TO PREVENT EATING DISORDERS & INSPIRE WELL-BEING

A Parent's Guide to Social Media

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Hello There!

Sharing information and images via social media is a part of daily life for many kids and teens. Social media allows kids to communicate with one another, and to document and share what they are doing in real time. The networking power of social media means that today it is common for kids to be connected with people they have never met in person.

Whether it's via text message or a smartphone app like Instagram or Snapchat, today's children and youth are able to both receive and share personal information far beyond what was possible for their parents' during childhood. For parents to protect and care for children in this new landscape, it's important for parents to learn about the different technologies children are using to help keep them safe online.

Social media is always changing, with new apps appearing all the time. Because this document is only an introduction, and because information is included that will rapidly evolve, we have included links to other websites you might find helpful.

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WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

For many parents, social media began with MySpace. If you are a MySpace alum, you probably remember discussing your favorite (emo) bands or asking yourself how a smiling, white-tee-shirted man named Tom had made it on your friends list. After MySpace, many people joined a high school and college networking platform called Facebook which ultimately transformed into an $86-billion company with 2.396 billion users. Today, we use "social media" to refer to websites and apps that allow people to interact, or create and share content. Popular social media platforms for kids include Youtube, Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, X, and BeReal.

THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT WAYS THAT PEOPLE USE SOCIAL MEDIA:

01 **Online Profiles**: Most social media sites require users to set up a profile, which usually includes a name, e-mail address, birthdate, interests and a photo.

02 **Friends**: Depending on the tool, users "follow" or "request" to be friends with people they know, such as classmates or family members. They may also use it to find new friends.

03 **Messaging/Chats**: Using instant messaging over the Internet or between smartphones to send messages (e.g. Facebook Messenger, iMessage, WhatsApp, Hangouts).

04 **Walls and Boards**: Social media sites allow people to post or send messages in many different ways. On Facebook, for example, information is posted to a "wall". Depending on a user's privacy settings, some messages are visible to the public, while others can only be seen by friends or followers.

05 **Photo and Video Sharing**: Many social networking sites or apps allow users to upload photos and videos, or to share live videos. These can also be public or private depending on privacy settings.

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06 **Vlogs:** Short for “video blogs”, vlogs are posted regularly to a video sharing platform (like YouTube) by individuals called “vloggers”. Vloggers can develop very big followings online.

07 **Joining Groups**: Many apps allow users to create groups. People “join”, “like” or “follow” groups to access information and have conversations with other members.

08 **Playing Games**: Children and teens visit online sites to play games, alone or with their friends. Some apps include free online gambling, and many feature product promotion or advertising.

09 **Online Dating:** Many apps or websites help strangers find romantic or sexual connections online.

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HOW CAN I KEEP MY KIDS SAFE USING SOCIAL MEDIA?

Keeping your kids safe online has never been more important, but for many parents, it has also become more and more complicated. While many apps have age limits to keep children offline, for example, it's not difficult for kids to find a way around these restrictions. Because many people use social media for networking, kids are also very likely to make friends with people they have never met in person. To keep up to date with your kids' social media activity, it is critical that you understand the apps they're using, monitor their online interactions with other users, and educate them about online safety. Below, we've listed some expert tips you can use to protect your kids on the internet.

TIPS AND THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW:

01 Learn about the programs and apps your child is using.

02 Show interest in your child's online life and ask questions.

03 When possible, keep tablets and computers in common areas where you can watch while your child uses them.

04 Get online family protection. Programs that provide parental controls can block websites, enforce time limits, monitor the websites your child visits, and their online conversations.

05 Follow your child's online accounts, and tell them that you are monitoring their online activity to help keep them safe. (Be aware that some children or teens may create a fake second account for their parents to follow.)

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06 Ask them about the people they “meet” online. Showing genuine interest will help them feel comfortable talking about it.

07 Explain that it’s easy for someone on the Internet to pretend to be someone they’re not.

08 Talk about the importance of keeping online friendships in the online world. Make it clear that if your child wants to meet an online friend in person, it must be with a trusted adult in a public place.

09 Discuss what’s okay and safe to post online, and what isn’t. Online posts stay online forever. As a general rule, your child shouldn’t post anything they wouldn’t want a parent, teacher, or a future employer to see or read.

10 One cannot always control what others post about them. Explain that information and photos found online can turn up again years later.

REFLECT

How can you model good online behavior on your own social media accounts?

