

2025

Social Media & Mental Health Toolkit



RECLAIMING
CHILDHOOD





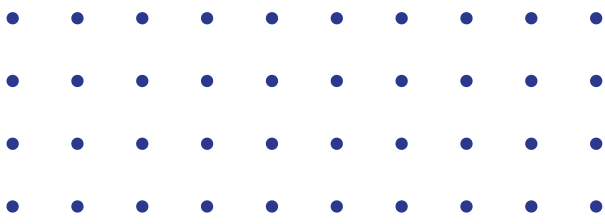


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[Executive Order 43 \(2024\): Empowering and Supporting Parents to Protect Their Children from Addictive Social Media & Establishment of the Reclaiming Childhood Task Force](#)

- This Social Media and Mental Health Toolkit was created as part of the Reclaiming Childhood Initiative named in Executive Order 43 (2024) through a collaborative effort across subject matter experts from executive state agencies of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Purpose of this Toolkit

- Raise awareness about the impact of social media on the youth mental health
- Empower youth and adults to take action to mitigate the negative impacts
- Provide strategies and tools to increase real life social connection and collaboration with the community

A Snapshot of the Problem

Kids are spending significantly more time on screens. Children and adolescents using social media are frequently exposed to extreme, inappropriate, and harmful content.

- Over 77% of high school students reported spending more than three hours per day on screens outside of schoolwork (Virginia Youth Survey, 2023).
- Research indicates that those spending over three hours daily on these platforms face twice the risk of poor mental health including symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Target Audience

Content and materials are intended to be used by the general public and may be adapted based on the target audience. The target audience for this toolkit is:

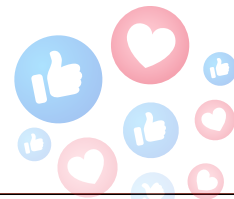
- Parents and guardians.
- Youth (under age 18 years old).
- Teachers and school staff.
- Community leaders.

Section Highlights

- The positive and negative impacts of social media on young people
- Recognizing harmful versus beneficial content
- Scientific research behind social media's influence on brain development
- Key warning signs of misuse or overuse

Positive and Negative Impacts

Teen brains are very sensitive to rewards—such as getting likes, comments, or shares on posts. When teens get a lot of likes, the reward part of their brain becomes very active. This part of the brain is also linked to how people react to things like sugar or even drugs.



On average, **teenagers pick up their phone 51 times per day**, ranging from two to 498 times per day (Common Sense Media, 2023).

It is important to acknowledge both the positive and negative impacts of social media and internet use and think about whether or not the positives outweigh the negatives for different youth and families. Write in below some of your positives and negatives.

POSITIVES

Staying in touch with friends and family

Creative digital art and media

NEGATIVES

Being exposed to content that you did not search for

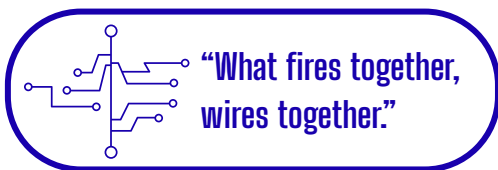
Doomscrolling and endless reels

Sleep difficulties and loss of productivity

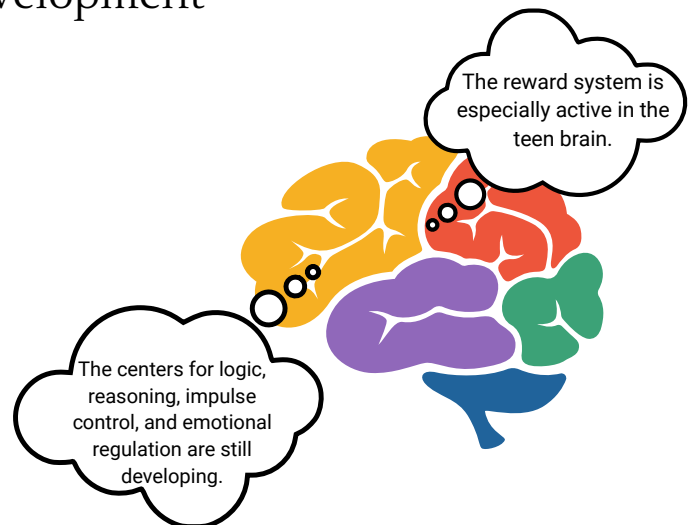
The Science Behind How Social Media and Excessive Internet Use Affects Brain Development

During the teen years, the brain is rapidly reshaping itself through synaptic pruning—strengthening frequently used pathways and trimming unused ones. Habits like constant scrolling or checking notifications can shape long-term brain wiring.

