Promoting the Healthy and Safe Use of Social Media

Social media use is a topic that affects every stage of health supervision, from before birth to adulthood. Health care professionals should understand the benefits and risks involved with social media use in the families they serve. This theme explores various types of social media use that a health care professional should be prepared to discuss with families during all preventive visits, from the prenatal period through young adulthood. Social media are the latest representation of all media and have an ever-increasing effect on communication, interpersonal relations, development, and health. Traditional media, such as television (TV), movies, and games, are discussed in Bright Futures Health Supervision Visits.



Social media are Web sites or applications that allow users to create and share content and to interact with other users. There are numerous types of social media sites and applications, and more are always being developed. Through social media, people share information about themselves, share links to content, create written content (eg, blogs), upload video or audio content, comment on content, engage in conversations around topics, play games, organize events or movements, and otherwise connect with other people.

Although many parents are comfortable with social media and use it regularly, they may not fully understand all of its capabilities and uses—and they may not understand the effect it can have on their children. Used properly, social media can provide children and families with positive social networks, social support, and opportunities for learning. For patients and families struggling with chronic health problems, social media can provide education, the ability to connect with others who share the same struggles, and access to helpful resources.

At the same time, however, social media use has some risks. Many of the risks associated with social media are not so much inherent to social media itself as they are related to the ability of social media to amplify and make public the actions of children and youth. Other risks of social media are related to technology use itself (eg, distraction or sleep problems). It is important for parents to become social media literate so they understand these risks and benefits of social

media and so they can guide their children and make the best decisions for their families. Health care professionals can serve an important role for families and children as an educator about social media and a supportive resource if problems or challenges arise.

Information Quality

Social media exposes children and youth to all sorts of information—some of which may be inaccurate or biased. Parents should help their children and teens look critically at information they find and help them be able to assess its source and biases.[1] Critical thinking skills are particularly important with health information. Health care professionals should be ready to provide youth and families with trusted health resources. Studies show that most adults who use the Internet have looked up health information online—and many people self-diagnose without ever talking with a health care professional.[2] For adolescents, who may be reluctant to talk with their parents or health care professionals about reproductive or other health concerns, social media and other Internet sources may be a natural place to go for information. Vetted resources provided by their health care professional may be helpful.

Distraction and Displacement

Increasingly, people of all ages are becoming distracted by their devices. This can have devastating consequences if done while driving, biking, or walking. Parents need to talk with their children and youth about being sure that their device use never puts them in any physical danger.

Distraction by social media can affect school success as well. Families should set expectations and rules about social media use during school and homework time.[3] Many software programs can temporarily block access to Web sites and social media platforms. These, along with moving the cell phone or other portable screen device to another room, may help youth who have difficulty fighting the distractions of social media.

Social media can distract from and displace social interactions. Conversations with families about establishing cell phone–free zones or media-free zones, such as at the dinner table and during family gatherings, can increase their awareness of their child's media use and help them formulate ways to ensure that the child does not replace face-to-face encounters and activities with social media and maintains ample off-line social interactions.

Social media use also can displace other healthy and important activities, such as exercise, reading, or hobbies. Parents should be aware of how much time their child is spending online and encourage adequate exercise and other off-line activities.

Sleep

Computer and device use can interfere with sleep. Youth may stay up later than they should using them, and the light emitted from the devices themselves may delay melatonin release and increase sleep latency.[4] This may be a particular problem with small screens, such as those found in cell phones. The content is interactive and inviting, and the screen is held close to the face, which may strengthen the effect of the emitted light. These devices also can generate audible alerts even when put aside, which may wake up or attract resting youth. Studies show that youth who sleep with a cell phone or tablet nearby sleep less and less well than those who do not.[5]

Inadequate sleep has been associated with daytime sleepiness, school difficulties, increased injuries, a higher risk of mental health problems, possible immune dysfunction, and a higher risk of future cardiovascular disease.[6]

Role Modeling

Finally, children typically pay more attention to what parents do than to what they say—and this is true of social media use as well. Parents should be cognizant of their own social media habits and postings and consider whether they are setting the best example for their children as positive mentors and guides. Reflective modeling of using media as a tool for good purposes is important for children at any age. Open communications should be encouraged between parents and children to mitigate risks and to provide resources and support in case of cyberbullying or other online challenges.

