

Children and Technology: It's all about striking a balance

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in social media usage among children and adolescents, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social media and online gaming became the primary method of socialization. Social media use is nearly universal among young people with up to 95% of teenagers actively using the internet¹.

Despite a minimum age requirement of 13 years on most U.S. social media platforms, nearly 40% of children aged 8-12 are on social media¹. Rates of depression and anxiety among youth have surged in parallel with increasing social media engagement, although this relationship is not fully understood. Considering the important period of brain development between childhood and young adulthood, the impact of social media usage on youth mental health remains an important topic.

There are benefits and drawbacks to social media use among youth. Social media platforms offer benefits to youth such as avenues for forging connections, receiving and offering emotional support, and expressing creativity. Further, youth in crisis are more likely to share suicidality on social media than directly to caregivers. Then, concerned peers often alert adults, which frequently leads to vital referrals to emergency services and child and adolescent psychiatry.

Despite these potential benefits, children and adolescents are prone to experiencing adverse effects of social media, including disruptions of sleep, which increase susceptibility to depression, fostering unrealistic social comparisons damaging self-esteem, adopting avoidant coping, cyberbullying, encouragement of eating-disordered behavior or self-harm, and sexual exploitation.

At this time, there is enough evidence to conclude that social media can negatively impact the mental health of youth. However, experimental research confirms that viewing idealized social media images can lead to body dissatisfaction among youth.

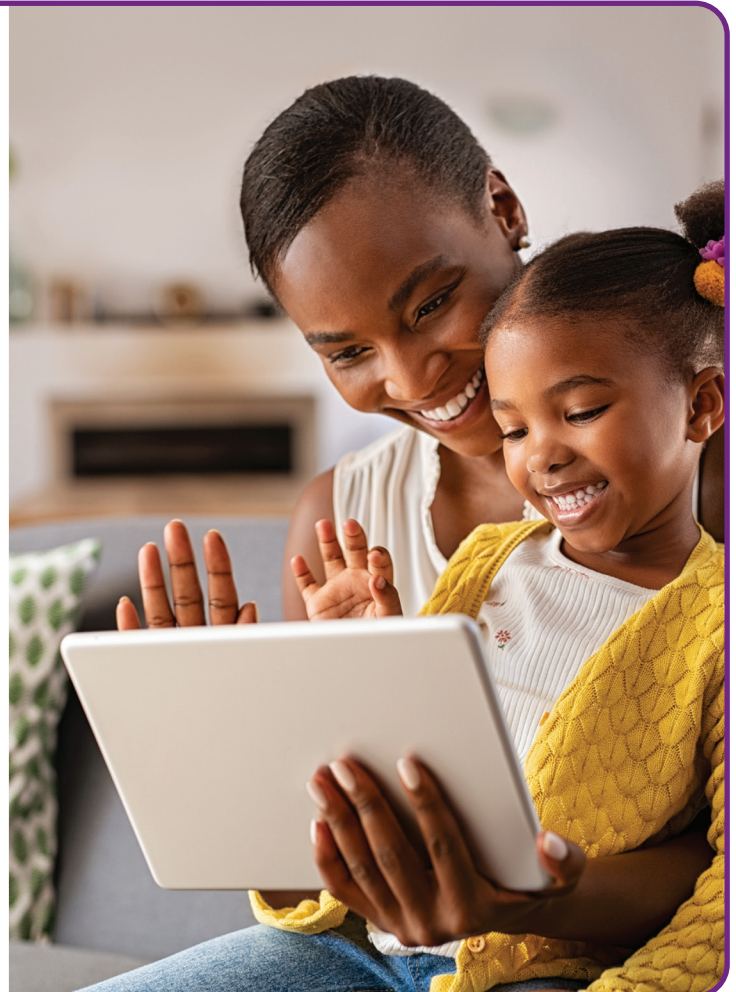
The key to managing technology use for children lies in balance. The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests creating a family media plan that includes guidelines for when and where screens are used and emphasizes shared activities that promote interaction and engagement. Encouraging offline activities like physical exercise, reading and creative play ensures that technology does not become a substitute for other forms of development. Additionally, adults can model healthy technology habits by using devices mindfully and prioritizing face-to-face interactions.²

Here are some tips to keep in mind as you establish your own family guidelines for safer use of technology.

Don't overreact. Like it or not, technology is an important part of our modern world. It won't help your child if you set overly restrictive limits or send the message that technology is something to fear. Instead, focus on teaching healthy habits that will stay with your child for a lifetime.

Teach kids about technology from a young age. Explain that tablets, computers and other media devices are not toys, and should be handled with care. Discuss with kids the many benefits of technology as well as the risks. Don't frighten them, but discuss the importance of respecting privacy and protecting personal information in age-appropriate ways. These conversations should be ongoing and should become more detailed as your children get older.

Use your judgment. While screen-time limits are often a good idea, experts caution that parents shouldn't assume technology use is inherently harmful. Consider the context when establishing your family's rules for technology use. Video chatting with family is different from playing a video game, for example. If you're entertaining your preschooler on a plane, it is okay if she has a little extra screen time that day. If your son is doing research for a school paper, that computer time shouldn't necessarily count as his only screen time for the day.



Protect bedtime. Studies show that using digital media at night can interfere with sleep quality.² Consider restricting the use of phones, tablets, and computers for at least 30 minutes before bed. Think twice about letting your child use those devices in his or her bedroom after lights out.

Pay attention. With younger kids, it's easy to see what they're doing online. As they get older, it's not so easy to look over their shoulder. Have open, honest discussions about which sites and type of content are off-limits. Do your research to understand the media your child is using and check out your child's browser history to see which sites they visit. Explore software to filter or restrict access to content that's off-limits.

Teach good online behavior. People often say things online that they'd never say to someone's face. According to a 2014 study by the internet security firm McAfee 87% of teens have witnessed cyberbullying. Talk to your children about the importance of being respectful in their digital interactions. Encourage them to come to you if they witness cyberbullying or other troubling information online.

Discuss digital decision-making. It can be hard to discern whether some websites are reliable sources of information or not. Have conversations with your child about how to evaluate authenticity and accuracy online. Explain why they shouldn't download unfamiliar programs, click on

suspicious links, or share personal information on unknown apps or websites. Also teach your children not to respond to unsolicited messages from strangers—and to tell you if they get them.

Foster real-life friendships. Some kids who find it difficult to connect with peers spend more time online than playing with friends in real life. But digital friendships aren't a replacement for the real thing. Help your child develop social skills and nurture his or her real-life relationships.

Learn more. Technology changes quickly, and it can be hard to stay on top of all the apps and sites your children use. To keep tabs on the changing tech landscape, visit the Family Online Safety Institute at www.fosi.org.³

Minimize children's and adolescents' exposure to problematic content, including that which promotes self-harm, prejudice, cyberbullying, health misinformation, and unrealistic beauty- or appearance-related content.

When used thoughtfully, technology can provide children with valuable tools for learning and creativity; however, parents and educators must remain vigilant about the potential downsides. By establishing healthy screen time habits, promoting critical thinking, and encouraging a balanced lifestyle, we can help children grow up in a world of technology without losing sight of the importance of real-world connections.



Digital world, mindful kids!

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