

Studies send mixed messages on influence of social media on teens

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Researchers and scientists are trying to figure out how social media use affects young people. So far, the evidence is mixed.
Photo by: MCT

Dr. Drew Pate is an expert on the emotional health of teenagers. Whenever he speaks to unhappy teens or their parents, one thing always comes up, he says. People are worried about sites like Instagram, Facebook or Snapchat. They wonder if such social media sites could be bad for teens.

Parents ask if their children's constant use of social media is healthy. Teenagers talk about the pressure to post the perfect photo of themselves. They say they sometimes feel bad when they see the perfect lives their online friends seem to be living.

Doctors are hearing more and more about the damage being caused by social media, said Dr. Pate. Most teens have probably been harmed by it in some way, he said.

Evidence Mixed On Social Media's Effect On Teens

Scientists are still trying to figure out how social media affects young people. So far, the evidence is mixed.

Studies have shown that social media use can have a bad effect on some young people. It has been linked to increased worrying and feelings of depression.

Social media can also be helpful, however. It can help teens find support when they are struggling with life issues. It can provide them with a place to express themselves. Some teens are able to build real friendships with people they only know through social media.

Mental, Emotional Problems Linked To Excessive Use

However, one recent study found major dangers. The more time teens spend on social media, the more likely they are to experience certain problems, the study found. Teens who use social media heavily are more likely to feel depressed. They are also more likely to have trouble sleeping.

Being depressed is more serious than being sad. It is being unable to feel happy for a long period of time. Often, it is caused by imbalances of chemicals in the brain. Still, things like social media could also affect mood.

Scientists have also found a link between social media use and poor body image. People with a poor body image are convinced they are ugly or too fat. They worry about how they look all the time. Their condition can lead to eating disorders.

Comparing Yourself To Others On Social Media

A recent survey found that Instagram and Snapchat are the most likely to cause body-image problems. In particular, young women are at risk. They see endless photos of perfect bodies posted on those sites. Many of the photos are digitally edited to mask people's imperfections. Teen girls can feel ugly in comparison.

Photos are not the only issue. Words can be a problem too, said Dr. Pate.

Teenagers are easily affected by what others say. They may think online comments are directed at them when they are not. Or, they may not realize someone is only joking.

Many experts say social media can be dangerously addictive, just like drugs or cigarettes. Teens who get hooked find it hard to spend too much time away from social media. Their schoolwork can suffer as a result. So can their relationships and their moods.

Studies Point To Positive Effects Of Social Media

However, some experts warn against seeing social media as purely harmful. They point to studies that have found it also can be helpful.

For example, one study looked at teenagers who spend many hours online playing video games. Those who also spent time with friends on social media seemed to do better than gamers who didn't. They seemed to be less likely to feel depressed or worried.

The Royal Society lists several ideas for reducing the dangers of social media. Sites like Instagram could highlight when people have digitally edited their photos, the group said. They could also post warnings about the dangers of too much social media use. The society also suggests that schools teach safe social-media use.

Limiting Use Also Recommended

Some teens simply cannot handle the stresses social media can cause, Dr. Pate said. Such teens might need to give it up completely.

Others might need to only socialize with a select group of people. Parents can also help by limiting the amount of time their children spend on social media.

"It boils down to what the kids can manage and handle when it comes to the stress created by these sites," Dr. Pate said. "We want the kids to individualize their own approach."