

What Parents Need to Know about Social Media and Mental Health

At National Online Safety, we believe in empowering parents, carers and trusted adults with the information to hold an informed conversation about online safety with their children, should they feel it is needed. This guide focuses on one of many issues which we believe trusted adults should be aware of. Please visit www.nationalonlinesafety.com for further guides, hints and tips for adults.

What Parents & Carers Need to Know about SOCIAL MEDIA & MENTAL HEALTH

An estimated one-third of children have a social media account, so it's important that trusted adults know what content young people are consuming, what they're posting and the interactions they're having. On social media, it can be easy to go down 'rabbit holes' that aren't beneficial to our wellbeing. As platforms grapple with managing such 'legal but harmful' content, lives are being impacted – sometimes to tragic effect. We might be daunted by the scale of the tech giants and their content which so enthral young people, but we can still help children to be aware of their mental wellness: recognizing when something isn't OK – and knowing what to do about content that upsets them.

- 1. UNDERSTAND THE ALGORITHM**
Algorithms rank content by user interest: someone who regularly interacts with sports news, say, will see the latest results at the top of their feed. Likewise, if a user browses content that can cause harm, that's what will be recommended to them in future. Someone who's had a bad day and looks for posts which reflect their mood will find similar content being suggested to them more and more.
- 2. AVOID THE MAIN FEEDS**
Avoiding the default feeds on social media platforms limits the amount of recommended content that's shown. Users can opt to only scroll through the accounts they follow, use restricted modes, or highlight posts that they don't want to see more of. Explore the platform safety settings to see how you can take control of what your child's phone shows them when they open the app.
- 3. DISCUSS WHAT THEY'VE SEEN**
Chatting about what your child's seen online keeps you aware of the content they're interacting with. Don't assume that platforms are screening out inappropriate material, or even that your child would recognise content as being harmful. Discuss who they follow, what posts they like and what comes up in their feeds: if alarm bells ring, it could be time for a more in-depth talk or to seek support.
- 4. LEARN HOW TO HIDE CONTENT**
If your child stumbles across unsuitable content on social media, there's the option to hide that post as well as indicating you'd prefer any similar material not to be suggested in future. On some platforms, you might also be able to block posts that contain specific words, which is an excellent way to start taking control of what your child sees online.
- 5. SET DAILY LIMITS**
Phones and most apps can tell you how much they're being used. Spending too long online can mean a child misses out on other activities that are important to our round wellbeing. You could set some family rules – for everyone to follow – around device use, such as screen time limits and tech-free spaces: involving your child in creating this agreement makes them more likely to stick to it.
- 6. MONITOR THEIR ACTIVITY**
Keeping a discreet eye on how your child is using social media can help ensure they're not entering potentially dangerous situations. As they grow up, of course, children need space to exercise their independence – but you can still occasionally ask to see what they're looking at. Be transparent about your own social media use and try not to sound judgemental about your child's.
- 7. TURN OFF PUSH NOTIFICATIONS**
Even for adults, it's tempting to check an email or message as soon as the alert sound rings. Push notifications encourage people to open their apps and spend time on their device, so turning them off will help your child to practise mindful use of tech. Most of us have other things we need to focus on as a priority – and those notifications will still be there later, when we have more time.
- 8. USE DEVICES TOGETHER**
Giving children internet-enabled devices and complete freedom to explore platforms on their own can result in exposure to highly damaging content. You could consider making a particular area of the home a designated space for use of phones, tablets and so on – making it much easier to monitor what content your child is viewing and intervene if they're drawn away from any potentially harmful paths.
- 9. ENCOURAGE OTHER ACTIVITIES**
Mental health professionals often highlight the importance of exercise, quality time with loved ones, a balanced diet and restful sleep for our mental wellbeing. Spending hours on social media can cause us to sacrifice other activities that our brains need to feel well – so encouraging your child to put down their phone and enjoy something that doesn't involve a screen can be immensely beneficial.
- 10. TALK ABOUT PEER PRESSURE**
Most platforms default children's accounts to private, so only people they've accepted as friends can see their posts. This reduces the risk of bullying or unkind comments, but – just like offline life – the digital world can still make children feel as if they need to act or look a certain way to fit in. Talk to your child about peer pressure, and listen to any concerns so you can provide the support they need.

Meet Our Expert
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Using social media has plenty of potential benefits for young people: it helps them stay connected to their friends, hear contrasting views on the world, find reassurance or support, and ease social anxiety. It also brings, however, a corresponding number of negative possibilities – including compulsive use, unhealthy comparisons with others online and exposure to harmful content.

Ironically – for a medium designed to enable engagement with other people – social platforms can actually lead to children feeling increasingly isolated and lonely, taking an obvious toll on their mental wellbeing. This week's #WakeUpWednesday guide has our top tips on how trusted adults can support healthier social media habits in young people.

According to Ofcom's 2022 Media Use and Attitudes report, six out of ten children who use social media say that it makes them feel happy (59%) or closer to their friends (61%) "all or most of the time". By the same token, eight out of ten children were aware of other people being mean or unkind on social media, with 89% feeling pressure to be popular on the platforms they frequent.

That, in a nutshell, is a key dichotomy of social media: it's simultaneously an avenue to closeness and connectivity, yet also an open door for threats to our happiness and self-esteem. It can be an especially difficult contrast for young people to deal with – but our #WakeUpWednesday guide has expert tips for helping them scratch that social media itch while still protecting their mental wellbeing.

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