

SOCIAL MEDIA & TEENS

WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

According to the American Psychological Association, U.S. teens spend an average of nearly 4.8 hours per day on social media. Teen girls average about 5.3 hours, compared to 4.4 hours for boys. The most popular platforms include YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. This guide will help you understand how social media affects the brain, offer tips for talking with your child, and provide strategies for creating healthier media habits.

Social Media & the Brain:

Social media activates the brain's reward system by releasing dopamine, a "feel-good" chemical linked to pleasure and motivation. This can make scrolling and checking apps feel rewarding—and hard to stop. Social platforms are intentionally designed to keep users coming back.

There are many healthy ways to boost mood and dopamine without screens:

- Listening to music can stimulate a release of dopamine.
- Physical activity helps to boost endorphin (another brain chemical) levels and can improve a person's mood.
- Sun exposure can increase dopamine levels.
- Sleep helps the body to regulate dopamine levels. This is another reason why a good night's sleep is so important.

Does your child need help finding a balance in social media use?

Often, young people are looking for the trusted adults in their lives to help put structure and boundaries around their use of social media. Start early and keep conversations open. Teens need trusted adults to help them navigate online experiences.

- Ask about their social media habits and what they enjoy
- Discuss online safety and how to handle conflict or "drama"
- Remind them that the decision-making part of the brain is still developing, which can make impulsive posting more likely
- Reinforce that they can come to you with questions or concerns

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How to talk to your child:

Young people need guidance on how to stay safe online and avoid online “drama” with their friends and followers. They need to know that they have a trusted adult whom they can talk to about the things that they come across online. It is also important to remember that the decision-making area of the brain continues to develop well into a person’s mid-twenties, making impulse control challenging. This can contribute to young people posting or sending inappropriate or unkind pictures and comments that they may regret later. As trusted adults, we can help young people navigate their online worlds.

Here are a couple of great resources:

- Use this social media awareness survey with your child to spark conversation about when and how they use social media
- Easy Tips for Using Social Media Responsibly – [SmartSocial.com](https://www.smart-social.com)

Positive ways to be active online:

Remember, there are many positive ways to use social media. Brainstorm with your child some of the great ways that social media keeps people connected, gets important messages out, and inspires creativity.

- How could social media be used to bring awareness to a cause that is important to our community?
- What are some ideas that you have for creating content (beyond selfies) to share on social media?
- Think about topics that you are passionate about and learn more about it. Who are some authors, scholars or organizations that would be good to follow on social media?

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