

Issue At A Glance:

Social Media and Youth Mental Health

October is a month dedicated to mental health awareness, and mental health issues among youth have been on the rise for more than a decade due to the presence of social media. This brief provides an overview of the Surgeon General's advisory on social media and youth mental health, the Kids Online Safety Act, and the impacts of social media on youth mental health.

Introduction

October is a month of awareness for several mental health causes, including Mental Illness Awareness Week during the first week of October to raise awareness of mental health support resources; National Depression Screening Day on October 5; and World Mental Health Day on October 10 to raise awareness of mental health issues and improve mental health around the world.^{1,2,3} Mental health concerns among youth have been on the rise for more than a decade, and research has shown that social media has a profound impact on youth and mental health.⁴

Research has shown that 69% of adults and 81% of teens across the nation use social media. This widespread use increases the risk of experiencing anxiety, depression, and other negative effects related to social media.⁵ Therefore, in May 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General published an advisory on social media and youth mental health, urging stakeholders to engage in a multifaceted effort to maximize the benefits and reduce the risk of harm posed by social media.⁶

This brief provides an overview of the U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on social media and youth mental health, the Kids Online Safety Act, and the impacts of social media on youth mental health.

Key Statistics⁷

- 40%** Of social media users experience anxiety or depression after use.
- 63%** Of social media users experience loneliness.
- 42%** Of social media users say they feel more insecure about their appearance after use.
- 24%** Of teenagers believe social media has a primarily negative impact on their lives.
- 32%** Of teenagers say they have experienced cyberbullying.

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Surgeon General's Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health

It is well known that teenagers are more attached to their smartphones and computers now more than ever. Currently, 97% of teenagers report using the internet daily, an increase from 92% in 2014-15.⁸ Social media use among youth is almost universal, with up to 95% of teenagers aged 13-17 reporting they use a social media platform and over a third saying they use it almost constantly.^{6,8} Although the minimum age for social media platform in the U.S. is typically 13, nearly 40% of children aged 8-12 are also using social media.^{6,9} Therefore, on May 23, 2023, the U.S. Surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, MD, issued an advisory about the effects of social media use on youth mental health.^{6,10}

Adolescence and childhood are critical stages in brain development, making youth more susceptible to the harms of social media.¹⁰ Existing evidence suggests that although social media can benefit some children and adolescents, there are numerous signs that it can also pose significant risks to their mental health and wellbeing.⁶ Therefore, the Surgeon General is urging for action from policymakers, researchers, technology companies, and families to better understand the full impact of social media use to enhance its benefits, reduce its harms, and create safer, healthier online environments for youth.¹⁰ Additional research is necessary to fully understand the effects of social media on youth mental health. However, existing evidence suggests that while social media may offer benefits to some youth, it also poses significant risks to their mental health and wellbeing.⁶

The Kids Online Safety Act (S. 1409)

Introduced on December 12, 2023, the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) aims to provide children and parents with the necessary tools, safeguards, and transparency needed to protect youth against online dangers.^{11,12} The bill mandates that social media platforms prioritize children's wellbeing by ensuring a default safe environment.¹² Specifically, KOSA aims to have a mandate that social media platforms offer minors options to safeguard their information, disable addictive features, and opt out of personalized recommendations. Furthermore, social media platforms must default to the highest privacy settings for children and provide parents with new tools to protect their children, identify harmful behaviors, and dedicate reporting channels for such issues. Lastly, KOSA aims to impose the responsibility on online platforms to prevent and address specific risks to minors, including suicide promotion, eating disorders, substance abuse, sexual exploitation, and illegal product ads, such as tobacco and alcohol.^{11,12}



Social Media's Impact on Youth Mental Health

The impact of social media on youth mental health is influenced by many complex factors, including the amount of time youth spend on social media, the type of content they consume, the activities and interactions facilitated by social media, and the extent to which it disrupts essential activities, such as sleep and physical exercise.¹³ Furthermore, social media affects youth in various ways due to cultural and socioeconomic factors.⁶

Positive Impacts of Social Media

Social media can offer benefits to youth by fostering positive communities and connections with others who share similar identities, abilities, and interests.⁶ According to a 2022 survey, 32% of youth view social media as having a generally positive impact on their lives, while only 9% see it as mostly negative and the majority (59%) consider its impact as neutral.^{14,15} During adolescence, social connections become more significant, and social media offers a way to foster these relationships by helping youth build communities, stay connected with distant friends, and receive social support.¹⁵

Additionally, there is evidence suggesting that social media and other digital platforms serve as a gateway to mental health care for children and adolescents.⁶ According to research conducted by an educational psychologist at the University of Wisconsin, social media provides a platform for social support, which can help alleviate depressive symptoms and

improve self-esteem among youth. Seeking and receiving support through social media platforms can enhance the overall wellbeing of youth.¹⁶ For example, most adolescents report that social media makes them feel more accepted (58%), provides them with support during difficult times (67%), offers a platform for creative expression (71%), and keeps them better connected with their friends (80%).⁶

Negative Impacts of Social Media

In the last decade, research has also highlighted various concerns about the possible negative effects of social media on children and adolescents.⁶ A study conducted on U.S. youth aged 12-15 found that those who spent over three hours a day on social media were twice as likely to experience poor mental health outcomes, including symptoms of depression and anxiety.¹⁸

Harmful content remains easily accessible to youth on social media through direct pushes, unwanted exchanges, and algorithmic design. Studies have shown that some platforms display live self-harm acts, potentially normalizing such behaviors and leading to dangerous trends like suicide pacts.¹⁷ Additionally, social media can exacerbate body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and low self-esteem, especially among adolescent girls. Studies have shown a significant connection between social media use and body image concerns, with social comparison often contributing to these issues.^{6,19}

Conclusion

Addressing the impact of social media on mental health is a crucial step in supporting both youth and adults. By acknowledging the significance of social media on daily lives of youth and following the recommendations of health experts, society can work together collectively to foster a healthier online environment and mitigate the adverse effects of social media on youth mental health. Below are hotlines if you or anyone you know is in distress.

The Mental Health Hotline: 866-903-3787

- Provides free and confidential 24/7 assistance

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988

- Provides 24/7 crisis support for people in emotional distress.

Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741

- Offers free, 24/7 support through text messages for those in crisis.

Teen Line: 800-852-8336

- Provides 24/7 crisis support for people in emotional distress, including youth.

The Trevor Project: 866-488-7386

- Focuses on supporting LGBTQ+ youth in crisis or needing emotional support.

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Did you know?

Approximately 37 of the 40 million adolescents in the U.S. are social media users.²⁰



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