

Social media: What parents should know

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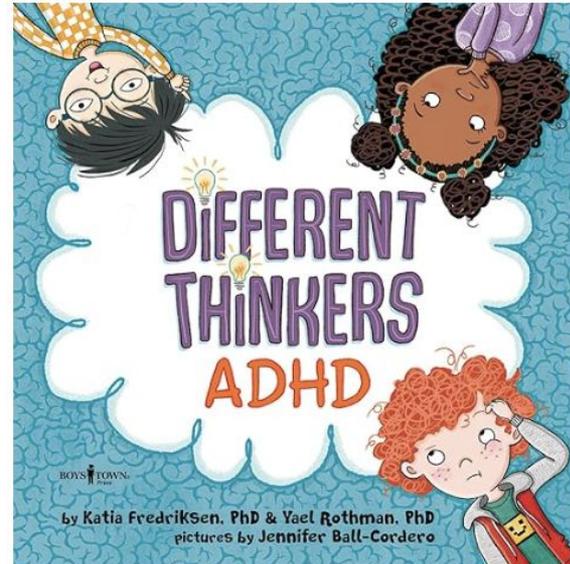
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A LIFESPAN NEUROPSYCHOLOGY PRACTICE

EST 1985



What is social media?

Forms of digital communication, i.e., websites, applications, through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content. This includes:



- **Social networking sites**, e.g., LinkedIn ('02), Facebook ('08), Snapchat ('11)
- **Media-sharing networks**, e.g., YouTube ('05), Instagram ('10, bought by FB '12), TikTok ('16)
- **Microblogging platforms**, e.g., X (Twitter, '06)
- **Community forums**, e.g., Reddit ('05), Discord ('15)

The early 2010s

- Smartphones and social media becoming increasingly popular
- Accompanying changes in data on mental health and happiness in teens internationally:
 - increased depressive symptoms
 - decreased happiness and life satisfaction
- Research also showed:
 - teens less likely to go out/see friends in person
 - sleep declined sharply
 - self-harm and suicide increased in ages 10-14
 - 8th graders' academic performance declined after 2012

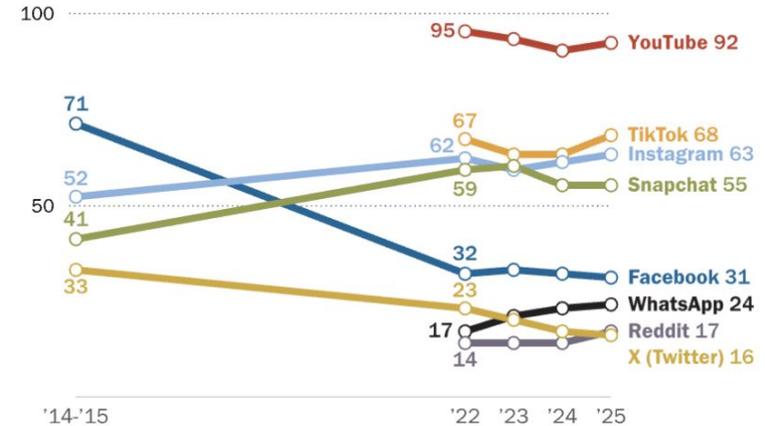


Social media apps popular among today's teens

- **Most popular**
 - YouTube has been used by almost all teens
 - other stand-outs: TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat
- **Changes**
 - use of WhatsApp has increased
 - X and Facebook use have declined

A majority of teens continue to use YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat

% of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 who say they ever use the following apps or sites



Note: Those who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. teens conducted Sept. 25-Oct. 9, 2025.

"Teens, Social Media and AI Chatbots 2025"

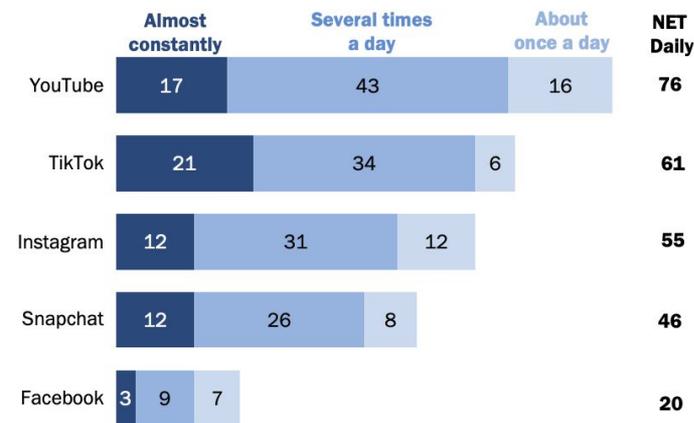
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Current prevalence of social media use in teens

- 76% on YouTube daily; 17% with “almost constant” use
- 61% on TikTok daily; 21% with “almost constant” use
- Approx. 50% on Instagram and Snapchat daily; 12% with “almost constant use”
- 36% report using at least one of these platforms “almost constantly”

Most teens visit YouTube and TikTok daily, including about 1 in 5 who say they do almost constantly

% of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 who say they visit or use the following apps or sites ...



