



Safe Connections

Empowering young minds online.

YOUTH SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND MENTAL HEALTH

New technology and the platforms, applications, sites, services, and content they deliver provide unprecedented opportunities that have forever changed much of our daily lives and lifestyles.

Among the most frequently used – and controversial – of these is social media. Although experts have identified the benefits of engaging with social media, some users – especially our youth struggling with anxiety, depression, and other biological, psychological, or sociological issues – social media can prove.

The American Psychological Association defines social media as “forms of digital communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content.”² Social media can therefore include social-networking sites, gaming opportunities, virtual “worlds” and spaces, video sharing platforms, and blogs.

According to a 2023 U.S. survey, teens spend an average of 4.8 hours engaging with social media platforms every day. Overall, girls spend slightly less than an hour more on social networks daily, with an average of 5.3 hours, compared with boys, who spend 4.4 hours on social networks.³

While there is yet no scientific evidence or expert consensus that social media use causes mental health issues among all adolescents, research has significantly indicated that for some users, social media engagement can significantly and negatively impact overall well-being.⁴ Those who struggle with healthy device management behaviors in general, and also engage with social media in greater measures of chronic, compulsive, and/or obsessive frequency, also appear to demonstrate lower levels of self-esteem and are more likely to experience (or exacerbate already existing) depression and anxiety disorders and poor sleep hygiene, which can contribute to a myriad other unfavorable wellness experiences and outcomes.⁵

As you navigate this inarguable millennial digital juggernaut –which is predicted only to increase and expand in both user engagement and potential influence – NABH encourages you to illustrate both the positive and potentially negative effects of not only social media, but device use in general.

When proposing strategies and skills to help promote “social media for good,” healthy device management, and the practice of good “Digital Citizenship” for our youth, NABH invites you to consider the following expert recommended tips and strategies.⁶

TIPS AND STRATEGIES ON HOW TO SUPPORT AND PARTNER WITH YOUTH ON SOCIAL MEDIA USE FOR GOOD

The following tips and strategies on how to support and partner with youth on social media use for good come directly from youth experts, researcher presentations, and group discussions. The recommendations that youth suggested, or explicitly agreed upon by them, are noted with an asterisk.⁷

INVESTIGATE AND EDUCATE YOURSELF ABOUT THE VARIOUS SOCIAL MEDIA APPS AND PLATFORMS OUR YOUTH ARE CURRENTLY UTILIZING. Ensuring that you have knowledge and familiarity with at least the more popular social sites may feel initially overwhelming or intimidating. However, doing so will help you not only engage in better conversations about them, it will also help you also avoid unfortunate mistakes that could undermine your credibility to create trustworthy discussions and potential recommendations for healthier behaviors when appropriate.

TAKE SOCIAL MEDIA SERIOUSLY.* Understand and accept that engagement with social media culture (e.g., viewing, publishing, “Follower” counts, reactions/responses to posted content, “Influencer” impacts, sharing, feeling current and relevant) can feel psychologically and/or sociologically focal to our youth today. NABH suggests you approach any discussions with youth about social media seriously and validate the feelings youth share about it, rather than simply rejecting or diminishing them. Ask them questions about platforms, their specific engagement, how it may affect them, and what they believe to be any benefits or risks associated with social media in general. Avoid expressing “absolute” judgments or opinions before allowing them to share theirs. This can help create meaningful, trusting, and courageous conversations about social media and its potential impact on youth mental health, and how to balance the information social media provides.

FOLLOW YOUTH AS SOCIAL MEDIA LEADERS.* Most Digital Natives (defined as individuals brought up during the age of digital technology and therefore familiar with computers and the Internet from a young age) today are tremendously knowledgeable about using the Internet, social media savvy, and even digital creators themselves. NABH suggests you seek guidance and recommendations from them on how to best use social media to reach their peers with the goal of creating connections to opportunities, resources, services, and other users. This could include partnering with social media platforms and organizations upon which youth are already serving as advisors, consultants, or positive creators.

INVOLVE YOUTH IN THE CONVERSATIONS.* This requires frequent participation by youth in important discussions and decisions about the issues that affect their lives. Trends and issues within the youth population change quickly, so frequent interaction and collaboration with youth can help professionals and organizations that work with youth remain current on the latest trends and also positive brand imprinting. This may prove more effective than merely conducting formal research with extended timelines.

FREQUENTLY POST AND PUBLISH POSITIVE, EDUCATIONAL, AFFIRMING, AND AWARENESS CONTENT FOR YOUTH.* By frequently updating social media accounts with new content that can be reposted by young people, you can establish your account as accessible, current, valuable, and useful to youth. This can help facilitate the creation of new connections while also solidly maintaining those already established with you and across their communities.

INTEGRATE EDUCATION ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA ON SOCIAL MEDIA.* A direct way to educate youth about healthy social media use is through posting directly on social media. This can be especially helpful for reaching and connecting with youth without trusted or supportive adults or peers in their lives.

SCALE BACK TECHNOLOGY USE. In cases where their social media engagement may seem problematic for a young person, suggest reducing engagement, rather than eliminating or forbidding it. Some suggested ways to help youth set healthier social media and device management boundaries include:

- ▶ Encourage social media “breaks.”
- ▶ Adopt device-free mealtimes.
- ▶ Charge devices in locations other than the bedroom overnight.
- ▶ Agree to a “No devices for anyone when traveling in a car” policy; have actual conversations instead!
- ▶ No use of devices for at least one hour before bedtime.
- ▶ Maintain recreational use of screens to two hours or fewer per day; limit social media sessions to 15 minutes.
- ▶ Discuss your family values and endorse that these are also expected/promoted during online engagement.
- ▶ Talk about the importance of authentic online impression creation, curation, maintenance, & management.
- ▶ Encourage turning off ALL notifications and unsubscribing from, blocking, and deleting “time suck” or chronically dysregulating apps, groups, platforms, connections, and even Followers.
- ▶ Utilize their bids for new devices, tech “equipment,” new app access, etc. to create a new “Family Responsible Device Use” agreement. Include in it an agreement on screentime “rules,” which parents have to follow, too!

BE AN ALLY.* Adults can play different roles in youth lives regarding social media use, including 1) helping youth self-monitor their social media use, 2) educating them about building healthy relationships on and offline, and 3) establishing a trusted offline connection with youth so that they know they can talk to you without feeling judged, shamed, or dismissed when they see or experience something dysregulating on social media.

ACCEPT THAT YOU CAN NEVER REALLY KEEP UP. None of us can keep up—even the Digital Natives we serve and support. The literal stream of fresh content published perpetually on social platforms can feel overwhelming and create anxiety even for adults. Do not worry if you do not know everything. The key is to continue (to the best of your ability) learning about new terms, platforms/apps, and trends. Collaboration with youth will help expand both your knowledge and skill base. Play the “Digital Immigrant” card and ask them about social sites, engagement behaviors, and current trends. Invite them to partner with you in the creation and publishing of online content. They will most likely love to flex their opinions and expertise!

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- 6 *Unplug to Reconnect: Healthy Device Management & the Practice of Good Digital Citizenship*; Dr. Grant research-based presentation
- 7 Working Group on Youth Programs’ *Social Media and Youth Mental Health meeting* at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration on July 11, 2019

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