



Technology has changed our world, especially with the explosion in mobile technology in the last 15 years. Having news, information, and entertainment immediately available has been celebrated but there is increasing concern over potential negative effects on mental health of some online experiences and the amount of time spent in front of screens. This is of special concern for many parents wondering about the possible harms that might occur during children's sensitive developmental periods.

Recent surveys of teens in the United States indicates that 95 percent have a smartphone, and almost all use it to access the internet daily. Decisions about how to monitor young people's time online and the type of content they are exposed to is something parents are encouraged to consider. Although the science does not give us any "hard and fast" recommendations for these questions, there are some areas where the science IS clear. Having some guidelines about screen time and having discussions with children about how their time online is affecting them are good places to start.

There are benefits that young people can realize from having access to social media, the internet, and gaming platforms...and as with most things, there are types of use that are clearly detrimental. How to balance the social, educational, and entertainment value of access to online content with the potential risks will require parents to explore their own values around online access and weigh the risks versus rewards for their family.



There are two main areas of potential harms that we will explore in this summary. One is the sheer amount of time that teens spend in front of their devices. There is no one size fits all, threshold where we know that harm occurs. Given this, we would invite caregivers to consider how they feel about how the balance of screen time versus time spent in other activities may be affecting children. For some children, social media use or gaming impacts their quality and quantity of sleep, amount of exercise, ability to study, the amount of time they spend engaging in quality time with family or pursuing other hobbies. There is even some evidence that teens



tend to engage in more distracted eating, rather than focusing on healthy meals, while they are online. Thinking about ensuring that a child has enough time for healthy activities and sleep, and then determining how much time remains to spend in the virtual world may be a good place to start as caregivers decide whether to set limits on screen time.

Parents should consider how their child's experiences online or in virtual spaces affects their mental health. Some teens find community of supportive friends that are lacking in their in-person experiences. These teens may actually be less prone to depressive symptoms or anxiety. For others, unhealthy comparisons or cyberbullying can create severe stressors or make existing mental health issues worse. Being aware of potential harms from unmonitored time in virtual spaces and having regular check-ins can help parents minimize the harms from some of these situations.



Some things to look for and potentially discuss with children include:

Things that may signal increased risk:

- extreme reliance on devices or significant time spent in virtual spaces—especially if they seem to struggle to control this or get very anxious or agitated when asked to take a break
- sharing of content that could have negative impacts for them—either immediately, or in the future (photos of them engaging in substance use, or sexting)
- being the object of bullying online, or engaging in bullying of others
- spending time on platforms or sites that glamorize harmful behaviors (substance use, disordered eating, violence, etc.)
- interest in radical groups or groups that spread hate speech or disinformation



Benefits children may be getting:

- connecting in positive ways with relatives and friends
- a window into different cultural experiences and access to information or to learn new skills
- a way to socialize with other people, especially if the others share specific interests or experiences (for example: hobby groups, groups for children that share a medical condition, online communities where LGBTQ+ youth may be more accepted than where they live, grief groups)
- a way to avoid chaos or stressful situations for a time
- networking to find jobs



Suggested additional resources:

- National Academies of Science Consensus Report: Social Media and Adolescent Health
<https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/27396/social-media-and-adolescent-health>
- Children and Screens: Institute of Digital Media and Child Development
[https://www.childrenandscreens.org/learn-explore/research/?types\[\]=parenting-tip-sheet](https://www.childrenandscreens.org/learn-explore/research/?types[]=parenting-tip-sheet)
- Winston National Center on Technology Use, Brain, and Psychological Development
<http://www.teensandtech.org/>



Supportive relationships with parents have been shown to be helpful at reducing the risk that online experiences will be harmful to children. In addition to nurturing warm and supportive bonds, there are some specific recommendations for parents and caregivers who want to actively engage with their children around screen time and online environments.

- Develop, consistently follow, and routinely revisit a family media use plan.
- Address what type of, and how much, media are used and what online behaviors are appropriate for each child or teenager, and for parents; place consistent limits on hours per day of media use as well as types of media used.
- Promote getting the recommended amount of daily physical activity (1 hour) and adequate sleep (8–12 hours, depending on age).
- Recommend that children not sleep with devices in their bedrooms, including TVs, computers, and smartphones; avoid exposure to devices or screens for 1 hour before bedtime.
- Discourage entertainment media while doing homework.

- Designate media-free times together (e.g., family dinner) and media-free locations (e.g., bedrooms) in homes; promote activities that are likely to facilitate development and health, including positive parenting activities, such as reading, teaching, talking, and playing together.
- Communicate guidelines to other caregivers, such as babysitters or grandparents, so that media rules are followed consistently.
- Engage in selecting and co-viewing media with your child, especially in ways that help your child to learn and be creative. Share these experiences with your family and your community.
- Have ongoing communication with children about online citizenship and safety, including treating others with respect online and offline, avoiding cyberbullying and sexting, being wary of online solicitation, and avoiding communications that can compromise personal privacy and safety.
- Consider seeking training about social media literacy
- Teach children how to access help and encourage them to seek it if they encounter harmful situations online.
- Be aware of your children’s baseline emotional and behavioral states and monitor changes in them. Watch for changes that may signal problems including problematic social media use or gaming addiction.

