Youth Social Media Use and Mental Health

Tip Sheet for Adults Who Work with Youth

This resource provides a discussion on the current state of youth, social media, and mental health. It also provides tips on how to support and partner with youth who are active on social media. This tip sheet was informed by youth, researchers, and federal staff who attended the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs' *Social Media and Youth Mental Health* meeting at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration on July 11, 2019.

Youth Experience Using Social Media

Research has found that youth are actively creating their own online spaces and doing so in a positive way.[1] However, there can also be negative effects of social media. The following points presented at the meeting highlight findings on youth, social media use, and mental health; and how youth have reported they view social media:

- Social media is not just one entity; it is a collection of tools, communities, and contexts.[2]
- Youth have reported connecting with friends, family, and other social supports during tough times; interacting with people from different backgrounds and experiences; and finding news as top reasons for using social media.[3]
- Low levels of social media use may be associated with healthier outcomes in comparison to heavy use and no use of social media,[4] while daily use may be linked to better wellbeing in adolescents.[5]
- Adolescents who experience online harassment may be more resilient when they also have a supportive social environment at school.[6]
- Bullying and lack of connection are the most commonly-reported reasons for views that social media can have a negative impact.[1]

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[1] Gajaria, A. (2019, July). *"Finding Connections in the Virtual World"* Social Media and Youth Mental Health Meeting; Rockville, MD.
[2] Moreno, M. (2019, July). *"Social Media: Isolator or Connector?"* Social Media and Youth Mental Health Meeting; Rockville, MD.
[3] Anderson, M. (2019, July). *"Teens, Social Media & Technology"* Social Media and Youth Mental Health Meeting; Rockville, MD.
[4] Twenge, J. (2019, July). *"Social Media: Implications for Youth Mental Health"* Social Media and Youth Mental Health Meeting; Rockville, MD.
[5] Odgers, C. (2019, July). *"Social Media Implications for Youth Mental Health: Fear vs. Facts"* Social Media and Youth Mental Health Meeting; Rockville, MD.
[6] Englander, E. (2019, July). *"Emerging Issues That Complicate Cyberbullying Interventions"* Social Media and Youth Mental Health Meeting; Rockville, MD.

Tips on How to Support and Partner with Youth on Social Media

The following tips on how to support and partner with youth on social media were taken directly from youth expert and researcher presentations and group discussions. The tips that youth suggested or were explicitly agreed upon by youth are marked with an asterisk*****.

- **Follow youth as social media leaders.*** Many youth are knowledgeable about using the internet and understand how to use social media, so seek guidance from youth on how best to use social media as a means to reach them and connect them to opportunities, resources, and services. This could include partnering with social media platforms that youth are already advising.
- **Take social media seriously.*** Understand that what happens on social media (e.g., an Instagram post, follower counts) can be psychologically important to youth, so take this seriously and validate their feelings, rather than brushing off their concerns or saying that social media is unimportant. This can help create meaningful conversations about social media and youth mental health, and how to balance the information social media provides.
- **Post content for youth frequently.*** By frequently updating social media accounts with new content that can be reposted by young people, you can establish your account as accessible and useful to youth. This can facilitate establishing online connections with communities of youth.
- **Involve youth in the conversation.*** This requires frequent participation by youth in important discussions and decisions about the issues that impact their lives. Trends and issues within the youth population change quickly so constant interaction and collaboration with youth can help professionals and organizations who work with youth stay on top of the current trends. This may be more effective than only conducting formal research with long timelines.
- **Assume that you can never keep up.** Do not worry if you do not know everything. The key is to continue learning about new terms, platforms/apps, and trends as best as possible. Collaboration with youth will help expand your knowledge base.
- **Be an ally.*** Adults can play different roles in youth lives regarding social media use, including: helping youth self-monitor their social media use, educating youth about building healthy relationships on- and offline, and establishing a connection with youth so that they can talk to you when they see or experience something distressing on social media.
- **Integrate education about social media <u>on</u> social media.*** A direct way to educate youth about healthy social media use is through posting directly on social media. This can be especially helpful for reaching youth who do not have trusted or supportive adults in their life.
- **Scale back technology use.** In cases where social media use may be problematic for a young person, suggest reducing usage rather than eliminating or forbidding social media use. Some ways to help youth set boundaries include: encouraging social media "breaks" (see [youth tip sheet](#)), phone-free mealtimes, charging phones in locations other than the bedroom overnight, no use of phone right before bed, and keeping free time use of screens to about two hours a day or less.