Too much fast, unpredictable content can overstimulate the brain's reward system, leading to addictive behaviors and reduced ability to focus, manage stress, or enjoy offline life.



Experts warn that excessive social media use during this critical phase of brain development may have lasting effects on attention, mental health, and self-control.



The prefrontal cortex, responsible for decision-making, impulse control, and emotional regulation, is still developing in teens. This makes them more sensitive to peer pressure and the emotional ups and downs of digital feedback—likes, comments, and comparisons.

Warning Signs of Social Media Overuse or Misuse

- Mood changes after being online
- Avoiding offline activities
- Poor sleep or “doomscrolling”
- Falling grades
- Feeling isolated or overwhelmed

Strategies for a Healthier Balance

- Set time limits on social media use
- Encourage offline hobbies and face-to-face time with friends or family
- Promote media literacy, so teens better understand what they see online
- Create tech-free zones (e.g., during meals or before bed)
- Seek support early if needed
- Helping teens find a healthy relationship with social media supports their mental health, emotional development, and academic success.



**For
Clinicians**

The [PRIUSS-3](#) is a [3-item screening tool](#) that can be used to help identify problematic or risky internet use. If the screen is positive, follow up with the full [18-item PRIUSS](#) which includes three sub-scales: social impairment, emotional impairment, and risky/impulsive internet use.

Section Highlights

- Explains digital platforms and their common features - benefits and drawbacks
- Practical guidance for monitoring screen use, setting age appropriate boundaries, and using parental controls
- Fostering open family communication and modeling positive digital habits

Digital Platform Literacy

Digital platforms—like social media, artificial intelligence, and gaming apps—connect people and enable sharing and interaction. They offer access to vast information and opportunities for self-expression, but also risks like misinformation, privacy concerns, and addictive design features that can affect youth mental health.

Social media apps evolve quickly, making it hard for parents to keep up. Parents should actively learn about the apps their children use, as popularity doesn't guarantee safety. Controversial apps often return even after removal, so staying informed is crucial.

Test Your Digital Platform Knowledge

Do you know the difference between Artificial Intelligence, Gaming & Chat, Social Networking, Image and Video Sharing, and Operating Systems? Name these popular icons then click on the icon to learn more about their features.



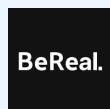
Artificial Intelligence



Gaming and Chat



Operating Systems



Social Networking



Image and Video Sharing

Strategies for Parental Guidance and Oversight

Parental Monitoring Strategies

Setting Boundaries

Parental involvement in children's online activity is associated with better mental health and fewer risky behaviors (Reich & Madigan, 2025). However, there's no universal approach—effective monitoring depends on a child's age, maturity, and personality (Reich et al., 2025).

Age-Appropriate Guidelines

Young children need close supervision and firm screen limits. As kids enter adolescence, parents can adopt a more collaborative approach—discussing healthy boundaries and teaching digital safety. By high school, teens benefit from increased independence, while still receiving guidance and support (Wisniewski et al., 2025).

Sleep and Screen Time

One consistent finding: no screens in the bedroom. Nighttime media use disrupts sleep due to blue light, social pressure, and late-night alerts (Reich & Madigan, 2025; Bickham et al., 2025).



Parents' own device use strongly influences their children. "Technoference"—parental distraction by devices—harms parent-child relationships and increases risks of mental health issues and risky behaviors in youth.

Tools and Apps for Parental Controls

No app or tool replaces active parental guidance. Digital safety requires ongoing attention and involvement, not "set it and forget it" solutions. Parents are the best safeguard against online risks.

