

Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health

Who We Are and What We Do

At the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health (the Center), funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), serves as a centralized, trusted source of evidence and support for children and teens, parents, educators, pediatricians, and other professionals who help youth navigate social media.

The work of the Center is guided by Co-Medical Directors, Dr. Megan Moreno and Dr. Jenny Radesky. Dr. Moreno and Dr. Radesky are both pediatricians and researchers with expertise in digital media use and its impact on youth mental health and development. Internally, Center Director, Nicole Owings-Fonner, leads a strong team of program, communications, and mental health professionals.

By listening to families, partnering with experts and communities, and engaging with the technology industry, the Center works to:

1. Improve the mental health of children and teens by reducing the risks and leveraging the benefits of social media.
2. Build the capacity of individuals who work with children and teens to mitigate harmful impacts of social media on youth mental health and promote healthy social media use.
3. Synthesize and promote the evidence base and best practices for healthy social media use via communication, guidance, and other resources.

Our Approach

Meeting the moment: We recognize the need to act now to address the youth mental health crisis while simultaneously working to prevent mental health problems in younger children. At the same time, the current public narrative can be polarizing and ineffective, generalizing technology as all bad or all good. Our approach actively avoids reinforcing these narratives, focusing on practical solutions.

Changing the way we talk about media: We are putting children and teens at the center of our work and our approach. Our strengths-based, action-oriented framework:

- Emphasizes child and adolescent agency and perspectives;
- Supports the relational and emotional processes that underlie mental health and wellbeing and how they interact with social media;
- Builds upon existing high-quality evidence and embraces its nuance and complexity;

- Works with the systems children and adolescents live in everyday, such as families, schools, community centers, medical and mental health professionals; and

Putting our Framework into Action

Here are specific ways that the Center implements our strengths-based, action-oriented framework to develop training materials, educational resources, and practical solutions to support children and teens navigate the digital world:

1. We provide families with new language and strategies to discuss media:

- Popular concepts like “screen time” are too simplistic and can make parents feel guilty. We focus instead on concepts that teens and parents can think about, like: *“Is this tech use worth my time? How does it make us feel? What is it contributing to in my life, or crowding out?”*
- We raise awareness about how interactive technologies try to capture and hold someone’s attention; it can be hard for children and teens to overcome these design features.
 - While “addiction” terminology dominates the discourse around social media, recent studies have shown that it’s not an accurate way to describe teens’ experiences. Research finds instead that when young people experience problematic use of social media, it’s more of a broad range of challenges (such as avoiding offline social connections to be online, lower grades due to overuse of technology, being emotionally withdrawn due to negative social experiences online); addictive behaviors are only at the extreme end of that spectrum.
 - Our work therefore focuses on the role *engagement-prolonging design* plays, rather than “addiction,” which avoids placing the problem on the user to solve.
- We are creating *conversation starters* to help families be curious, rather than ashamed or anxious, about what kids are experiencing online and how to help them.
- By reducing the fear and increasing the understanding that can happen in family conversations, we aim to increase parents’ sense that they can handle this.

2. We recognize that children and adolescents have varied relationships with social media – some problematic, some neutral, some positive.

- We know that all children don’t react to social media the same way. We also acknowledge that even for an individual child, their experience and relationship with social media may differ based on the day, the platform, or who they are interacting with in that moment.

Our approach is to help parents and youth understand how their unique strengths and challenges shape their relationship with media at different ages/stages.

- We are helping young people recognize *how they respond to different types of social media, interactions, and content*— so they can make changes to how they use social media that support their unique way of being in the world.
 - We also help families and teachers recognize problematic media use that is getting in the way of how children and teens interact, learn and connect.
3. **We center and support youth experience:** We support children and teens in using social media in ways that strengthen their social, emotional, cognitive, and identity development. When it comes to how families approach technology use, there is evidence that rules focusing on content, co-viewing and communication are associated with better well-being outcomes than rules focused on screen time.
 4. **We make evidenced-based recommendations for change:** Children and adolescents deserve online spaces that are designed with their needs in mind, to help them be authentic and find community and good ideas, but not be manipulated by people, design features, or algorithms that have been optimized for engagement, not user wellbeing.

Center Activities and Resources

The Center provides a variety of educational and technical assistance opportunities to support clinicians, educators, parents, youth, and others in encouraging healthy social media use:

- Virtual interactive learning communities leveraging Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes), an online learning community modality that uses didactic presentations from multidisciplinary faculty experts, case-based peer learning discussions, and quality improvement methodologies to improve health outcomes;
- Regularly scheduled [webinars](#) and follow-up office hours with expert clinicians;
- Expert speakers for and presentations delivered by our co-Medical Directors, staff, and Center Ambassadors;
- A variety of tipsheets, educational case studies, and brief topical educational videos;
- A [Question & Answer Portal](#): a two-way communication channel for questions about social media and mental well-being. Each submitted question has an evidence-based response from our expert team and users can search our library of previously submitted questions and responses.

To learn more, please visit our website: aap.org/socialmedia, [sign up for our monthly newsletter](#) (sign-up available on our website), or contact us via email at socialmedia@aap.org.

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