Promoting the Healthy and Safe Use of Social Media: The Prenatal Period and Infancy—Birth Through 11 Months

Social media can be a great tool for parents to find and share parenting tips and resources and create a virtual support network. Health care professionals can talk with parents about what sites (including blogs and birth groups) they are using for networking and finding information about pregnancy, birth, parenting, and their new baby. Although these social media sites and tools can be useful, it is a good idea for parents to discuss the health information and advice they obtain with a health care professional to be sure that the information is accurate and applicable to (and a good idea for) them. It is also important for health care professionals to discuss with parents how to be critical consumers of information, especially health information, and to carefully assess the source before believing or following it. A list of useful and reliable sites and applications can be a valuable resource for parents.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) **HealthyChildren.org** Web site is one resource for parents (Twitter: @healthychildren).[7] Parents of hospitalized infants or infants with special health care needs may be more likely to seek out virtual networks for support and information. Health care professionals can provide them with trusted and vetted resources.

Promoting the Healthy and Safe Use of Social Media: Early Childhood—1 Through 4 Years

Social media offer many beneficial opportunities for families with young children. Parents may find it useful to connect with and learn from other parents, and young children may benefit from talking online with grandparents or family members who live far away. However, social media also can present challenges, including exposure to excessive screen time for young children instead of focused adult-child interactions, which enhance language and social development, or exposure to inappropriate content when they watch their parents use social media. Remind them that device use before bedtime may interfere with sleep, and the AAP recommends that TVs not be in children's bedrooms. The AAP encourages all screens, including tablets, be turned off at least 1 hour before bedtime.[8] Encourage parents to reflect on and monitor the content that their child may be exposed to and to consider how their own social media and device use may affect not just the time they spend interacting with their child but the quality of those interactions. Be sure to ask parents to include tablet computers, phones, and other digital devices when adding up overall screen time for their child. Starting healthy media habits now is important because they are considerably harder to change when children are older. Parents' use of interactive media has the potential to distract from parent-child interactions. Parental media use usually involves work, errands, and social or other content requiring significant information processing, which makes it hard to balance attention between devices and their child.[9,10] Health care professionals can suggest that parents consider making a family media use plan (Box 1).

Box 1

Family Media Use Plan[11,12]

A family media use plan is an online tool on media use and screen time that all family members can fill out together. Take into account not only the quantity but the quality and location of media use. Consider TVs, phones, tablets, and computers, as well as social media use. Rules should be followed by parents as well as children. This kind of plan can help parents and children balance the child's needs for physical activity, sleep, school activities, and unplugged time against time available for media. It can also help families preserve special face-to-face time during routines, such as meals, playtime, and bedtime. Families may even want to designate some parts of the home as media-free.

Once a plan is established, families can revisit it periodically. This not only reinforces the plan's importance to the family but gives all members a chance to discuss how it should be updated to reflect the family's changing media use.

The AAP has information and resources to help parents learn about media use in childhood and ways to manage their children's media exposure (see **www.HealthyChildren.org/MediaUsePlan**).

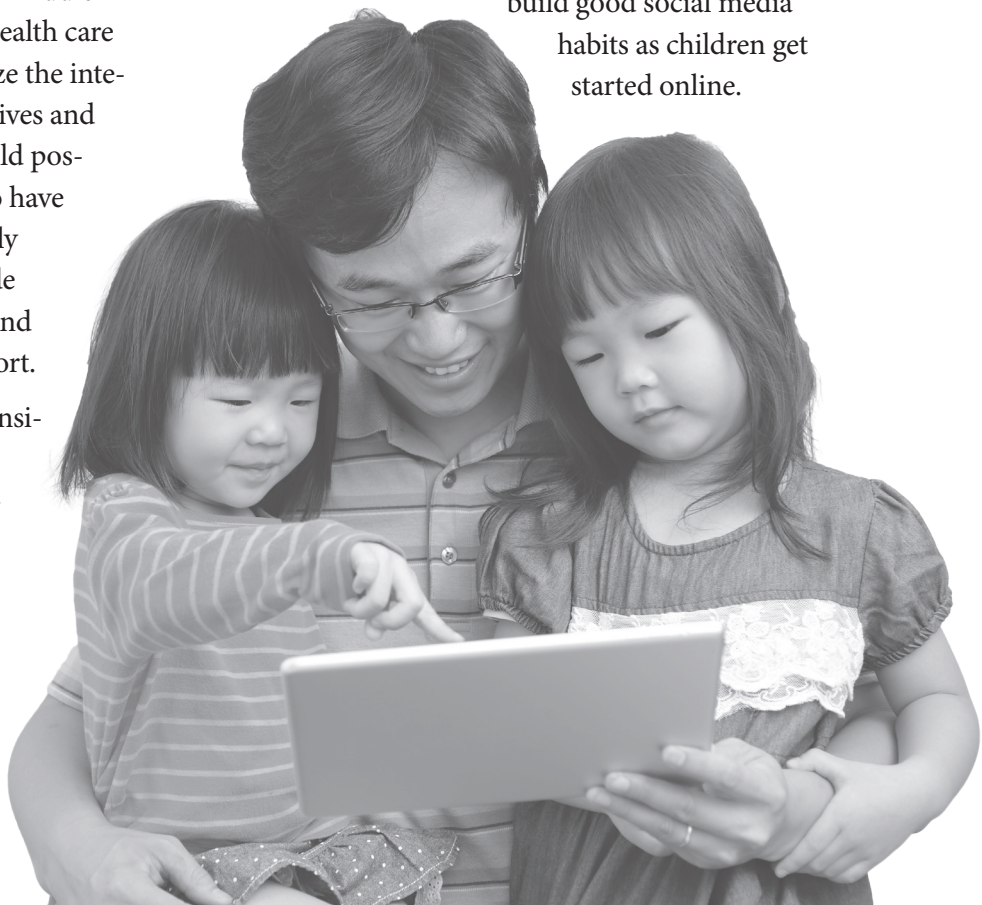
Abbreviations: AAP, American Academy of Pediatrics; TV, television.