Effective Strategies

- ✓ A balanced approach works best—combining reasonable limits with conversations that build digital literacy and social skills (Bickham et al., 2025).
- ✓ Overly strict rules are often less effective, especially with teens.
- ✓ Screens should complement—not replace—parent-child interaction. Shared interests online can lead to real-world experiences, like visiting a shelter if a child enjoys puppy videos (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2025).
- ✓ Youth often say screen privileges should be earned through milestones like good grades or extracurricular involvement (Bickham et al., 2025). Linking screen access to earned goals not only encourages responsibility but also aligns with how the brain's reward system works. By framing screen time as something to be earned—rather than an automatic entitlement—parents can help reinforce healthy patterns of delayed gratification, goal-setting, and self-regulation.

Create a Family Media Plan

Creating a Family Media Plan can help you and your children set media priorities that matter most to your family. Revise your plan as often as you need to, such as at the beginning of each school year or during summer and holiday breaks.

The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness

NYU social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt argues that the widespread adoption of smartphones and social media since the early 2010s has played a significant role in rising rates of anxiety, depression, and self-harm among young people.

Read this book!

How It Works

Since media habits are different for every household, the Family Media Plan can be customized to meet your family's needs. Make a full plan, or just choose a few parts that matter the most to your family. Family media plans set clear rules, limits, and expectations together. Involving children and teens promotes respect and compliance. Agreements typically include daily limits, screen-free zones, and consequences to balance online and offline life.

The Family Media Plan includes:

- A list of media priorities to choose from
- Practical tips to help make the plan work
- Why it's important
- The ability to print or share your finished plan
- The option to save your plan and return as often as you'd like to make changes

Start Your
Family Media
Plan

We will help balance tech with online and offline activities by: _____

We will communicate about media by: _____

We will emphasize kindness and empathy when using technology by: _____

We will set and discuss digital safety rules by: _____

We will create some screen-free zones for our family by: _____

We will choose times and spaces where we don't want distractions from screens by: _____

We will choose good content for our family by: _____

Section Highlights

- The important role educators play in addressing student mental health risks by recognizing warning signs
- Highlights school-based initiatives such as integrating digital citizenship into the curriculum
- Highlights cell-phone free education initiatives and strategies to continue supporting schools and communities

Schools play a crucial role in helping students stay safe when using technology. They can set clear rules for computer use, teach students how media can affect their emotions, and model healthy digital habits. The goal of digital media education isn't just to warn about the risks—it's to help students think critically about what they see and do online.

Schools are often the first to recognize changes in a youth's mental health, challenges in social situations, and identify barriers to learning and reaching their educational potential.



Knowing the warning signs, listening closely, and being open to conversations about mental health can help parents, teachers, and other adults in a child's life better understand the child's needs and take steps to support their well-being.

Virginia General Assembly 2025

HB 1961 (Rasoul) | SB 738 (Pekarsky)

The bipartisan legislation codifies that school divisions adopt a full Bell-to-Bell Cell Phone-Free policy during school hours.

"School should be a place of learning and human interaction—free from the distractions and classroom disruptions of cell-phone and social media use. Our students will learn more and be healthier and safer."

- Governor Glenn Youngkin

Mental Health in Schools

- Early intervention is key!
- Schools have behavioral health services to support students' mental health (like school counselors, social workers, and psychologists.) They can also help families find other services that can support them.
- The Removing Non-Academic Barriers webpage offers resources for educators and parents to support children's social, physical, and mental health.

Integrating Digital Citizenship into the Curriculum

Digital Citizenship is the ability to use technology responsibly, safely, and respectfully.

It includes the ability to think critically and practice healthy online habits. Teaching digital citizenship includes promoting online etiquette and fostering critical thinking about digital information. The Virginia Department of Education uses Common Sense Education's Digital Citizenship Curriculum which offers K-12 lessons on online safety, digital literacy, and ethical tech use.

Read the full curriculum here!

