



Safeguarding Your Child's Use of Social Media

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ELECTRONIC DEVICES HAVE BECOME the new pathways of communication, especially in the era of COVID19 restrictions. With a never ending stream of flashy new apps and websites, this reality is not going away any time soon. Now, this is not without its advantages, when used in a balanced and mature way. It is possible to stay in touch with friends and loved ones anywhere in the world, to engage in harmless fun activities with family and friends, and to quickly and effectively communicate with one or more persons.

However, all that glitters is not gold. The dangers of social media for kids is a matter of current discussion and research. Several areas of concern have been identified with social media use, including depression, anxiety, self-esteem problems, negative body image, lack of real "face to face" social experience, bullying, exposure to inappropriate material, sharing of inappropriate personal information, and exposure to predators.

Since electronic devices are here to stay, your goal as a parent is to protect your kids from social media dangers and teach them to use these devices in a balanced and mature way, appropriate to their age and demonstrated maturity level.

Here are three ideas to get you started in the right direction:

■ Don't start too early.

There may come a time when some of your child's friends will have a certain electronic device or have permission to use a certain app and your child doesn't. Remember this fact: Just because some other parents have allowed their kids to have a certain device or use certain apps doesn't mean this is the right choice for your



child. Do not allow yourself to feel pressured into a false sense of having to do what other parents do. It is your job to teach and protect your kids, so introduce electronic items into your family at the pace that is right for your family and only when you feel your kids are mature enough to handle them properly.

■ Talk about it ahead of time.

When my boys were younger, we had several fun computer games that we enjoyed playing. At one point, most of their friends had a video game console and we didn't. When they asked for one, our answer was: "We'll think about it and talk about it." Over the following months we had several family discussions about the potential benefits and dangers of adding a video game console to our family. We clearly defined expectations for behavior that would allow video games into our family as well as behaviors that would quickly cause video games privileges to be removed. We made it clear that our family was more important than a video game, so if the video console hurt our family

relationships or kids in any way, we would discontinue it until it could be used in a fun and healthy way.

■ Keep the discussion open.

Your kids will have many questions as to why they can't have a certain device, play a certain game, use a certain app, and so on. These discussions will apply to other types of media (e.g., movies, music, YouTube videos) as well. Listen to your kids' thoughts and requests and do your own research as to the appropriateness of a certain device or app for your child. If the answer is no (or not yet), explain your reasoning clearly and share your concerns. If the answer is yes, discuss the importance of safeguarding personal information and be clear about your expectations for appropriate use and parental monitoring. For more practical ideas, a great resource is *Growing Up Social*, by Gary Chapman and Arlene Pellicane. ■

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Q&A

Q My child spends hours “hanging out” with friends from home, playing video games. Is his time online holding him back from social relationships?

As technology has changed, the idea of socialization has changed as well. For parents, “spending time with friends” typically means meeting in person or speaking on the phone. Now, teens consider online and/or video game interactions to be quality social time.

Recently, researchers found social skills can develop in positive ways through video gaming. Children who interact through headsets/voice communication were found to provide mostly supportive, helpful comments to others. Video games can also promote teamwork, problem-solving, and communication skills. Allowing children to practice these skills from the comfort of home, it may build confidence for more successful interactions in person.

Using technology to socialize has become even more prevalent in the age of COVID-19. Zoom play dates, online board games, and virtual movie nights are providing positive, creative ways to socialize.

With any online platform, children need safe and responsible interactions, being mindful of who they talk to, what information they share, and how much time is spent on devices. These limits are best for their overall development.

Talk with your children about what online socializing provides for them, and encourage a healthy balance of social time online and in person (as safely as our current environment allows). ■

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How “social” is Social Media?

A 2017 PRESS RELEASE FROM the American Medical Association reported that “according to several recent studies, there is a notable link between increased use of social media and increased levels of anxiety and depression.” As with most things in life, the problem lies not in what we use, but how we use it. Given our increased reliance on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, I thought it might be helpful to examine how use of this resource can help or hurt our emotional health.

Loneliness is one of our most painful emotions, because as social beings we require bonds with others for survival (imagine a newborn with no social connections!). From the beginning, negative emotions and other types of pain signal unmet needs. Just as hunger signals the need for food and thirst for water, loneliness signals a need for social connection.

Interaction with social media can simulate this connection.

When we use social media, we are interacting in an indirect fashion using text, pictures, video, etc. Although these provide social *information*, they do not provide an experience of direct social connection in all sensory domains, many of which are nonverbal. Our felt need for additional sources of information explains the development of new forms of communication such as emojis, an attempt to remedy the deficits of text by providing indicators of emotional tone :).

Problems can arise with excessive or increasingly exclusive use of such indirect means of social contact. Just as use of alcohol or other chemicals can temporarily decrease or remove the pain associated with a need or problem, doing little or nothing to remedy the situation itself,



interaction with social media can simulate satisfaction of social needs while leaving these needs unmet. Interaction with others through social media, therefore, should be balanced with face-to-face time as often as possible. ■

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Connecting and Disconnecting with Social Media



IS SOCIAL MEDIA SCREEN TIME healthy for my relationships or family? Use of social media has become a popular, and controversial topic, especially given higher reports of use during the quarantine related to Covid-19. Any choice is likely to have pros and cons, so let’s take a look at the positives and negatives of social media on connection.

POSITIVES

Communication: Communication builds relationships, and increased communication is a positive between family members. Busy lifestyles can make it difficult to stay in touch, and social media can help families share memories together.

Involvement: Increased involvement in each other’s lives sends a positive message of caring. This can lead to deeper follow-up

conversations outside of social media use. Sharing experiences can increase connection and understanding between family members.

Outside opinions: Social media provides a perspective of what it is like to not be you. It can be a source of positive news and hope. Families can use social media as a starting block to discuss serious issues or bring up topics.

Identity: Family videos and photos can be a positive way to affirm family connections.

NEGATIVES

Less Family Time: Individual time viewing social media and disconnecting with immediate family around you decreases communication. Additionally, social media use focused on news may increase divides among family members.

“Highlight reel effect”: Family members may compare their experiences to the “highlights”

shared by other families, which can promote unrealistic comparisons.

Negative mood: Scrolling through social media when sad or lonely can increase these negative moods. Social media use can lead to feelings of disconnection, anxiety, or depression.

The benefits and consequences of social media use are best examined within each family, as use and influence of social media can have differing impacts on mood and relationships. It is possible all family members could benefit from less disconnected screen time, and more connection with authentic relationships and experiences. Ask your family members, how does social media improve or interfere with our relationships? ■

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