased depression and anxiety. One study has attributed over 300,000 new cases of depression across

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<sup>5</sup> ProCare Therapy. (2020, February 27). The dangers of social media on teens. Retrieved from <https://www.procaretherapy.com>.

<sup>6</sup> Hartman, A. (2025, June 25). The neuroscience of social media: how algorithms hijack your brain. Richmond Integrative and Functional Medicine

<sup>7</sup> Masri-Zada T, Martirosyan S, Abdou A, et al. The Impact of Social Media & Technology on Child and Adolescent Mental Health. *J Psychiatry Psychiatr Disord.* 2025;9(2):111-130.

<sup>8</sup> Hartman, A. (2025, June 25). The neuroscience of social media: how algorithms hijack your brain. Richmond Integrative and Functional Medicine

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General. *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory.* 2023.

college-aged youth to the introduction of a new social media platform. These adverse outcomes are even more concerning for adolescents whose brains are in an earlier stage of development.<sup>10</sup>

The negative mental health trend since the advent of social media is more pronounced among girls than their male peers. Social media use among girls is linked with higher risks of poor body image, low self-esteem, and depressive symptoms. Studies into the disparate impact of social media on girls identify comparison with unrealistic bodily expectations as the primary contributing factor. Furthermore, girls and LGBTQ youth are disproportionately targeted by harassment and abuse on social media sites, likely contributing to the higher rates of anxiety and depression.<sup>11</sup>

Social media can also reduce a young person's capacity to be attentive and mindful. Recent research suggests that young people that use social media excessively are more likely to develop symptoms of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).<sup>12</sup> While further research is needed into the links between social media use and ADHD, researchers point to the increase in short-form content across social media platforms as a potential explanation for current findings. Short-form content is fast-paced and provides instant gratification that can interfere with the brain's natural reward system over time.<sup>13</sup>

Over time, compulsive social media use can grow into an addiction, which has several psychological and social consequences for youth. Researchers estimate that between 5% and 20% of teenagers are addicted to social media. Researchers point to infinite scrolling features and personalized algorithm-driven content as potential drivers of social media addiction. Young people may turn to social media for entertainment, but it can quickly become a coping mechanism that draws them away from personal relationships and interferes with daily responsibilities.<sup>14</sup>

## EVIDENCE-BASED TREATMENTS

The impact of social media on our children and youth is not yet fully known. More research is needed to determine the best way to counteract the adverse mental health outcomes associated with social media use. Since social media is designed to keep users engaged with a variety of content as long as possible, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents monitor social media use for positive content and limit their children's time spent on social media. Parents must be proactive in setting boundaries and having open discussions about safety online. Table 1 displays strategies that have been used to help reduce the risks of social media use.

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<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General. *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*. 2023.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General. *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*. 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Hassan, M.M., Orebi, H.A., Salama, B. *et al.* The association of social media use and other social factors with symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in Egyptian university students. *BMC Psychiatry* 25, 19 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-024-05988-6>.

<sup>13</sup> Chiencharoenthanakij R, Yothamart K, Chantathamma N, et al. Short-Form Video Media Use Is Associated With Greater Inattentive. Symptoms in Thai School-Age Children: Insights From a Cross-Sectional Survey. *Brain Behav.* 2025;15(7):e70656. doi:10.1002/brb3.70656.

<sup>14</sup> Amirthalingam J, Khera A. Understanding Social Media Addiction: A Deep Dive. *Cureus.* 2024;16(10):e72499. Published 2024 Oct 27. doi:10.7759/cureus.72499.

**Table 1**  
**Strategies to Reduce the Risks of Youth Social Media Use**

**Strategies:**

- Studies have shown that depression and anxiety are alleviated when social media time is reduced or eliminated. Apps such as FamilyPause, ScreenTime (Apple), Digital Wellbeing (Android), and Google Family Link allow parents to lock the child’s phone, set screen time limits and manage the child’s phone remotely, or manage the child’s Google account. Phones may also be suspended with the carrier.
- Using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, instead of turning to social media, is helpful in processing any impact from negative social media use. Young people may discuss concerns and issues with a therapist who is nonjudgmental and incorporates age-appropriate strategies, such as problem-solving and education.
- Stop using screens at least one hour before bedtime. Blue light from the screen interferes with quality sleep and contributes to sleep deprivation, which contributes to depression and thoughts of suicide. Keep the phone and screens out of the bedroom, if at all possible, but especially one hour before bedtime.
- Setting boundaries to limit social media use and enforcing them reduces the risk of cyberbullying, poor grades, mental health concerns, and suicide.
- Creating a Family Media Plan to establish clear guidelines about the amount of screen time, digital etiquette, and appropriate online behavior.
- Enforcing tech-free areas at home or on vacation (dinner, breakfast, company).
- Having parents get to know their child’s in-person friend group, and staying in touch with their child’s activities on and off social media.
- Having a conversation with the child about harmful content, and about not really knowing who these online strangers are. Strangers may lie about their name, gender, age, situation, etc.
- Encourage the use of critical thinking while using social media. (e.g., If it seems too good to be true, it probably is; don’t believe everything on social media; some people are endorsing products or doing crazy challenges for their own gain; etc.)
- Role-modeling positive online behavior by commenting respectfully on social media and balancing social media with non-screen activities and personal connections.
- Encouraging youth to participate in extracurricular activities, such as sports, theater, music performance, chorus, writing, cheering, or other school clubs.
- Using incentives to provide rewards for time spent away from screens and interacting personally with others.
- Parents following and checking their child’s social media accounts (and possibly their friends’ accounts) for appropriateness.