6 Core Competencies of Digital Literacy



MEDIA BALANCE & WELL-BEING
We find balance in our digital lives.



RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNICATION
We know the power of words & actions.



PRIVACY & SECURITY
We care about everyone's privacy.



CYBERBULLYING, DIGITAL DRAMA & HATE SPEECH
We are kind & courageous.



DIGITAL FOOTPRINT & IDENTITY
We define who we are.



NEWS & MEDIA LITERACY
We are critical thinkers & creators.

Call to Action

Creating a culture change regarding smart phones, screen time, and internet use in youth takes collaboration, conversation, and commitment. Work with schools to foster the environment of change.

Host a Community Conversation to Support Schools in Implementing a Cell-phone Free Education

1 Write down topics that parents and students want to discuss.

Examples:

- Clear lines of communication
- Safety and Emergencies
- How to be consistent at home & school
- Name other topics: _____

2 Invite a speaker & community organizations.

Examples:

- Boys and Girls Club
- Faith Organizations
- Youth Sports
- Name other organizations: _____

3 Think about take away actions.

Examples:

- Start a new social club at school
- Sign a pledge with other parents to delay social media use
- Name other actions: _____

Section Highlights

- Promotes digital literacy and focuses on social media's privacy and security concerns
- Guidance on creating a balanced digital diet and addressing diverse values around use of technology
- Discusses 'sharenting' and establishing habits to be attentive to yours and your child's digital footprint

Understanding Privacy and Security Concerns

It is important that children understand that the rules in the “real world” continue online and that they are responsible for things they say and do. Parents should make sure rules are very clear at all times and that breaking those rules could lead to something simple like loss of internet privileges to something serious like criminal charges.

Discuss things with children that may happen when using social media such as inappropriate pop-ups, a stranger trying to talk to them, or someone threatening or harassing them. Discuss how the child should respond, like telling you what happened immediately so you are aware. This practice also shows the child that you understand what may happen and that they can come to you to discuss it when it does.

Would you let your child go to a party alone, to an unfamiliar place, with adults and kids that you've never met before?

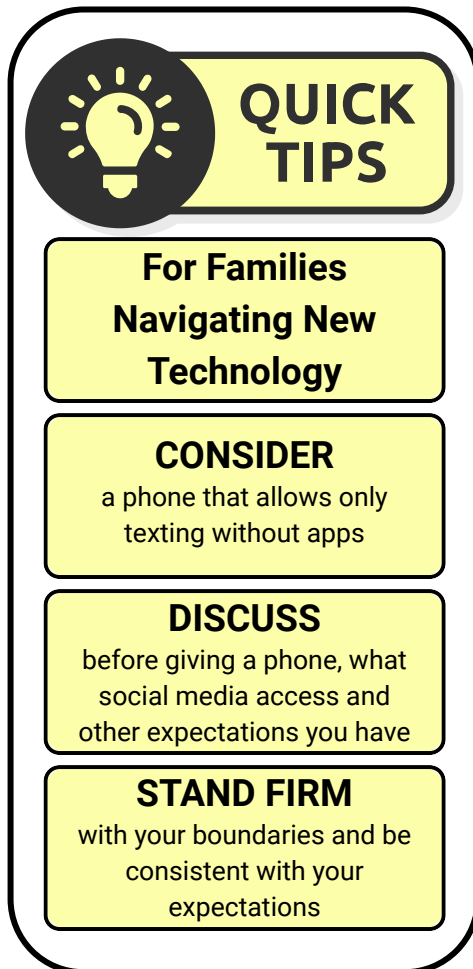
- What percentage of teen girls have been approached online by someone they didn't know?
- What percentage of kids, grades 4-8, chatted with a stranger online?
- What percentage of tweens have encountered sexual content online?
- What percentage of teens have encountered sexual content online?
- What percent of teens have experienced cyberbullying?

Answers: A.) 47%; B.) 40%; C.) 69%; D.) 91%; E.) 59%

Regulation

The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) is a

federal law that protects the privacy of children under 13 by regulating how websites, apps, and online services collect, use, and share their personal information. It requires parental consent, clear privacy policies, and safeguards to ensure children's online safety.