GO DEEPER

- **Read Article:** 10 Tips for Managing (and Reducing) Your Kid’s Screen Time (Wirecutter)
- **Read Article:** Should I demand my kid's passwords to his or her social websites and apps? (Common Sense Media)

Have a specific question? Submit it here and we’ll get back to you with an answer soon!

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WHY PUT LIMITS ON SCREEN TIME/SOCIAL MEDIA?

Setting limits is an important component of guiding your kid to adopt healthy exposure to social media. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than two hours of screen time per day for children and teenagers. For many parents, or for any adult, these time limits on our own use are not possible since technology is integrated into nearly every aspect of our lives. But for a child or teenager, limiting screen time is critical for a kid's physical and emotional growth. As a child's brain develops, their cognitive development, emotional development, and relationship building skills learning must happen mostly with hands-on, real-world exposure–not on a screen. If all of a child's time is allocated to a screen, this real-world exposure is not possible. To learn how to help your kids limit their screen time, check out the tips below.

TIPS AND THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW:

01 Set screen time limits and rules on when/where/how screens are appropriate to use.

02 Teach your child the value of "unplugging" from devices for technology-free time.

03 Social media can be exciting, but it should be considered entertainment. Remind your child that–aside from genuine crises–no message is so important that it can't wait until it is appropriately screen time.

04 Be aware that some children have "streaks" with online friends, which means they message daily to maintain a streak. Losing smartphone or social media privileges can trigger stress and anxiety if they can't maintain their "streaks". Talk to your child about this. Ask them if feeling stress over something like this feels worth it.

05 Model good behavior on your own social media accounts. Talk openly about the realizations you have had regarding stress you've felt because of unnecessary or more-than-necessary digital use.

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REFLECT

In what ways do you monitor your own stress and anxiety around social media?

GO DEEPER

- Media and Children (aap.org)
- Insights from a Trailblazing Youth Activist: Sophie Szew

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WHAT to SAY
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WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT ONLINE PRIVACY?

Most social media websites have privacy policies and settings, but such policies vary. Some sites are completely public, meaning that anyone can read or look at anything, anytime. Other sites let you control who has access to your information. Importantly, most kids and teens don't understand the lack of privacy that exists online.

TIPS AND THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW:

01 Before sharing any personal information on a site, read a website's privacy policy.

02 Check your child's privacy settings in their social media accounts to make sure they aren't sharing more information than you want (for example, their birthdate or location).

03 If they use a GPS-enabled smartphone or tablet, they could be posting status updates, photos and videos with "geotags". Geotags share the exact location of where your photo was taken. Make sure these are turned off on devices.

04 Encourage your child to use an online nickname, instead of a real name, whenever possible.

05 Make sure your child keeps every account password protected, and have them change passwords often.

06 Remind your child not to share passwords, even with friends.

07 Your child should not accept friend requests from (or actively connect with) people they don't know in real life.

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08 Explain that Snapchat posts are NOT temporary, as they were intended to be. People can take screenshots of a photo before it disappears.

09 Encourage them to protect and respect their friends' privacy, too. They should ask a friend permission before posting something about a friend, such as a photo or a video.

10 They should also be aware of what friends are posting about them. If a friend posts something they don't like or want posted, recommend they talk with the friend: request both that the post be removed and that they be consulted on future posts.

REFLECT

Are you familiar with the privacy policies of the social media websites and platforms that you use?

GO DEEPER

- **Read Article:** Your Family Has a Right to Privacy Online (Common Sense Media)
- **Read Article:** I'm a Mom and a Children's Privacy Lawyer: Here's What I Do and Don't Post About My Kid Online (parents.com)
- **Watch Video:** Every iPhone Privacy Setting You NEED To Change
- **Watch Video:** 7 Android Privacy Settings You NEED To Change Now

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WHAT IS CYBERBULLYING?

Cyberbullying is when people are bullied online. While most online social interactions are positive, some people use the technology to intimidate and harass others. Cyberbullying can happen in many ways: by sending mean messages over e-mail or by posting them publicly in an app like Facebook, by sharing photos and videos without permission, or by excluding someone from a group chat.

TIPS AND THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW:

01 Talk to your children about cyberbullying.

02 Encourage your children not to engage with online bullies and, when necessary, teach them how to block emails, messages, or texts from specific people.

03 If the bullying doesn't stop, is violent or sexually explicit, or makes your child feel unsafe, encourage them to talk to you or another trusted adult. Take all threats seriously, even if these threats are meant to be jokes.

04 Notify your child's guidance counselor and teachers of instances of cyberbullying so that they can monitor your child's experiences with peers at school. Before you do so, let your child know that you will be reporting the cyberbullying to other adults.

