

Teens and Social Media - what it means to them (positive and negative)

The love with social media can be likened to a modern day love story - plenty of ups and downs, seemingly inseparable, it's seductive and often there's lots of drama. As parents, at times we despair with the time spent on social media and the intrusions into family life too. However, when examining the positives, we note that social media can play an important part in helping teens connect, feel accepted and validated by their peers.

The adolescent brain is wired to connect with peers, and teens are consistently experimenting with where they belong and how they fit in the world. 'Likes' on a photo or post relate to feeling accepted, included and validated. A hit of dopamine (the chemical that mediates pleasure in the brain) that happens with growing likes or positives comments on a post or photo can be enough to encourage the chase for the next social media 'feel good' opportunity. Of course feeling a warm, bundled sense of belonging at home is extremely important but adolescence is a time of reaching for independence, and learning where they fit in a wider sense is connected to who they identify with, and how they are doing. Relationships teens make during adolescence can be very supportive of their transition towards adulthood. Social media makes it easy to maintain friendships and connect on terms and timing that works well for the individual. The boundaries for possible friendship are so very broad and social media can widen the possibility of finding somewhere to belong - teens who might otherwise feel isolated for alone can find like minds and have their experience and interests normalized and validated. Social media expands the opportunities to feel part of a group and further establish their identity. It can also do the opposite so helping your child to be safe online is not only challenging but requires you to stay close to what is happening for them and rather than exerting control, go for influence. Wherever you can, give them the space to experiment with who they are, to air their opinions even if they are vastly different from yours. The more you show acceptance of who they are and how they think even if you do not agree, the more they will nurture their own self acceptance, leading to perhaps less need to find acceptance online or at least to overexpose themselves on social media.

A recent UK review of international research confirms that participation in social media can increase teenagers' feelings of self-esteem, support, and fitting in with a group. Children relate to each other through social media, for good and for bad.

By connecting with others through social media, as reported on reachout.com website your child could:

- develop better social skills
- feel less isolated
- learn about new cultural and societal ideas and issues
- bond with their friends
- have fun
- be creative and share their own ideas with friends
- be better equipped to be active citizens in society
- develop real world skills to help them become more independent
- learn about world events and current affairs outside of their immediate environment.

<https://parents.au.reachout.com/skills-to-build/wellbeing/social-media-and-teenagers>
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Like any form of social engagement, social media can come with risks. Some of the common risks include:

- spending too much time online and being disconnected from the real world
- being the victim of online bullying
- damaging your online reputation
- having your personal information shared online
- being harassed or annoyed by someone you do not want attention from
- being the victim of an online scam
- having reduced self-esteem (for some teenagers).

There are things you can do to help protect your child from these risks. To begin with children under 11 should not have a Twitter account and those under 13 should not have an account with Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, Kik, and Snapchat. The reasons for this are many and not least of all because up until about 12 years of age, it is difficult, if not impossible for a child to fully grasp the impact of their actions upon others online and otherwise.

For Vine, Tinder and Yik Yak the age restriction is 17. YouTube requires account holders to be 18 although over 13s can have an account with parent permission. For under 13s Kids YouTube is an option. If you are trying to steer a younger child away from the 13+ accounts Club Penguin, WebKinz and Whyville are suitable options.

Ways to help your teen with monitoring their social media use are:

- to encourage regular breaks
- orchestrate technology free days (or even weeks during family holiday times perhaps)
- insist on devices being kept out of the bedroom at sleep time
- Make sure notifications are turned off so that your teen is not constantly distracted by their device and compulsively checking it.

If you notice big changes in your teen's behaviour or wellbeing talk to them about their social media engagement and seek professional help if concerns continue. Look for changes in:

- their energy levels and enthusiasm for offline life
- their engagement in normal conversation
- the amount of time they spend doing other activities, like sport, homework, and other hobbies
- their self esteem and sense of self worth

As with many aspects of parenting we invariably come back to the idea of modeling what you want from your children. You are their greatest role models and you influence your

child's basic values such as honesty, fairness, religious values and so on . Friends influence the more every day choices such as music they listen to, clothing they choose, who they connect with. Make the time spent online a value you want your child to be influenced by. If they see you on a device much of the time, this says to them that being on a device is what you value.

For further information:

https://youtu.be/HffWFd_6bJ0 (5 Crazy Ways Social Media is Changing Your brain)

<https://parents.au.reachout.com/skills-to-build/wellbeing/social-media-and-teenagers>

<https://www.news-medical.net/health/Dopamine-Functions.aspx>

<https://turbofuture.com/internet/effects-of-social-media-on-our-youth>

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