Addressing Diverse Family Values Around Technology

The age that children get their first smartphone is different for every family. Families also have different rules about when children can access social media, and how much their online activity is monitored. This can create conflict when children complain all their friends are on certain platforms, but parents aren't ready to give permission.

'Sharenting' and the Digital Footprint

Parents can set children up for using social media well by using it well themselves. Social media makes it easy to hit send, comment, and post content that many don't always consider the consequences for their digital footprint and online presence. This generation of youth is the first to inherit a social media presence and privacy risks they didn't ask for. 'Sharenting' is a term used to describe when parents overshare photos and other data about their children on social media. While tech companies need to be held accountable, adults also need to be aware of their own and their child's digital footprint.

Fast Facts

- By age 5, the average kid has 1500 photos of them online.
- By 2030, 'sharenting' could account for up to 7 million incidents of identity theft and over \$800 million in online fraud.
- COPPA Violations:
 - In 2019, Google and YouTube were fined \$170 million for allegedly collecting personal information about children without their parents' consent.
 - Many Attorneys General have sued Meta for collecting kids' personal information without parental consent. A coalition of 43 states is fighting to strengthen online privacy for children.
 - The U.S. Department of Justice recently sued TikTok for collecting personal information from children under 13 years old without parental knowledge.

Establishing Healthy Internet Use Practices



Take 15 minutes to do a social media clean up!

Adapted from [Smart Social](#)

What is a social media clean-up?

- Organize and declutter your online space.
- Update privacy settings, unfollow profiles, and delete questionable posts.
- Remove anything that could have a negative impression on your identity and ensure your digital footprint fits an image consistent with your interests and values.
- Search for your name on the internet. Check the first few pages of results to see what kind of information and images are appearing.

What apps do you spend the most time on?

Why should parents and educators care?

- A questionable social media presence could potentially show red flags and lead to a job or school rejection letter.
- A positive social media presence can highlight positive attributes and demonstrate responsible online etiquette.
- Cybercriminals can learn a lot about students from their social media accounts.

Did someone tag you in a photo that is questionable?

What can parents and educators do?

- Help determine what is appropriate for them to post to create the image they want prospective colleges, employers, and others to see.
- Have an open dialogue with your child and guide them in learning what text and photos are appropriate to post online.
- Determine what platforms are best for your child to use to build a positive social media resume to be noticed by job recruiters and colleges.

Is there 1 platform that you can keep up to date?

Section Highlights

- Presents evidence-based data on the connections between screen use, social media, and substance use, offering strategies to reduce negative impacts and identify common substance-related terminology
- Explores the influence of artificial intelligence on youth
- Discusses the risks associated with viral trends and challenges
- Examines the link between excessive screen time, sedentary behavior, and childhood obesity
- Provides critical information on sexual exploitation and human trafficking, along with guidance to help protect children from online scams and predators

Discussing the topics in this section

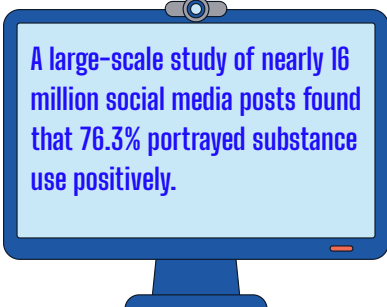
This section contains information about topics that may be considered sensitive to certain audiences and explores more explicit risks that may need additional adaptation to be developmentally and age-appropriate. Take a trauma-informed approach to discussing these topics in more detail with youth and adult community members.

The Impact of Social Media and Access to Drugs

Substance use, involving alcohol, tobacco products, illicit drugs, inhalants, or misused prescription can lead to negative consequences and dependency in children and adolescents. Youth are often exposed through school, social settings, and especially digital platforms and social media, which can normalize use, increase peer pressure, and even facilitate access. It's crucial for parents and caretakers to intervene due to the harmful effects on a child's health, development, academics, and social life.