Note: Figures may not add up to NET values due to rounding. Those who did not give an answer or gave other responses are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. teens conducted Sept. 25-Oct. 9, 2025. "Teens, Social Media and AI Chatbots 2025"

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Other factors



- **Gender:**

- Girls more likely than boys to use TikTok and Instagram “almost constantly”
- Boys more likely than girls to use YouTube “almost constantly”

- **Race/ethnicity:**

- Black and Latino teens more likely than White teens to report using TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram “almost constantly”

- **Age:**

- Older teens (15-17) more likely than younger (13-14) to use all platforms surveyed, *except* for YouTube, which is even
- Almost 40% of kids aged 10-12 use social media
- Median age for first smartphone is 11

It's designed to be addictive



Sean Parker, ex-FB president: “It’s a social validation feedback loop...you’re exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology. We understood this, consciously, and we did it anyway.”

Aza Raskin, who designed “infinite scroll”: “It’s as if they’re taking behavioral cocaine and just sprinkling it all over your interface, and that’s the thing that keeps you coming back and back and back. Behind every screen on your phone, there are generally like literally a thousand engineers that have worked on this thing to try to make it maximally addicting.”

Leah Pearlman, co-inventor of the FB “like” button, tried to stop using FB after leaving the company but realized she was “actually also kind of addicted to the feedback.”

Steve Jobs didn’t let his kids use the iPad. **Bill Gates** didn’t give his kids smartphones until they were in high school.

Half of young adults aged 18 to 27 say **they wish TikTok and Snapchat had never been invented.**

Neurological changes in adolescence

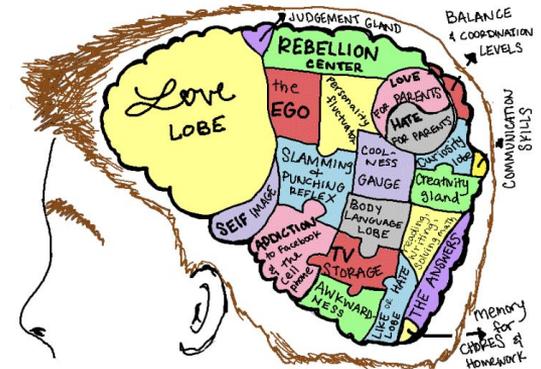
- Shifts in hormonal systems that mediate the reaction to stress
 - HPA (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal) axis becomes more reactive
 - teens release more cortisol in response to stress
 - cortisol stays elevated for longer
- Rise in sex hormones
 - estrogen - increased cortisol production, emotional memory, amygdala sensitivity
 - testosterone - increased emotional reactivity, reward-seeking, social sensitivity
- Frontal lobe is still developing, so teens are less able to logically problem-solve in the face of stress



Stress signals are amplified, the emotional center is highly active, and the regulatory system is not yet fully online. And teens are often chronically sleep deprived!

Psychosocial changes in adolescence

- **Identity versus role confusion**
 - explore values, morals, beliefs, political views
 - question family norms
 - experiment with style, interests, social roles
 - develop gender and sexual identity
- **Increased importance of peer relationships, shift toward autonomy from parents**
 - need for belonging, peer approval
 - social comparison intensifies
 - increased desire for autonomy
 - conflict/emotional distancing from parents
- **Emotional intensity**
 - including worries about the upcoming post-secondary transition, and about the world at large.



Positives of the teen brain



- Very adaptable and resilient
- Readily learns and adapts
- Quickly absorbs new information and learns from new experiences
- High motivation when something feels meaningful
- Strengthening of social brain networks
- Executive functions continuing to develop

Not all screen time is created equal...

- Parental involvement
- Amount of time spent on screen
- Type of content consumed/exposed to
- Sorts of interactions that kids are having online
- Disruption of other activities
- Addictive use trajectories
 - Sample questionnaire items: I feel the need to use social media apps more and more; the thought of being without my phone makes me feel distressed; I play video games so I can forget about my problems.
 - associated with elevated risk for suicidal ideation/behavior
 - “social-media use disorder” has been proposed



Social media

Positives:

- Community/connection with people who share identity, abilities, interests (could be niche, marginalized);
- Access to important information and space for self-expression/creativity;
- Access to social support.



Negatives:

- Negative self-comparison and focus on likes.
- Contact from unknown adults (1/5 of 13-15 y/o girls sexually propositioned via social media)
- Cyber bullying, sextortion, harmful/disturbing content.
- Teens who spend 3+ hours per day on social media face 2x risk of anxiety and depression. Similar for college students.
- Higher concern for adolescent girls and for kids with pre-existing mental health problems.
- LGBTQ+ teens who are heavy users of social media are more likely to be depressed than light users.

Video games



Positives:

- Cognitive: spatial skills, logical problem-solving, impulse control, working memory, manual dexterity.
- Emotional: can promote relaxation, build resilience;
- Social: builds connections, cooperation, team-building, community.