## RESOURCES AND ORGANIZATIONS

**American Academy of Pediatrics' Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health**

<https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/media-and-children/center-of-excellence-on-social-media-and-youth-mental-health/>

**American Psychological Association**

<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2024/04/teen-social-use-mental-health>

**Annie E. Casey Foundation**

[https://www.aecf.org/blog/social-medias-concerning-effect-on-teen-mental-health?gad\\_source=1&gad\\_campaignid=11154517408&gbraid=0AAAAAD3xzvFYfxWZmh8UB\\_P0wXjZGJyHP&gclid=Cj0KCQjwmK\\_CBhCEARIsAMKwcD6NOcISQce7IFTTn29tEjrZElyXzDgig0v-wBBVVOTp7ELtJNzBMEcaAi3YEALw\\_wcB](https://www.aecf.org/blog/social-medias-concerning-effect-on-teen-mental-health?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=11154517408&gbraid=0AAAAAD3xzvFYfxWZmh8UB_P0wXjZGJyHP&gclid=Cj0KCQjwmK_CBhCEARIsAMKwcD6NOcISQce7IFTTn29tEjrZElyXzDgig0v-wBBVVOTp7ELtJNzBMEcaAi3YEALw_wcB)

**Behavioral Health News**

<https://behavioralhealthnews.org/the-impact-of-social-media-on-youth-mental-health-risks-benefits-and-family-approaches/>

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/73/su/su7304a3.htm>

**Child Mind Institute**

<https://www.childmind.org>

**Common Sense Education**

<https://www.commonsense.org>

**Connect Safely**

<https://connectsafely.org>

**Internet Matters**

<https://www.internetmatters.org>

**John Hopkins Medicine**

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/social-media-and-mental-health-in-children-and-teens>

**Mayo Clinic**

[https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/tween-and-teen-health/in-](https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/tween-and-teen-health/in-depth/teens-and-social-media-use/art-20474437)

[depth/teens-and-social-media-use/art-20474437](https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/tween-and-teen-health/in-depth/teens-and-social-media-use/art-20474437)

**Mental Health Coalition**

<https://www.thementalhealthcoalition.org>

**National Institutes of Health**

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10476631/>

**Organization for Social Media Safety**

<https://www.socialmediasafety.org/about/>

**Pew Research Center**

<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2025/04/22/teens-social-media-and-mental-health/>

**Safe Surfin' Foundation**

<https://safesurfin.org/resources/>

**Social Media TestDrive**

<https://socialmediatestdrive.org>

**Stanford Law School**

<https://law.stanford.edu/2024/05/20/social-media-addiction-and-mental-health-the-growing-concern-for-youth-well-being/>

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

<https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/reports-and-publications/youth-mental-health/social-media/index.html>

**World Health Organization**

<https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/25-09-2024-teens--screens-and-mental-health>

**Young Minds**

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk>

**Yale Medicine**

<https://www.yalemedicine.org/news/social-media-teen-mental-health-a-parents-guide>

## VIRGINIA RESOURCES AND ORGANIZATIONS

### Governor Youngkin's Executive Order 43

<https://www.governor.virginia.gov/newsroom/news-releases/2024/november/name-1036768-en.html#:~:text=RICHMOND%2C%20VA%20%E2%80%93%20Governor%20Glenn%20Youngkin,the%20unrestricted%20use%20of%20cell>

### National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Virginia

<https://namivirginia.org/?s=Social+media+use>

### Reclaiming Childhood—A Virginia Initiative by Governor Youngkin

<https://www.hhr.virginia.gov/initiatives/reclaiming-childhood/>

## BOOK

Haidt, J. (2024). *The anxious generation; how the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness*. Penguin Press.

***The Collection of Evidenced-Based Practices for Children and Adolescents with Mental Health Treatment Needs, 10<sup>th</sup> Collection***  
*Virginia Commission on Youth, 2025*

*The information contained herein is strictly for informational and educational purposes only and is not designed to replace the advice and counsel of a physician, mental health provider, or other medical professional. If you require such advice or counsel, you should seek the services of a licensed mental health provider, physician, or other medical professional. The Commission on Youth is not rendering professional advice and makes no representations regarding the suitability of the information contained herein for any purpose.*