

The Negative Impact of Social Media on Teen Mental Health

Overview of Social Media Use Among Youth

Social media use among teens is ubiquitous. A staggering 95% of teens aged 13-17 report using a social media platform, and more than a third say they use social media “almost constantly” (1). Although the required minimum age for most social media platforms is 13, 40% of children aged 8-12 also use social media (1). This widespread use has generated concerns among researchers, parents, caregivers, healthcare experts, and the public. Mounting evidence suggests that social media negatively impacts teenagers' mental health (1).

Potential Harms of Social Media Use Among Teens

1. **Content Exposure:** Harmful and inappropriate content, such as self-harm acts like partial asphyxiation leading to seizures and cutting leading to bleeding, are easily accessible and spread through direct pushes, unwanted content exchanges, and algorithmic designs. Especially among girls, social media use may lead to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, with girls using unrealistic filters to alter their appearance (1).
2. **Excessive Use:** Among 8th and 10th graders, the average time spent on social media is 3.5 hours per day, with 1 in 4 spending 5+ hours per day and 1 in 7 spending 7+ hours per day on social media. Developers have designed social media to be addictive and compulsive with tools such as infinite scrolling, push notifications, autoplay, quantifying and displaying popularity through “likes,” and algorithms that leverage user data to suggest more content. This excessive use can diminish the amount of sleep a teen gets per night, which is known to trigger mental health illnesses (1).
3. **Cyberbullying and Harassment:** Cyberbullying on social media has been linked to depression and is more common in adolescent females and sexual minority youth. Among adolescent girls of color, one-third report exposure to racist content or language monthly on social media (1).

Recommendations and Actions to Mitigate Harm

Reducing the negative impact of social media on teenagers' mental health requires a multidisciplinary approach, including changes from policymakers, technology companies, parents, caregivers, and educators. Jonathan Haidt, in his book “The Anxious Generation,” offers four bold suggestions:

1. **No Smartphones Before High School:** Instead, opt for teenagers using flip phones or simple phones with minimal apps. Foster the development of real-life relationships over internet friends to develop social skills (2).
2. **No Social Media Before Age 16:** Teenagers are better equipped to handle the pressures and complexities of social media after the age of 16. Again, cultivate offline activities and face-to-face interactions (2).
3. **Phone-Free Schools:** Place phones in a pouch or locker for the duration of the school day and avoid allowing teens to keep phones with them. Designate specific areas where teens can use their phones during breaks if needed. Going phone-free in school helps

students focus on their studies, reducing distractions, and improving academic performance (2).

4. **More Independence, Free Play, and Responsibility in the Real World:** Give kids and teenagers the opportunity for unsupervised, self-directed play where they make and enforce their own rules. Give teens more autonomy and responsibilities within the household to encourage a sense of purpose and accomplishment (2).

Conclusion

Social media adversely affects the mental health of teenagers in several ways, including exposure to harmful content, encouragement of excessive, compulsive, and addictive use, and increased risk of cyberbullying and harassment (1). Through collaborative efforts, policymakers, educational institutions, technology companies, parents, and caregivers can make changes that mitigate the negative impact of social media on teenagers. In the digital age, it is increasingly important to conduct further research and develop proactive measures to safeguard teen mental health.

References

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2. Haidt J. The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness. New York, NY: Penguin Press; 2024.