The Virginia Youth Survey (VYS) has tracked youth substance use for over a decade, showing progress in reducing tobacco, nicotine, and cannabis use, yet alarming rates persist. The 2023 VYS revealed:

- Vaping (e-cigarettes): 8.2% of high school students and 4.2% of middle school students.
- Cannabis: 9.5% of high school students.
- Misused Prescription Drugs: 6.6% of high school students and 7.6% of middle school students.



A large-scale study of nearly 16 million social media posts found that 76.3% portrayed substance use positively.

Online content often fails to depict the risks of substance use. Posts from individuals, rather than just companies, are particularly concerning as they are more likely to be believed by youth.

Substantial research links youth substance use to screen time, including social media, movies, and television. This connection is driven by increased exposure to substance-related content and the positive or misleading portrayal of substance use. [According to the University of Virginia, teens are exposed to an average of 85 drug mentions daily across various media.](#) Frequent exposure increases the likelihood of use, and even non-media screen time (texting, video chatting) is associated with higher rates of substance use.



New data from the Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth (2025) also reveals a troubling link between social media and access to illicit substances:

- 28% of Virginia teens surveyed purchased pills/powders online.
- 46% reported their friends buying pills/powders online or via social media.

Understanding marijuana terminology and emoji slang is vital for parents. Terms like "weed," "blazed," and "greened out" are common, as are emoji combinations used to discreetly communicate about drugs.

Drugs have different kinds of street names. Parents and teachers should be familiar with their names and depictions on social media.



Oxycodone

Oxys, M30s, Blues,
M-boxes



Percocet®

Percs, Perc 30s, Jumps,
Skittles, O.C. Dirty Birds,
Blue Pills



Benzodiazepines

Benzos, Bars, Bricks



Xanax®

Zanes, Zanbars, Z-bars



Adderall®

Addies, Uppers,
Bennies, Speed,
Truck Drivers



Cocaine

Coke, Crack, Bump,
Blow



Heroin

China White, Dope,
H, Smack



Meth

Glass, Ice, Speed

**They also have one thing in common -
They're all being laced with a deadly dose of **fentanyl**.**

<https://www.deadlydoseva.com/>

IT ONLY TAKES ONE



- 5 in 10 counterfeit pills contain a lethal dose of fentanyl.
- Nearly 100 Virginian teens and young adults die each year from fentanyl.
- It Only Takes One was launched in order to raise awareness about the dangers of fentanyl and save lives.
- Naloxone is a life-saving nasal mist that can reverse an opioid overdose. Naloxone is distributed free of charge by the Virginia Department of Health.
- Learn how to save a life through [REVIVE!](#) training offered by the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services.

Quick tips

- Report and block content promoting substance use.
- Adjust social media settings to block substance-related ads.
- Most importantly, foster an open dialogue with your teen so they feel comfortable discussing concerning online content.
- Discuss the dangers of fentanyl. Learn more at [It Only Takes One](#).

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its Influence on Youth

Chatbots

Chatbots allow users to have text or voice conversations with a computer. Examples include ChatGPT, Grok on X/Twitter, and Meta's AI chatbot on Facebook.

Most chatbots specialize in performing tasks, but some apps such as Character.AI allow users to chat with custom characters, simulating human friendships or even romantic relationships.

Some companies even market AI chatbots as a substitute for therapy with a licensed professional.

Chatbots are programmed to respond in a way that keeps users engaged, and the responses can become unhealthy. There have even been cases of chatbots encouraging teenagers to engage in harmful behavior.

Generative AI

An increasing number of teenagers use AI to help with schoolwork. AI takes shortcuts to generate responses, often making up sources. Work done by AI often has signature phrases and signs that it was written by a machine.

AI technology can be used to create images and videos that look real, often called "deepfakes."

Images of real people can be modified to make it look like they participated in events that never happened.

The same technology can be used to generate pornographic images and videos of real people, called "deepfake nudes." Some teenagers have created deepfake nudes of their peers as a joke, or as a form of bullying, causing serious emotional harm to the victims.

