Protecting Your Child's Mental Health Online

Technology is evolving fast – it can be hard to keep up with the new platforms, content trends, and potential dangers that young people may be exposed to. Kids and teens see traumatizing events and controversial opinions in the news on a regular basis, and social media is a way to see in real-time what their peers are doing.

The type of content young people see <u>affects</u> their mental health. Like anything, there can be pros and cons to this. Unfortunately, we can't fully protect young people from all the bad stuff. What we can do is prepare them to protect themselves and be there to help them understand what they're seeing and hearing.

COMPARISON & FOMO (FEAR OF MISSING OUT)

It's natural to compare ourselves to others from time to time, but feeling like everyone else has better grades, social lives, home lives, etc. can stir up dissatisfaction with kids and teens about their own lives. We're in a culture of seeking validation through likes, comments, and follower counts, and it's easy to feel inadequate if numbers are low.

TIPS

Help young people understand that peers only post the highlights of their lives. Social media is designed to show the best parts of life. High school seniors aren't putting up pics holding college rejection letters, only acceptances. Nobody is bragging about losing the big game. For every post about a party, there is another party that person didn't get invited to. People only share what they want others to see, and some people with the happiest online presence have many bad days.

Encourage kids and teens to connect offline. Time spent with others doesn't just reduce screentime, but can also help kids and teens avoid some of the triggers they might see while scrolling. It also builds resiliency to FOMO – after all, it's harder to feel left out of one activity when you are busy doing something else.

BODY IMAGE & DISSATISFACTION

Social media feeds are full of images of celebrities, influencers, and peers who young people may perceive as more attractive than themselves. Photo filters and editing impact this, too. Some people have even requested plastic surgery to <u>look like</u> a filtered Snapchat picture. Body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem are commonly triggered by social media, <u>especially</u> among adolescent girls.

TIPS

Remind kids and teens that social media isn't showing real life. Pictures are often edited or filtered, and there are lots of tips and tricks people use to take flattering photos. Beyond that, influencers often exaggerate the power of beauty products (especially if they are being paid to promote them).

Encourage young people to reduce their social media use, at least for a few weeks. Teens and young adults who reduced their social media use <u>by 50%</u> for just a few weeks saw significant improvement in how they felt about both their weight and their overall appearance compared with peers who maintained consistent levels of social media use.

Seek professional support if needed. Body dissatisfaction and disordered eating can be a slippery slope, especially when algorithms push harmful related content. If you think your child might have symptoms of an eating disorder, a free and anonymous online eating disorder test is available at mhascreening.org.

NAVIGATING MISINFORMATION

There's an endless amount of information online, and it is hard to know what is true and real. Altered and AI videos, images, and audio can make things especially complicated.

There's also a lot of misinformation related to mental health terms. While it's great that young people are talking more openly about mental health, language is important. Using clinical terms in a negative way can contribute to stigma, and using them casually can make it hard for people who truly need help to be taken seriously.

TIPS

Encourage young people to question things. Teach them how to dig deeper before taking something as fact. It's important to check multiple sources (and make sure those sources are credible) and think critically about if the information makes sense.

When it comes to mental health, it's better to be safe than sorry. If a young person says they're "traumatized," "triggered," or another mental health term, it's worth gently following up. They may need support, or, if they used the term lightly, take the teaching moment.

VIOLENT & DANGEROUS CONTENT

Technology exposes youth to several dangers, and they're able to access more violent and inappropriate content than ever before. This doesn't only happen if they go looking for it; social media algorithms are known to push this kind of content into young people's feeds. This can include graphic violence, pornography, dangerous challenges, tips to restrict eating, self-harm how-to videos, suicide challenges, and more.

TIPS

Be a trusted person or help identify one. Make sure there's a safe person in your child's life for them to go to if they see something online that makes them uncomfortable or scared. As a parent or guardian, you may want to be this person for your child, but they may feel better talking about things with a teacher, coach, aunt/uncle, or other adult.

See some of it for yourself. Knowledge is power. Be aware of any dangerous challenges that are trending, know what video games your child is playing, and be ready to talk about troubling current events.

CYBERBULLYING & HARASSMENT

Unfortunately, bullying is nothing new. But these days it doesn't just happen at recess or after school, and online bullying, or cyberbullying, can be nonstop. This can look like posting unflattering or edited images of someone, spreading rumors, or sending disrespectful messages. Being able to hide behind a screen can give people a false sense of security and confidence to be meaner than they would in real life.

Online bullying and harassment aren't only coming from people your child knows. Connecting with new people is a huge benefit to youth being online, but not all strangers have good intentions. The internet can be a hotbed for people pressuring teens for explicit content, or people who simply aren't who they say they are.

TIPS

Ask your child about their social media and online life. Know what platforms they're using, who can see their profiles, and who they may be talking to. Online friends – people they only know online – aren't automatically dangerous, but it's important to be cautious.

Know when to contact the authorities. Any inappropriate online contact between a child and an adult should be reported to the police. Schools, counties, and states have different policies and laws related to cyberbullying to protect youth. There are also federal laws in place regarding exploiting youth and sharing explicit content with/of them. Learn more here.

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Keep in mind that you'll never fully relate or "get it." Youth are growing up in a truly different culture when it comes to technology. It may be tempting to leave this as a "young people's problem." But young people model the adults in their life – caretakers and household members are the main influence on how kids use technology. Being an informed, trusted role model in a young person's life can go a long way in ensuring their social media use does more good than harm.

If you think your child's time online is impacting their mental health, take the parent mental health test at mhascreening.org, and check out MHA's book "Where to Start" for tips on how to take action.

MHA
Mental Health America®

Connect on social
@mentalhealthamerica

Learn more
mhanational.org