



## Understanding Teen Social Media Use

Social media plays a huge role in most teenagers' lives today. Teens are constantly connected online, through platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and more. As a parent, it can be difficult to understand why social media is so captivating for teens and how their use can impact them. This guide provides an overview of teen social media use—the benefits, most popular platforms, and signs of problematic use.



### Why Do Teens Use Social Media?

There are many complex reasons why teens are drawn to social media platforms and use them so frequently. As a parent, it is important to understand what motivates teens to engage heavily on social media in order to guide them toward healthy usage habits. Some of the main reasons include:

#### *Social Connection*

One of the primary appeals of social media for teens is the ability to constantly stay connected with their friends and social circles. Social media allows teens to interact via posting photos and videos, messaging each other, commenting on posts, and liking content. This gives them a sense of being involved in their friends' lives and participating in social activities even when physically alone. Teens going through emotional experiences like breakups, fights with friends, victories, or losses can immediately share and get support from their online connections. The appeal of feeling socially connected at all times is incredibly powerful for teens.

#### *Peer Belonging and Acceptance*

Teens have a strong drive to feel accepted by their peer group. Social media provides constant opportunities to interact casually with peers, share common interests, display involvement in teen culture, and gain acceptance. Teens can use social media to monitor their standing in their social circles and try to improve it by gaining followers, comments, and likes. Many teens measure their self-worth by their number of followers and likes on social media, indicating a need for peer approval.



### *Self-Expression and Identity Exploration*

Adolescence is a time of figuring out one's identity. Social media allows teens to experiment with who they are—their personal style, interests, personality, and more. Teens can express themselves through posting photos, videos, stories, and commentary. This self-expression helps teens try on different personas and get feedback from peers on how they present themselves. Teens enjoy the creativity and freedom of constantly updating and refining their online identity and using social media to showcase their evolving self.

### *FOMO: Fear of Missing Out*

Teens have a very strong fear of missing out (FOMO) when it comes to social events and activities. Social media allows them to stay continually updated on everything their peers are doing. Whether it's friends hanging out without them, exciting events at school, gossip and drama, or extracurricular happenings, social media keeps teens "in the know." The compulsive need to stay continually connected stems from the teen's worry they will be left out of the social loop. Social media provides the cure for FOMO.

### *Validation Through Likes and Comments*

The external validation teens get from likes and comments on their social media posts provides a major boost to their self-esteem and confidence. The more likes and comments a teen acquires, the more admired and popular they feel among their peers. Likes and comments have taken on the role of social currency and status symbols for today's teens. Teens will often anguish over how many likes their posts get and carefully analyze which types of content receives the most engagement.

### *Pop Culture Connection*

Social media allows teens to directly interact with celebrities, influencers, athletes, artists, and other pop culture figures that shape teen culture. Teens can follow the daily lives of their favorite public figures through social media. They also participate in viral trends, memes, challenges, and pop culture moments spreading through social media. Staying on top of pop culture gives teens cultural capital and status among their peers. Social media provides teens proximity to the glamour and excitement of pop culture.

### *Entertainment and Passive Consumption*

From funny videos to memes to crazy social media drama, teens are drawn to social media for sheer entertainment value and mindless consumption. Endlessly scrolling through feeds full of funny, weird, dramatic content quickly becomes addictive. Social media effectively

captures teens' attention and provides constant entertainment at their fingertips around the clock. The never-ending stream of fresh content teens can passively consume via social media is extremely appealing.

### *Opportunities for Self-Promotion*

Teens enjoy showcasing their best selves through social media. Posting attractive selfies, sharing exciting life updates, and displaying social popularity all allow teens to self-promote themselves in flattering ways. Teens can selectively curate their best moments and achievements on social media profiles and present idealized versions of themselves. The allure of showing off a “picture-perfect” life and receiving admiration provides strong motivation for teens to actively maintain their social media presence.

## **Most Popular Platforms**

The social media landscape is constantly evolving, but these are some of the most popular platforms currently used by teens:

- Instagram: An app for photo and video sharing. Teens often carefully curate their Instagram feeds to portray their best selves.
- Snapchat: Known for disappearing messages and videos. Teens enjoy the casual, temporary nature of Snapchat.
- TikTok: An app for creating and sharing short-form videos. Teens get hooked on the bottomless stream of entertaining content.
- X: Previously known as Twitter, this platform is for sharing short thoughts and having conversations. Teens follow celebrities, friends, brands, and influencers.
- Facebook: While less popular with teens than adults, many maintain Facebook profiles to connect with family.

## **Signs of Problematic Use**

How can you determine if your teen's social media use has become excessive or unhealthy? Here are some warning signs:

- Obsession with likes and comments: Your teen seems overly preoccupied with their number of followers, likes, and comments. Self-worth appears contingent on social media feedback.
- Constant comparison: Your teen constantly compares themselves to others and comments on how their life is “not as good” as their peers’.
- Changing sleep patterns: Your teen has difficulty falling asleep or wakes frequently at night but is tired during the day. This may indicate late-night social media use.
- Declining academic performance: If your teen is consumed by social media, schoolwork

may take a hit. Watch for slipping grades as a red flag.

- Mood changes after device use: You may notice your teen appearing more irritable, anxious, or depressed after long stretches of social media use.
- Withdrawal from family and friends: If your teen abandons real-life relationships in favor of online-only interaction, it may signify a problem.

## Tips for Parents

As a parent, how can you help your teen develop healthy social media habits? Here are some expert-recommended strategies:

- Maintain open communication: Have regular conversations about social media and your teen's online experiences. Don't criticize; rather, be supportive.
- Model responsible use yourself: Strive for healthy social media habits within your family by limiting your own phone use around your teen.
- Set reasonable limits: Establish appropriate limits for when and how long your teen can use social media, but allow connection with friends.
- Follow and friend your teen: When appropriate, follow or friend your teen to gain insight into their online interactions while respecting some privacy.
- Reinforce diversity of interests: Ensure your teen participates in activities and hobbies beyond social media to develop a broader sense of identity.

Social media plays a pivotal role in most teenagers' lives today. While social media can enrich teens' relationships and self-expression, parents must also guide teens in managing its risks. With an open and understanding approach, parents can help foster teens' healthy engagement and growth in the digital world.