

# Social Media and Youth Mental Health:

A Guide for Youth-Serving Organizations



The use of social media platforms (such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and X [formerly known as Twitter]) has become part of everyday life over the past decade. Although age 13 is commonly the required age minimum used by social media platforms in the U.S., in practice nearly 40% of children age 8 to 12 use social media. Social media use starting during childhood can play a significant role in the relationships and experiences that impact children's and teens' growth, development and mental health. There are increasing concerns among researchers, parents and caregivers, young people, health care experts, and others about the impact of social media on youth mental health.

## Effects of Social Media Usage

In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an **Advisory** on social media and youth mental health, noting: "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."<sup>1</sup>

Social media may be especially dangerous for young people's mental health. **One study** found that the rollout of Facebook on different college campuses was associated with increased depression and even mental health hospitalizations.<sup>2</sup> Further, a **randomized control trial** found that when young adults stopped using social media for four weeks their mental health improved.<sup>3</sup>

The Surgeon General's Advisory suggests several ways that social media can harm youth mental health:

- ⦿ **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.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/260853/1/cesifo1\\_wp9723.pdf](https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/260853/1/cesifo1_wp9723.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w25514/w25514.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w25514/w25514.pdf)

# What Can You Do?

## Support Skill Development

- ⦿ Incorporate opportunities to discuss social media use and youth mental health into your programs and services. This can include conversation starters like:
  - 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?
- ⦿ Integrate information and activities to help young people develop skills for healthy social media use into your programming. NYC’s School Library System offers content on topics by grade in partnership with Common Sense Media, a nonprofit education and advocacy organization, at [nycdoe.libguides.com/digitalcitizenship/home](https://nycdoe.libguides.com/digitalcitizenship/home). Visit [commonsense.org/education/digital-citizenship](https://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)
- ⦿ Engage parents and caregivers in conversations around social media use and youth mental health, and provide resources for them to build their own social media skills.
  - Common Sense Media offers a variety of articles and tips for parents and caregivers: [commonsensemedia.org/articles/social-media](https://commonsensemedia.org/articles/social-media).
  - The American Academy of Pediatrics offers a tip sheet for parents and caregivers: [bit.ly/researchbasedtips](https://bit.ly/researchbasedtips).

## Reduce Exposure to Harmful Content

- ⦿ Build in opportunities for youth to connect with one another and engage in rewarding activities while taking a break from social media. This can include:
  - Setting community norms that phones should be put away during certain activities or times so everyone can be fully present
  - Designating certain spaces as “tech-free zones” that allow young people to engage in offline games and activities and create chances to bond with peers and adults
- ⦿ Set aside time to check in with youth and help them to align their social media app settings with their personal goals. Social media platforms increasingly offer customization options, many of which make for a safer and healthier experience for young people, but the platforms do not encourage users to make these changes. You can educate parents, caregivers and youth about these options for different apps:

### Instagram and Facebook:

Youth: [about.meta.com/actions/safety/audiences/youth](https://about.meta.com/actions/safety/audiences/youth)

Parents and caregivers: [familycenter.meta.com](https://familycenter.meta.com)

### Snapchat:

Youth: [bit.ly/safesnap](https://bit.ly/safesnap)

Parents and caregivers: [parents.snapchat.com](https://parents.snapchat.com)

### TikTok:

Youth: [tiktok.com/safety/youth-portal](https://tiktok.com/safety/youth-portal)

Parents and caregivers: [tiktok.com/safety/en-us/guardians-guide](https://tiktok.com/safety/en-us/guardians-guide)

You can then help young people choose settings that align with their goals in areas such as:

- How their feed is set up, including how it incorporates their data and what topics it prioritizes
  - When and if users are shown notifications that encourage them to engage with the platform
  - Time limits for use and reminders to take breaks
  - Privacy limits on who can see and interact with a person's account
- ⊙ Encourage parents and caregivers to delay access to smartphones until at least age 14 and then reassess based on the current evidence of harms and the child's strengths and needs. Brains develop throughout childhood, and there is no safe age established yet for children to use smartphones and social media platforms. If children begin to travel more independently in NYC before age 14, encourage parents and caregivers to start them with a phone that cannot access social media (such as a flip phone). The American Academy of Pediatrics offers a resource at [bit.ly/first-phone-child](https://bit.ly/first-phone-child) to support parents and caregivers in making decisions about when to give children their first phone.
  - ⊙ Work with youth, parents and caregivers, and program staff to establish a common set of healthy social media habits based on everyone's shared goals. The American Academy of Pediatrics' Family Media Plan offers a potential guide: [bit.ly/AAP-media-plan](https://bit.ly/AAP-media-plan).
  - ⊙ Areas of shared norms to build healthy habits might include:
    - Putting phones on silent and away during conversations, activities or other opportunities for engagement
    - Openly discussing intentions and strategies around adhering to limits on social media use and prioritizing other more fulfilling activities
    - Reinforcing the need to limit the use of devices around bedtime and build good sleep hygiene for overall wellness

## **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](https://mhanational.org)), Fairplay ([fairplayforkids.org](https://fairplayforkids.org)) and Common Sense Media ([commonsense.org](https://commonsense.org)).
- ⊙ Encourage youth and families to organize and share their voices with policymakers. You can build in visits with local, state or federal policymakers as an activity, or host town halls or roundtables with policymakers to have conversations with young people about how social media is impacting them and what protections they would like to see established. As inspiration, NYC has issued its Call to Action for social media companies, which offers ideas for possible reforms, on Page 6 of its Framework for Action: [bit.ly/nycmediahealthframework](https://bit.ly/nycmediahealthframework). For direct action, young people can contact the Mayor at [nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/mayor-contact.page](https://nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/mayor-contact.page) and look up their other elected officials at [usa.gov/elected-officials](https://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](https://bit.ly/schools-digital-citizenship). Curricula include:

- ⦿ Lesson plans for all grades from Common Sense Media:  
[commonsense.org/education/digital-citizenship/curriculum](https://commonsense.org/education/digital-citizenship/curriculum)
- ⦿ Be Internet Awesome, a program to teach kids online safety from Google:  
[beinternetawesome.withgoogle.com/en\\_us](https://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](https://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](https://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](https://talkspace.com/nyc).

### Reducing Exposure to Harmful Content

As mentioned previously, see the American Academy of Pediatrics' tip sheet ([bit.ly/researchbasedtips](https://bit.ly/researchbasedtips)) and Family Media Plan ([bit.ly/AAP-media-plan](https://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](https://commonsensemedia.org/app-reviews/instagram)
- ⦿ Snapchat: [commonsensemedia.org/app-reviews/snapchat](https://commonsensemedia.org/app-reviews/snapchat)
- ⦿ TikTok: [commonsensemedia.org/app-reviews/tiktok](https://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](https://fairplay.salsalabs.org/kosa/index.html)
- ⦿ The Age Appropriate Design Code:  
[5rightsfoundation.com/our-work/design-of-service/age-appropriate-design-code.html](https://5rightsfoundation.com/our-work/design-of-service/age-appropriate-design-code.html)

For more information, visit [nyc.gov/health](https://nyc.gov/health) and search for **social media and youth mental health**.