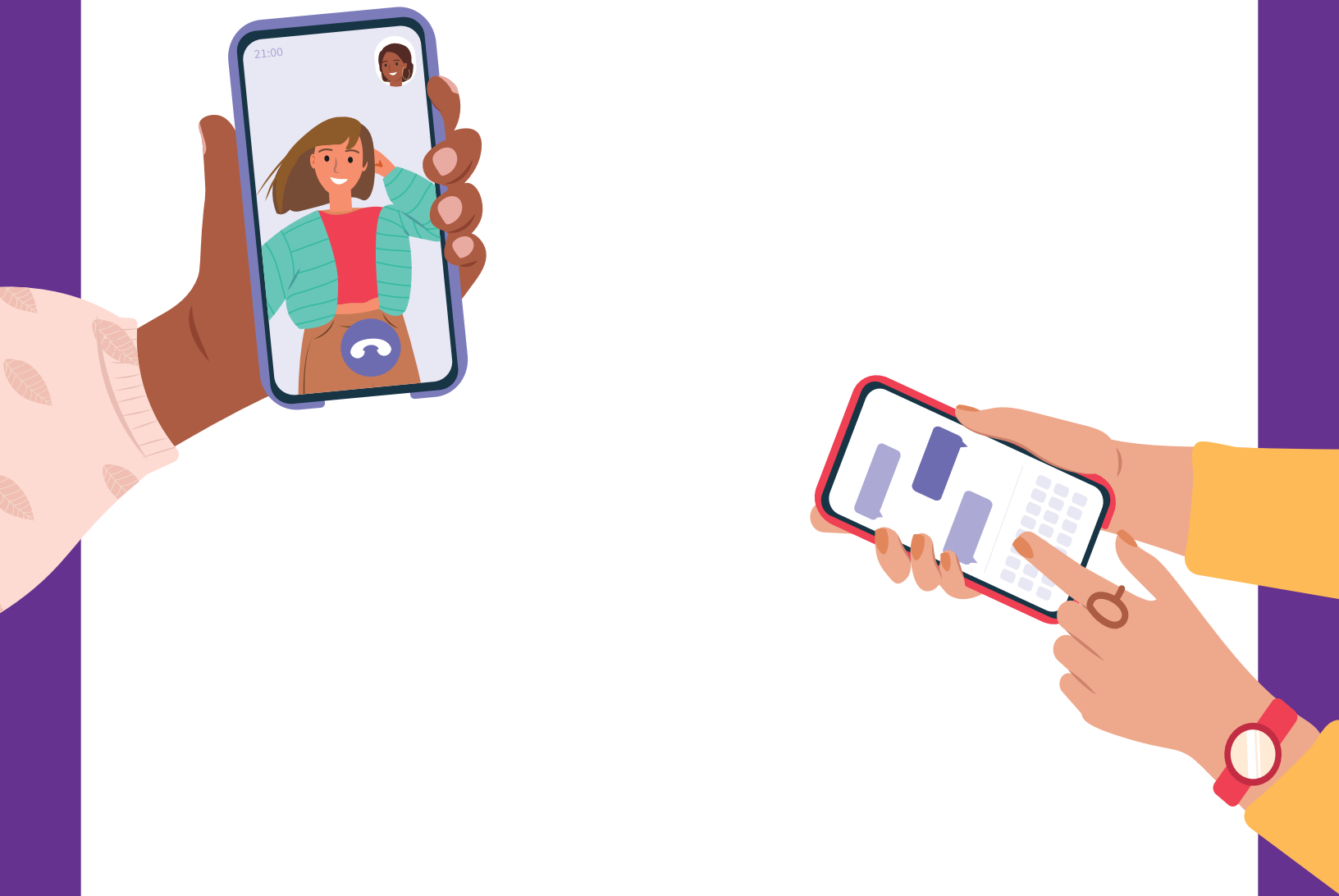


Social Media and Youth Mental Health:

A Guide for Parents and Caregivers



Social media platforms, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and X (formerly known as Twitter), have become part of everyday life. Social media use starting in childhood can play a significant role in the relationships and experiences that impact growth, development and mental health.

Effects of Social Media Usage

In 2023, **the U.S. Surgeon General warned**: “Nearly every teenager in America uses social media, and yet we do not have enough evidence to conclude that it is sufficiently safe for them. Our children have become unknowing participants in a decades-long experiment.”

Social media may be especially dangerous for young people’s mental health. Harms can include:

- ⦿ **Negative social comparison.**
Social media exposes youth to new levels of fear of missing out, body shaming and other content that can make them feel negatively about themselves.
- ⦿ **Disengagement from healthy activities.**
Social media can distract youth from socializing, school, exercise and other activities important for their mental health.
- ⦿ **Disruption to sleep.**
Using social media too close to bedtime can interfere with sleep, an important building block of mental health.
- ⦿ **Greater stress and hopelessness.**
Social media exposes young people to frightening and confusing news, stories and other content that can become overwhelming.
- ⦿ **Exposure to dangerous content.**
Sometimes youth can encounter content that promotes self-harm or other dangerous activities, including unhealthy or inappropriate sexual content.
- ⦿ **Online harassment and cyberbullying.**
Youth can connect with friends and strangers in new ways, which also puts them at greater risk of receiving threatening or harmful messages.