Key Takeaways

- AI can be used as a tool to identify resources, but homework generated by AI is not reliable. It might contain false information, and there will be clues that indicate it's not your own work.
- Chatbots should not be used as a substitute for independent research or for human relationships.
- Some of the images and videos on social media are fake. Be skeptical of everything you see, especially when posted by people you don't know.
- Creating deepfake nude or sexual images of real people is a crime and can be prosecuted under Virginia law.

Understanding Viral Trends and Challenges on Social Media

Memes and Challenges

Memes and viral trends on social media inspire users to copy each other's behavior for clicks and attention. While some trends are harmless, others can be dangerous or even deadly. For example, social media users have challenged each other to drink Tide Pod laundry detergent, which is toxic.

Social Contagion

Social media can provide support for people experiencing mental health challenges, but viral content related to mental health can also make things worse. Creators on platforms such as Tik-Tok have formed large online communities around mental health conditions. While claiming to raise awareness, these creators can glamorize mental distress and harmful behaviors. When young people encounter self-harm on social media, they are more likely to engage in self-harm and to experience suicidal ideas. Influencers who promote "awareness" of mental health conditions may inspire users to diagnose themselves with disorders, and self-diagnoses are often inaccurate. Some young people have even begun to show symptoms they didn't have previously in response to viral content.



Impulsive decisions, pushing boundaries and taking risks is part of growing up but social media definitely isn't helping. It amplifies the power of peer pressure, and rewards dangerous risk-taking with likes, shares and empty promises of insta-fame. Learn more about the dangers from the [Cleveland Clinic](#).

Key Takeaways

- Be skeptical of viral content; many videos are edited or AI-generated.
- Don't participate in challenges that pose a threat to your health or safety.
- Only a mental health professional can diagnose symptoms and prescribe treatments.
- Stay away from online communities that reward unhealthy or toxic behavior.

Excessive Screen Use and Childhood Obesity

Excessive screen time significantly contributes to childhood overweight and obesity due to its link with sedentary lifestyles. The 2023 Virginia Youth Survey found that 18.3% of Virginia high school students did not engage in at least 60 minutes of total physical activity week prior. Screen time often replaces opportunities for exercise, and research shows even one hour of television daily can increase a child's obesity risk.

Beyond inactivity, constant exposure to advertisements for ultra-processed foods on television and social media further contributes to weight gain. Encouraging screen time limits alongside increased physical activity is a powerful strategy for prevention.

Encourage Active Habits Alongside Screen Use

- Follow social media accounts that promote physical activity and healthy living by qualified professionals.
- Use social media to document fitness journeys for accountability and inspiration, but be mindful of "fitspiration" downsides; follow accounts that feature diverse body types.
- Use phone settings or apps to monitor and restrict social media usage. Limiting daily use to 30 minutes can improve well-being and reduce depression/loneliness.
- Create a healthy balance by setting specific screen times and scheduling breaks.
- Turn off push notifications to reduce distractions and mindless scrolling.

Sexual Exploitation and Human Trafficking

Human trafficking happens when someone uses force, fraud, or coercion to make another person work or engage in sex acts for money. More and more victims are being targeted and exploited online. In 2021, the Human Trafficking Institute reported that 41% of U.S. sex trafficking victims were recruited via the internet, with Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat being the most common platforms for minors. Predatory behavior often occurs over a period of time, where traffickers, who may be an adult or an adult posing as a minor, form a relationship with the child. Traffickers employ various tactics, including faking romantic interest, posing as modeling agents, or offering tempting job opportunities. They often promise money, gifts, housing, or transportation to lure victims away from home.

Youth who have been targeted can feel deep shame or embarrassment, preventing them from seeking help from an adult or law enforcement. In severe cases, some youth have taken their own lives due to feelings of entrapment. Parents should have age-appropriate discussions about these risks and continue to ask questions about who their child has talked to online.

Quick tips to protect yourself

- Set online profiles to private to limit visibility to known friends and family.
- Do not accept friend requests from strangers.
- Never respond to unsolicited job offers—these are scams.
- Be wary of offers that seem too good to be true, such as money, gifts, or modeling contracts.

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