Promoting the Healthy and Safe Use of Social Media: Middle Childhood—5 Through 10 Years

Pediatric health care professionals should emphasize to parents the importance of monitoring and offering guidance as their children interact with social media, just as they would with any other format of social contact. As children in middle childhood begin to use social media, health care professionals can help parents recognize the integral role that social media play in our lives and help their child use social media to build positive social networks. For children who have disabilities or those who may be socially marginalized, social media may provide an invaluable opportunity to develop and engage in friendships and obtain support.

At the same time, parents have a responsibility to help their children use social media in healthy and safe ways. Beginning in middle childhood, health care professionals can encourage parents to

- **Talk with their children about platforms and applications, and choose with them the ones best suited to their children's ages, temperaments, and abilities.** Talking with children about which social media sites and applications their friends are using can provide useful information for parents in guiding their own children's use. Although it can be almost impossible to know everything a child is doing on social media, setting up usernames and passwords together can help spur discussions and build good social media habits as children get started online.





- **Help them understand how content can be misunderstood—and hurtful.** This is a hard lesson for people to learn at any age, but the earlier parents and children start talking about it, the better. Starting these conversations early and checking in often can help prevent children from becoming cyberbullied or the perpetrator of cyberbullying. Parents should help their children learn to be kind and thoughtful in what they say and do on social media—and teach them to tell a parent or other trusted adult if they or anyone else is hurt or scared by social media content.
- **Help them understand that nothing is truly private.** Although children should use all the privacy settings possible (parents should talk with them about this, as well as help them set them up if needed), it is impossible to keep everything private. Through screen shots and other technology, anything they post anywhere can potentially be shared. A useful guiding principle is that if there is any person in the world they would not want to see something they post, they should not post it.
- **Help them be safe.** Although online predation is actually rare, it is best that children not give out information that would allow a stranger to find them (eg, address, phone number, school). Parents should tell children to check with a parent before interacting online with anyone they do not know off-line.

Promoting the Healthy and Safe Use of Social Media: Adolescence—11 Through 21 Years

As children grow into adolescence, social media use generally increases and becomes more sophisticated. Parents' role in helping adolescents use social media responsibly becomes all the more important. Parents should regularly talk with their adolescents about their social media use. Monitoring an adolescent's use of social media can be difficult, especially given that more and more youth access the Internet using their phone.[13] This means that discussion is key. The more that families create a culture of open communication about social media, the more opportunities they will have to guide their adolescent's use now and in the future.

Health care professionals can encourage parents to continue the guidance they provided during their child's earlier years, particularly with conversations about safety and privacy. Although research shows[14] that adolescents do think about privacy and take steps to protect theirs, it is still important to talk with them about it, especially because research suggests youth rely on parents for advice about privacy.[15]

Continued conversations about how content on social media can be hurtful, directly and indirectly, also are important. Parents should talk with their adolescents about standing up for anyone who is being hurt by social media content, about not passing on any possible hurtful content, and about alerting a parent, guidance counselor, or other helping adult if someone is being hurt, threatened, or bullied using social media.

Parents also can help their adolescents understand that anything they put on social media can stay there forever—and may be found by admissions officials or future employers. This "digital footprint" may have unintended consequences and should be created thoughtfully and carefully. In addition, adolescents should be particularly careful about any sexual content they post. It could be misinterpreted or become an unwanted part of their digital footprint or may be considered pornography and have legal repercussions.

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