Negatives:

- Could desensitize to violence or impair empathy, depending on content (though no direct causal link found to violent bx).
- Could lead to sleep problems, sedentary lifestyle, etc.



Bear in mind

- Either activity can result in obsessive behaviors.
- Both activate the brain's reward system, and in kids and teens the executive functions are not yet fully developed to help mitigate this effect.

Remember: fire was a great discovery to cook our food and keep us warm, but we had to learn it could be harmful as well.



"Hey! Look what Zog do!"

Impact of screen use more generally

- Can improve learning
 - e.g., e-books/learning-to-read apps
- But screens also provide things kids don't need:
 - high stimulus/pace input (how can a teacher compete?)
 - interruptions during homework/learning time
 - supposed “multi-tasking”
- And the almost 5 hours daily the average teen spends on social media reduces exposure to some things they do need:
 - sleep, outdoors time, pretend play/creative pursuits, boredom
- Smartphone ownership before age 13 is associated with:
 - depression, obesity, and insufficient sleep in early adolescence
 - negative emotional outcomes in early adulthood, including issues with self-esteem and emotion regulation, as well as suicidal ideation



Signs of problematic social media use

- Does my child participate in a diverse and meaningful range of activities every day?
- How many hours per day is my child using social media?
- Are addictive use patterns developing?
- Does my child have a very hard time stopping?
- Is it affecting their ability to get enough sleep, complete homework, or generally function day to day?



Guidance for parents - talk about it

- Listen, validate, share concerns, reflect, educate, provide data
- Topics to cover:
 - Never send nude pictures of yourself
 - Don't post anything on social media/online that you wouldn't want announced on a loudspeaker at your school
 - Don't share information about your identity online or while gaming
 - Don't assume that texts or Snapchats are private
 - Ask parents first about bodies/sex rather than searching online
 - Remember that your time is valuable



Guidance for parents - when to start?

- On average, U.S. kids get their 1st smartphone around age 11, and almost 40% of kids age 10-12 use social media.
- Recent international research indicates a big difference in mental health outcomes depending on whether a child receives a smartphone at 12 versus 13.
- Dr. Twenge and many other researchers advise:
 - no social media until 16 or later
 - no smartphone until 16 or later (basic phones earlier)
 - avoid giving kids their own tablet or gaming console
- While likely to be highly unpopular, it's never too late to make changes based on scientific advances! Consider cigarettes...
 - parental controls
 - deleting apps/features
 - switching to flip phone



Guidance for parents - set rules

- Develop a clear family media contract and stick to consequences
 - having a phone is a privilege, not a right
 - different families, different rules
- Protecting sleep is key
 - no screens for an hour before bed or in the bedroom overnight
 - family charging station
 - parental controls to shut down from bedtime through wake-up time
- Establish phone-free hours and spaces, and model good screen use
 - dinner time, vacation, etc.
 - if needed, use productivity apps during homework



Guidance for parents - monitor

- Set up parental controls - via operating system and/or third-party software
 - don't download apps without permission
 - set time limits, and set controls for night-time, school
 - block inappropriate websites/social media
- Periodically check texts, browser history
 - pornography, cyber bullying, self-harm, disordered eating, toxic ideologies, etc
- Game with your kids
 - See what's motivating them
 - 1-1 time

Watch this utterly terrifying but excellent show!



Resources



- “10 Rules for Raising Kids in a High Tech World, by Jean Twenge
- Common Sense Media
- Be Internet Awesome, by Google
- Family Online Safety Institute, www.fosi.org
- “Good Picture, Bad Pictures,” by Kristen Jenson
- “Slaying Digital Dragons,” by Alex Packer”
- Adolescence; The Social Dilemma; Screenagers - show, movies

Resources

- [Teens, Social Media and AI Chatbots 2025 | Pew Research Center](#)
- [Social Media Has Both Positive and Negative Impacts on Children and Adolescents - Social Media and Youth Mental Health - NCBI Bookshelf](#)
- [How much is too much social media use: A Q&A with Mitch Prinstein, PhD](#)
- [How to Wean a Teen Off Social Media](#)
- [Does Your Child Have an Unhealthy Relationship to Social Media? Here's How to Tell.](#)
- [Screen Time and the Brain | Harvard Medical School](#)
- [Association of Screen Time and Depression in Adolescence](#)
- [Addictive Screen Use Trajectories and Suicidal Behaviors, Suicidal Ideation, and Mental Health in US Youths | JAMA](#)
- [More and more countries are banning kids from social media](#)
- [Social Media and Youth Mental Health | HHS.gov](#)
- [Smartphone Ownership, Age of Smartphone Acquisition, and Health Outcomes in Early Adolescence | Pediatrics](#)
- [Protecting the Developing Mind in a Digital Age: A Global Policy Imperative](#)
- [Addictive Screen Use Trajectories and Suicidal Behaviors, Suicidal Ideation, and Mental Health in US Youths | JAMA](#)
- [Don't give children under age 13 smartphones, new research says | CNN](#)