

Kids and Social Media

Now that we are well into the 21st century, the internet and instant messaging have become primary sources of communication for people around the world. Who would have guessed that our children would become the dominant users of social media? Adolescents alone average about 60 text messages per day and are the primary users of other platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and online videogames. They also learn and use new platforms for communication more quickly than adults. As a result, more and more parents are worried that their kids are addicted to their phones, and parents feel helpless to do anything about it. A recent review in *American Psychologist* by Drs. Marion Underwood and Samuel Ehrenreich at the University of Texas explores the impact of social media on our children and their parents. These authors note that three-quarters of adolescents now own smart phones and ask the question: Are they engaging in a new habit or an extension of an old habit?

School age children have always found ways to pass notes in class, chat in the hallways at school, and talk about each other with friends. Indeed, adolescence is that phase of human development when personal identity and connections to peers are major drivers of behavior. Social media provides an exponential expansion of this need to “stay in touch” with friends and to “know what’s going on” with peers. From this perspective teens are not so much addicted to social media as they are to each other. Surveys of teens reveal an overwhelmingly positive attitude toward social media, mainly because of the social support and information it provides them. After all, social media is a very efficient way of 1) knowing what your peer group is up to, and 2) knowing where you stand in it. It also provides the sender a huge audience in an imaginary world where he or she can act cute, clever, outrageous, obnoxious, or even obscene. Such behaviors are bound to get a reaction from peers, who pass them on and post comments about them, each post expanding on the last. Messaging also provides important information to adolescents about what, when, and where activities are happening. Not knowing what’s going on and who is going to be there creates what the authors call the Fear Of Missing Out.

Social media can obviously have negative consequences. Kids sometimes send hurtful messages as a form of “making fun” of others. Because parents and teachers rarely review texts or tweets, there is little reprisal for doing so. Messages can be sent anonymously, which allows the sender to be more aggressive, sometimes even brutal. Interestingly, girls exchange and attend to photo images more than boys do, suggesting that they are more likely to react to what they see than to what they read. Negative self-comparisons can erode self-esteem. Girls also tend to ruminate more than boys about what they see. Hence images that “make fun” of how someone looks are likely to be more painful for girls than for boys and can contribute to anxiety and depression. Outright put-downs, accusations, name-calling, or threats can result in traumatic and suicidal reactions in both girls and boys.

Another source of pain occurs when teens preoccupy themselves with the posts and photos of other teens but don’t join in the conversations, a kind of internet eavesdropping called “lurking.”

Scanning through photos of peers who are better looking or better dressed (and which can be enhanced digitally to make the sender look more attractive) can create negative comparisons with oneself. Reading about the lives of more successful friends and checking out what “all the popular kids are doing” can exacerbate feelings of isolation, loneliness, and low self worth in vulnerable teens. Lurking can also lead to jealousy when boyfriends and girlfriends start checking up on each other.

The need to stay in touch with peers and the ease of doing so with smart phones locks teens into ongoing interactions that are difficult to stop. Texts and tweets are not usually preceded by a lot of thought. They are the electronic equivalent of quips, remarks, emotional gushing, and reactions to something that just happened. The more provocative posts are quickly forwarded to others, sometimes with additional remarks, until everyone in the circle becomes involved. The original sender stays in the loop to gauge the reactions of others and to react to them, thus perpetuating the cycle of posting and reacting. This compulsive form of communication is very difficult to disrupt and obviously interferes with attention to anything else, like school work or family. Consequently, it leads to conflicts with parents and teachers. Unfortunately efforts by adults to take the teen out of the loop by restricting phone or internet use may result in a very distressed and angry teen. To avoid such restrictions, teens become secretive about their use and find ways to avoid such interference.

Dr.s Underwood and Ehrenreich offer several creative suggestions for parents to address such problems. First, they suggest that parents join social media and become part of their teen’s social network. Taking time to read the posts and look at the photos that their children are viewing keeps parents informed. Second, the authors encourage parents to structure the use of communication devices in the home by putting them away periodically and enforcing off-times during activities such as study time, family time, chores, and sleep. Third, they suggest that parents regularly visit with their teens about their social contacts, including media posts and conversations, to better inform themselves about their children’s social lives. Parents are encouraged to find out who their kids are visiting online, how they are feeling about their friends, and to discuss distressing information from others. This also provides information to parents about what their teens are planning with their friends. Finally, parents are encouraged to form their own social network with other parents and stay in touch with them. This provides parents with additional sources of information about their teen’s social contacts.

The bottom line is that electronics are not going away. Social media outlets continue to expand and are being used by more and more people of all ages. Perhaps in the end social networking may be the solution to its own problem.

Underwood, M.K. & Ehrenreich, S.E. 2017. The power and pain of adolescents’ digital communication: Cyber victimization and the perils of lurking. *American Psychologist*, 72, Pp. 144-158.