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APA panel issues recommendations for adolescent social media use

Calls for social media literacy training, screening for 'problematic' online behaviors

WASHINGTON - A presidential panel of the American Psychological Association has issued recommendations for the use of social media by adolescents, noting that while these platforms can promote healthy socialization, their use should be preceded by training in social media literacy to ensure that youth have skills that will maximize the chances for balanced, safe and meaningful experiences.

"Social media is neither inherently harmful nor beneficial to our youth," said APA President Thema Bryant, PhD. "But because young people mature at different rates, some are more vulnerable than others to the content and features on many social media platforms that science has demonstrated can influence healthy development.

"Just as we require young people to be trained in order to get a driver's license, our youth need instruction in the safe and healthy use of social media."

In an effort to provide guidance to educators, parents, policymakers, mental health and health practitioners, technology companies and youths themselves, Bryant formed an advisory panel to examine relevant scientific literature to formulate recommendations to ensure that adolescents develop healthy social media practices. The result is the [American Psychological Association Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence \(/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use\)](#), which contains 10 recommendations.

The report also recommends psychological competencies that youth should possess before using social media, plus periodic booster training to minimize the chances for harm and maximize the benefits that social media can provide.

The health advisory notes that not all findings apply equally to all youth. "Scientific findings offer one piece of information that can be used along with knowledge of specific youths' strengths, weaknesses and context to make decisions that are tailored for each teen, family and community," it says. "Age-appropriate use of social media should be based on each adolescent's level of maturity (e.g., self-regulation skills, intellectual development, comprehension of risks, and home environment)."

Among the report's other recommendations:

- Tailor social media use, functionality and permissions to youths' developmental capabilities; designs created for adults may not be appropriate for children.
- For younger kids, adults should monitor social media use, including discussing and coaching around social media content. This should be balanced with youths' appropriate needs for privacy. Autonomy may increase gradually as kids age and gain more digital literacy skills.
- Minimize adolescents' exposure to social media content that depicts illegal or psychologically maladaptive behavior, including content that instructs or encourages youth to engage in self-harm or high-risk behaviors or those that encourage eating-disordered behavior (such as restrictive eating, purging or excessive exercise).
- Minimize adolescents' exposure to online content that promotes discrimination, prejudice, hate or cyberbullying, especially directed toward groups targeted because of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion or disability status.
- Monitor adolescents for signs of problematic social media use that can impair their ability to engage in daily roles and routines and may present risk for more serious psychological harms over time.
- Limit social media use so as not to interfere with adolescents' sleep or physical activity, as each is required for healthy brain and psychological

development.

- Limit adolescents' use of social media for primarily beauty- or appearance-related content.

The report is careful to note that, given the publicly available research, it is not possible to determine if social media is the cause of harmful impacts on youth. In addition, there have been relatively few studies conducted with youth from racial, ethnic, sexual, gender, socioeconomic or differently abled populations, and/or youth with chronic developmental or health conditions.

The report calls for "a substantial investment in research funding" and access to more data, including data from tech companies.

"We hope these recommendations will be helpful as we all try to keep pace with the rapidly shifting social media ecosystem," said APA CEO Arthur C. Evans Jr, PhD. "APA will continue to keep tabs on developments within the current and future platforms, with an eye toward safeguarding our youth and enabling them to benefit from the positive aspects of social media."

These recommendations are based on psychological science and research from related disciplines at the time of the report's writing (April 2023). Collectively, these studies were conducted with thousands of adolescents who completed standardized assessments of social, behavioral, psychological and/or neurological functioning, and reported (or were observed) engaging with specific social media functions or content.

The advisory panel was co-chaired by Mary Ann McCabe, PhD, associate clinical professor of pediatrics at George Washington University School of Medicine and an APA Board member, and Mitch Prinstein, PhD, APA's chief science officer and the John Van Seters distinguished professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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