

Access

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Social Media and Youth Mental Health

The U.S. Surgeon General weighs in on this important topic

The U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy recently issued an extraordinary public warning about potential risks of social media use on young people. He wrote: “We are in the middle of a national youth mental health crisis. I am concerned that social media is an important driver of that crisis — one that we must urgently address.”

Social media use by young people is nearly universal. Up to 95% of young people age 13-17 report using a social media platform. More than one third say they use social media “almost constantly.”

A large body of research has emerged on the connection between increased social media use and soaring rates of mental distress among adolescents. Data indicates that heavy use of social media displaces important activities such as getting sufficient sleep and time spent with family and friends. Excessive use can fuel feelings of addiction, anxiety, depression, isolation and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO).

Dr. Vivek Murthy explained that social media’s effects on adolescent mental health are not yet fully researched or understood. “We don’t have enough evidence to say it’s safe.” He said a growing body of research suggests that social media poses a **“profound risk”** to young people’s mental health, by potentially exposing them to violent and sexual content, cyberbullying and harassment.”



How can parents guide social media use?

Dr. Murthy’s offered recommendations to help families guide social media use. He recommends that families keep mealtimes and in-person gatherings free of devices, to help build social bonds and promote in-person, face-to-face conversation. His advisory suggested creating a **‘family media plan.’** It should include clear expectations for social media use — setting boundaries around content — and stress the importance of keeping personal information private.

Parents need to be engaged and aware, in order to have productive conversations about social media usage. They can teach children about responsible social media behavior by modeling good online habits themselves. Young users should be encouraged to immediately report any problematic content or suspicious online activity.



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Social media use: How much is too much?

The Department of Health and Human Services reports that adolescents spending more than three hours per day on social media face double the risk of experiencing poor mental health outcomes. Since 2011, mental health conditions and suicidal thoughts and behaviors in teens have increased. Teenage girls are experiencing the most sadness or hopelessness at 57% (up from 36% in 2011) with 30% saying that they have seriously considered suicide (up from 19% in 2011).

Despite these warnings, researchers say social media can provide an important “lifeline,” by providing a sense of shared identity and belonging, especially for LGBTQ youth. Social media offers a forum to connect with others, find a sense of community and allow people to freely express themselves.

The darker side of social media

Social media platforms can be sites for predatory behaviors and interactions with malicious actors who target children and adolescents. Adolescent girls and transgender youth are disproportionately impacted by online harassment and abuse. Nearly 6-in-10 adolescent girls say they’ve been contacted by a stranger on social media platforms in ways that made them feel uncomfortable.¹

The bottom line

The genie is out of the bottle. There’s no going back to the “pre-social-media” days. We must now take steps to create social media environments that are healthy and safe for everyone. Dr. Murthy’s complete Advisory is available at [Surgeon General’s Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health - PDF](#)

¹ Nesi, J., Mann, S. and Robb, M. B. (2023). Teens and mental health: How girls really feel about social media. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense.

The government or tech companies — who’s responsible for online safety?

The Surgeon General said everyone has a part to play in keeping our young people safe. He called for action by policy makers, tech companies, researchers (and concerned parents) to collectively take steps to gain a clearer understanding of the impact of social media.

Dr. Murthy called for policymakers to step in and establish age-appropriate, transparent, enforceable safety standards (just like we do for other products). This will give parents some reassurance around the safety of social media. He called upon tech companies to enforce minimum age limits for children and create default settings on apps that include high safety and privacy standards.



Remember, if you or family members in your household are concerned about social media use, Advocate Aurora EAP can provide free, confidential counseling and other helpful resources.



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