What Can You Do?

Support Skill Development

- ⦿ Talk to children about their social media use and learn more about their experiences with it. This can include conversation topics like:
 - What are some ways you currently use social media, and how does your social media use make you feel?
 - Are there things you wish you could change about your social media use?
 - Have you seen or experienced anything on social media that worries you?
- ⦿ Learn more about social media and youth mental health:
 - Common Sense Media, a nonprofit education and advocacy organization, offers a variety of articles and tips for parents and caregivers: commonsensemedia.org/articles/social-media.

- The American Academy of Pediatrics offers a tip sheet for parents and caregivers: bit.ly/researchbasedtips.
- ⊙ Learn more about social media and build skills that support mental health by taking online courses with your child. NYC's School Library System offers content on topics by grade in partnership with Common Sense Media at nycdoe.libguides.com/digitalcitizenship/home. Visit commonsense.org/education/digital-citizenship and search for these lesson titles:
 - **My Social Media Life** (navigating thoughts and emotions)
 - **Social Media and How You Feel** (increasing positive feelings)
 - **What You Send** (acting with empathy)

Reduce Exposure to Harmful Content

- ⊙ Consider starting children with a flip phone that cannot access social media. Delay providing a smartphone until at least age 14, and then reassess based on the current evidence of harms and the child's strengths and needs.
- ⊙ Encourage the whole family to put away phones during certain times, such as dinnertime, during family activities or before bedtime.
- ⊙ Find activities that everyone can enjoy that do not involve screens, such as games, arts and crafts, sports, or even just dedicated times to talk.
- ⊙ Have the whole family take time to customize the settings on social media apps in ways that support the mental health of each family member, such as:
 - How the feed is set up, including how it uses data and what topics it prioritizes
 - When and if notifications are shown
 - Time limits for use and reminders to take breaks
 - Privacy limits on who can see and interact with a person's account

Learn more about how to do this for different apps:

Instagram and Facebook:

Youth: about.meta.com/actions/safety/audiences/youth

Parents and caregivers: familycenter.meta.com

Snapchat:

Youth: bit.ly/safesnap

Parents and caregivers: parents.snapchat.com

TikTok:

Youth: tiktok.com/safety/youth-portal

Parents and caregivers: tiktok.com/safety/en-us/guardians-guide

- ⊙ Set healthy social media habits and goals together as a family. The American Academy of Pediatrics' Family Media Plan offers a potential guide: bit.ly/AAP-media-plan.

Make Social Media Less Harmful

- ⊙ Join mailing lists for advocacy groups focused on youth mental health and social media to find opportunities to get involved, such as Mental Health America (mhanational.org), Fairplay (fairplayforkids.org) and Common Sense Media (commonsense.org).

- ⦿ Encourage young people to share their voices and get involved with community-based programs that give them opportunities to advocate for the changes they would like to see. Young people can contact the Mayor at nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/mayor-contact.page and look up their other elected officials at usa.gov/elected-officials.

Further Resources

Supporting Skill Development

NYC Public Schools recommends different curricula that can help build critical skills: bit.ly/schools-digital-citizenship. Curricula include:

- ⦿ Lesson plans for all grades from Common Sense Media: commonsense.org/education/digital-citizenship/curriculum
- ⦿ Be Internet Awesome, a program to teach kids online safety from Google: beinternetawesome.withgoogle.com/en_us
- ⦿ Ignition: Digital Wellness and Safety from Blackbaud, an education support company: everfi.com/courses/k-12/digital-literacy-wellness-safety

Accessing Support Services

988 provides connection to free, confidential crisis counseling, mental health and substance use support and referrals to care. Call or text 988 or chat at nyc.gov/988. Counselors are available 24/7 by phone call in more than 200 languages.

NYC Teenspace currently provides free online mental health support to any person age 13 to 17 who lives in NYC. To register and receive access to online courses and tips designed just for teens or be paired with a therapist for live virtual sessions, visit talkspace.com/nyc.

Reducing Exposure to Harmful Content

As mentioned previously, see the American Academy of Pediatrics' tip sheet (bit.ly/researchbasedtips) and Family Media Plan (bit.ly/AAP-media-plan) for help with setting healthy limits.

Common Sense Media offers guides for different social media platforms that explain the possible harms and how to avoid them:

- ⦿ Instagram: commonsensemedia.org/app-reviews/instagram
- ⦿ Snapchat: commonsensemedia.org/app-reviews/snapchat
- ⦿ TikTok: commonsensemedia.org/app-reviews/tiktok

Making Social Media Less Harmful

Advocacy groups are currently engaged in several efforts to make social media less harmful for young people, including:

- ⦿ The Kids Online Safety Act: fairplay.salsalabs.org/kosa/index.html
- ⦿ The Age Appropriate Design Code: 5rightsfoundation.com/our-work/design-of-service/age-appropriate-design-code.html

For more information, visit nyc.gov/health and search for **social media and youth mental health**.