

Fostering Healthy Social Media Engagement in Youth:

#GoodforMEdia's Guide for Parents



What role should parents have when it comes to their kids and social media? How much should they be involved? The purpose of this guide is to provide helpful tips to parents about how to best support their child's relationship with social media, as well as what this role may entail.

First, some context...

In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General and the American Psychological Association issued new guidelines for parents, urging them to monitor all social media use for kids and teach teens digital literacy.

Research shows that parents have become more vigilant in monitoring their teens' online activity; for instance, more than three-quarters of parents say they have checked to see which websites their kids have visited.

However, some common steps that parents take to maintain awareness of their child's social media use, such as "friending" their teens online, increase the likelihood of parent-child conflict over social media ([Pew Research Center](#)).

Given this, parents may be wondering in what ways and to what extent they should be involved in managing their child's relationship with social media.

Quick take: What is the role of parents?

The aim is not to navigate social media for your child, but rather to equip them with the necessary tools, advice, and digital literacy skills to build a healthy relationship with social media themselves.

Now for our tips!

1) Take time to familiarize yourself with the **functionalities and purposes** of the social media platforms your young person is using.

Learning about specific social media apps (by talking to your child, searching online, etc.) may help you get a better sense of why your young person is drawn to it, as well as what they enjoy doing on that platform.



Having this mutual understanding can help make conversations about social media more productive and cooperative.

2) Promote **social media literacy** through discussions about the pros and cons of social media.

While social media can be a fun, engaging way to connect with others, it also comes with risks.

Talking to your young person about ways to maximize benefits and minimize pitfalls, as well as what positive online behavior looks like, can build their sense of agency in navigating social media.



Positive online behavior, or good digital citizenship, includes actions like protecting your safety, respecting others, and using good judgment when navigating online content ([University of Michigan](#)).

When encouraging social media literacy, you may consider explaining its principles yourself or pointing your child to other resources. There is a plethora of online resources like articles, blog posts, and YouTube videos about social media literacy.

Social media literacy can look like:

- Recognizing that social media is highly curated and thus not a real representation of others' lives
- Understanding how to decode, respond to, and interact with positive and negative online content
- Identifying fake news/images and making informed judgments about the credibility and potential biases of information found online

- Check out our [News Guide](#) to learn how to interact with media through a critical lens
- Acknowledging that social media can portray idealistic lifestyles to promote consumerism
- Identifying when social media trends or online fads can be detrimental to physical and emotional health.
- Being mindful about how much time you are spending on social media and what you are spending this time doing
 - This includes recognizing that social media is taking up more time than you want it to
 - Take a look at our youth leader Sonia's [Social Media Checklist!](#)
- Utilizing available resources to take agency over your relationship with social media. Helpful tools may include:
 - Timers on phone
 - Apps that regulate screen time
 - Ad-blocking
 - Muting words you don't want to see on your feed



It may also be helpful to discuss hypothetical scenarios. Ask your teen to walk through how they might respond, and offer your thoughts. This can be a great opportunity to highlight the big concepts of social media literacy, such as the idea that social media does not mirror the real world.

Examples of hypothetical scenarios include:

- A bizarre image goes viral online, sparking intense debate, leading you to wonder whether the image is AI-generated or photoshopped.
- You encounter language or content that is not age-appropriate.
- A peer posts an image of themselves engaging in risky/illegal behavior. You are not sure how to engage, especially whether or not you should like the post.
- You see peers singling out another student in a mocking or bullying manner.
- You experience bullying or encounter negative online comments targeted toward you.

When going through these hypotheticals, remind your child that they can always come to you when encountering difficult, uncomfortable, or scary situations on social media.



3) Keep an eye out for potential **signs of problematic use, identified by the [American Psychological Association](#) as:**

- *Social media interferes with their daily routines and commitments (school, friends, activities, etc.)*
- *It hinders them from getting 8 hours of sleep each night*
- *They continue to use social media even when they express a desire not to*
- *They experience strong cravings to check social media*
- *They lie or use deceptive behavior go online*

If any of these statements ring true for your child, consider enforcing limits and offering advice to cut down on their screen time. Emphasize that balancing social media use with other responsibilities is important in protecting their mental health!

It is also key to empower your child to reflect on their social media experiences and habits themselves. Encourage them to be mindful about screen time and signs of problematic use early on in their journey with social media.



Having these conversations when your young person first starts using social media is often more effective than waiting until they get older.

4) Model healthy social media use.

Studies show that teens learn some social media behaviors and attitudes from their parents ([American Psychological Association](#)).

It is important for adults to model healthy social media use in their own lives. This could look like:

- Discussing how and why you use social media
- Demonstrating how you manage how much time you spend online
- Discussing the challenges you have faced with social media and strategies you have found helpful to overcome them
- Taking “social media holidays” as a family
- Bonding over what you enjoy about social media

Taking steps like these can help your child understand that social media is not an inherently bad or dangerous thing, and that it can be used in a **mindful, positive** way. This may be helpful in laying the foundation for open, trusting discussions about social media.

5) Set guidelines, explain why, and abide by them! Laying down rules and guidelines can be very helpful in promoting healthy social media usage.

Examples may include:

- Getting off social media during certain hours of the day
- Utilizing parental controls on social media apps
- Leaving electronic devices outside of the bedroom to ensure a good night's rest
- Encouraging self-enforced time limits



It is key that you **communicate why** you are setting any rules you set. Consider explaining what you are hoping to promote or avoid in creating these rules. Abiding by these guidelines yourself can help **model** healthy social media use.

One practice you may consider **avoiding** is granting extra screen time as a reward or setting more stringent limits as a punishment. Studies have shown that using screen time to control behavior can heighten children's attraction to screen ([University of Guelph](#)).

Instead, work together to identify other ways to uplift their achievements and demonstrate the consequences of their actions.

How should you go about having these conversations?

As with any other interaction with your child, communication is key! In order to have productive conversations with your child, it is important to lead with curiosity, not judgment.



This can help set the tone for the conversation – speaking in a calm, neutral way as opposed to using accusatory or emotional language can help your child feel comfortable discussing their social media usage and presence.

The general idea is to lead with a neutral observation or comment, then ask an open-ended question rather than jumping straight into advice.

This will help it feel more like a two-way conversation than an overwhelming lecture! Here are some **examples** of how you can get the communication flowing:

- “I’ve noticed that you’ve been spending more time on social media after school. How does this make you feel?”
- “I’ve been trying to reduce my screen time lately and I’ve found a few strategies that have really helped me. Would you be open to discussing some of these tools with me?”

- “I wanted to check in about the way we discuss your relationship with social media. Do you feel like adults are missing anything about teens’ social media use? Is there anything I can do to better understand your experiences online?”
- “Social media can have a really powerful effect on the brain by triggering its reward center and releasing pleasure hormones. I read that teens are especially vulnerable to the addictiveness of social media because your brains are rapidly developing. Do you have any thoughts on how to maintain a balanced relationship with social media?”

In conclusion...



To best support your young person’s relationship with social media, it is important to maintain open communication, promote digital literacy, and set and model guidelines!

For more tips on how to best communicate with your child about social media, check out GFM’s [Parent Guide #1](#). Some questions suggested by the original guide include:

- How do you think you are balancing social media with the other areas of your life?
- How do you feel social media benefits you?
- Do you feel safe using social media?

For more conversation starters and helpful tips, check out other youth-created resources on www.goodformedia.org!

Sources

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