

Social Media and Your Child

Considering the prevalence of the growing number of social media platforms, many of which cater to younger and younger social media consumers (i.e., children of all ages), it has become almost inescapable to ignore them. By the time most children enter high school the majority of teens have had exposure to social media in some form, from Instagram and FaceBook to Snapchat and Tik Tok, there seems to be something of interest for everyone. By adulthood, over 94% of Canadians have a social media account of some kind. The preferences of which platforms we participate on are largely based on age, gender and socio economic status.

Many parents tread carefully as their children begin to show interest in social media. Some parents are concerned about whether their child is mature enough to navigate the potential pitfalls of being on a social media platform and there is good reason for caution. Most prevalent is the concern that self-esteem can take a hit from the constant exposure of posts that depict lives that are “perfect” showcasing images of friends, holidays and social events. There is a steady stream of others’ successes, achievements and cherry picked moments. It can potentially leave observers feeling as though they’re on the sidelines and feeling “less than”. In fact, there is new research that indicates a correlation between social media and depression in adolescent females (however there is no causative evidence). As well, parents are sometimes concerned about the potential for online bullying and exposure to negative social behaviours.

These factors that can potentially be mitigated by teaching our children and teens how to avoid some of the possible risks of being active on social media.

When is my child mature enough to manage a social media account?

Whether your child has a social media account or not is largely individual and there isn’t any “right” age for any given child or family. Rather than considering the age of the child prior to giving the green light to participate on social media platforms, it may be more important to consider how much dialogue you’ve had around the subject, your plan for role modelling social media use and how you might approach some of the potential risks. The

more we communicate with our children and bring to light some of the pitfalls and how to trouble shoot tricky issues that may come up, we are able to arm them with strategies that can be emotionally protective.

How might I support my child's social media participation?

As your child navigates a social media platform for the first time, it's a great idea to explore it together. Regardless of whether you're interested in setting up a Snapchat account of your own or creating your own Instagram account, there's no better way to understand, track and be part of your child's online life than participating alongside your child. It's important to set up ground rules from the very beginning (and okay to introduce some rules and boundaries as we learn more as parents, even if our kids are already up and running with social media accounts). Social media is a privilege not a right. That is, parents have the responsibility to monitor their children's accounts on a regular basis. Passwords need to be shared on phones and all accounts, and parents need to explain that this is part of good parenting. It is not about snooping or not trusting our kids, but rather about ensuring that we are supporting their online exposure and learning. We oversee our children's nutrition, sleep, academic habits and social connections, and social media is no different. Some parents are reticent to keep track of what is happening on their child's phone or iPad and sometimes feel as though they are being intrusive. If we have conversations up front about our jobs as responsible parents, social media participation being a privilege until our children are well into their teen years, we normalize our participation in their online lives. As our kids become more mature, and used to navigating social media independently we may feel less need to oversee what's happening online, however parental responsibilities need to be understood by our children and teens. It is okay to take a look through your child or teen's phone or iPad and to scroll through their social media account regularly. Ongoing conversations with our kids normalizes these parenting responsibilities (e.g., "I'd love to see what's new on Instagram", or "show me something that was posted after the soccer game or party").

It's important to note that social media has become an important and relevant way that many teens connect with one another and an integral part of how they socialize and their culture. Teaching kids how to participate in a healthy balanced way on social media may have better outcomes than attempting ban them from it altogether.

Some good habits in teaching our kids about how to avoid some of the potential pitfalls of social media include the following:

- ‘Follow’ others who are known to you (not necessarily only those peers that you know personally, but keep your circle to people that you know of)
- Accept invitations to ‘Follow’ or ‘Friend’ only people that either you know or know of generally (e.g., friends of friends or people in your community or circles of interest such as hockey or dance, etc.)
- If someone makes an inappropriate comment to you online, don’t respond. If they’re a friend whom you feel comfortable speaking with, try to talk about your feelings about the comment offline. If you don’t know the person well, consider blocking them.
- Report any abusive, threatening or sexually explicit comments or communications to adults and the social media platform itself immediately.
- Limit time spent on social media and decide with your child when good times during the day might be to spend on social media. We should have no access to screens or anything online at least one hour before bed.
- Set timers on devices to practice good screen hygiene and teach kids reasonable time limits on screens. We need to explicitly discuss, teach and model these habits on a regular basis.
- Continuously discuss and bring to light what they are “consuming” on their social media. Ask “What’s new today?” “Who posted something that interested you?” “How did it make you feel?” “What caught your eye?”

- Show an interest in social media if your child is interested and participate in their online world. “Like” their posts, contribute comments and post some things of your own. You may even get some Follow requests from their friends!
- Role model good habits and healthy responses to social media

How to manage the pressure that can be a reality for children and teens exposed to social media.

That old saying “keeping up with the Jones’s” has never had more meaning than when others began to share their lives on social media. To make matters worse many platforms keep track of the number of views, and “Likes” of whatever is posted and make it possible to scroll through and see who has liked or commented on what has been posted. One strategy to mitigate this phenomenon is to use humour with your child or teen about the whole matter (e.g. “I think I’ll check Instagram and see how well my post is performing so I’ll know whether or not I’m worthy today!”). Humour and pointing out the silliness of some of what occurs on line can go a long way in putting things into perspective for our kids, and helps them become more resilient.

Whether we love it or hate it screen time is here to stay and we must as parents and educators alike try to find that sweet spot of when and how we can work with it to enhance children’s development and when to step away.

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