05 Discourage your child from making posts that could be hurtful or harmful to others.

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REFLECT

Have you witnessed cyberbullying? Did you intervene?

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- **Get Guide:** Helping our kids deal with cyberbullying (Media Smarts)
- **Read Article:** What Kids Can Do (StopBullying.gov)
- **Read Article:** The Psychology of Cyberbullying (verywellmind.com)

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WHAT IS SEXTING?

Sexting involves sending sexually explicit messages, photos, or videos between social media apps or email accounts. Ask your child (if/when they are of the appropriate age) or teen what they know about sexting. Remind your teen that words and photos posted online can easily be shared with others. Remind them that nothing is ever really deleted online. Friends, enemies, parents, teachers, coaches, strangers, and potential employers can find past posts. Although most dating sites (like Tinder, Grindr, Bumble) are for people over 18 years old, many teens know about them. Online dating services allow users to create a profile and upload personal information and photos. Users can be encouraged by others to share inappropriate photos.

TIPS AND THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW:

01 Talk to your child (if/when they are of the appropriate age) or teen about the dangers of sharing sexually explicit photos.

02 If your child or teen receives a sexually explicit photo of another child or teen, encourage them to delete the image immediately. Some explicit pictures legally constitute Child Sexual Abuse Material.

03 If your child has received or forwarded explicit texts or photos, have a calm and supportive conversation with them about their motives for doing so as well as the potential legal and psychological consequences of these exchanges.

04 Consider talking to the parents of any teens involved in sexting exchanges.

05 Some schools are mandated to report knowledge of any CSAM to law enforcement. which could mean that anyone involved in sexting photos could be implicated in a serious crime.

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06

Talk with your kids about the differences between sexting and sextortion. If someone is using their explicit messages or images for exploitation and/or blackmail, take action by inviting your children to talk with a therapist, another trusted adult (if they're uncomfortable speaking with you), or law enforcement (when necessary).

REFLECT

How do your own views, values, and discomforts around sexuality shape the conversations you have with your kids about sex and sexting?

GO DEEPER

- **Read Article:** The Sexting Revolution (Talk With Your Kids)
- **Read Article:** Sextortion: What Kids and Caregivers Need to Know (FBI)

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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON KIDS MENTAL HEALTH AND BODY IMAGE

Researchers have long demonstrated that social media can negatively impact a child's or teen's body image. In fact, researchers from Fairplay's study of eating disorder social media accounts illustrate that social media companies knowingly use algorithms to promote harmful mental health content that boosts user engagement. Instagram, for example, hosts 90,000 pro-eating disorder accounts that are accessible to 20 million users; annually, they net $230M from these accounts. Over time, a child's or teen's poor body image may result in serious consequences, such as eating disorders or suicidal ideation.

Many teens attribute an increase in anxiety and depression to their engagement on Instagram. While it is nearly impossible to protect your child or teen from negative body standards in social media, here are some tips you can use to help them distinguish between unrealistic and realistic body standards online.

TIPS AND THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW:

01 Model healthy body standards at home by speaking positively about your own body.

02 Model a healthy relationship with food by avoiding diet talk or talk about "good foods" and "bad foods." Don't make food a moral issue.

03 Hold conversations with your children about unhealthy body images. Use real media examples for discussion. If you notice your child scrolling through the account of an influencer who promotes unrealistic body standards, for example, critically analyze the account together to determine what messages the influencer might be trying to promote.

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04 Talk about the marketing tactics organizations use to sell their products (Photoshop, etc.)

05 Teach your children and teens about the filters that social media users use to alter selfies and other photos of themselves.

06 Encourage them to celebrate their unique traits–both physical traits and character traits–that make them unique. Encourage them not to compare themselves to others online

07 Ask your child to consider how viewing certain posts or accounts makes them feel. If posts or accounts make them feel bad about themselves or their body, ask them if it's worth it. Suggest accounts focused on learning new hobbies or humor or positive things that bring education and joy.

REFLECT

How can you model a realistic and positive body image for your kids or teens at home?

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- **Read Article:** Here's The Truth On The Effects Instagram Has On Your Brain (Glamour UK)
- **Read Article:** Social Media and Teen Bodybuilding: What is Bigorexia (New York Times)

Have a specific question about this principle?
Submit it here and we'll get back to you with an answer soon!

Thank you for all the ways you love and support the kids in your life. Your words mean so much to them and your desire to support their health and well-being means the world to them and us.

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GO DEEPER IN YOUR ROLE

- **Parents and families:** Learn the 3 Simple Shifts at withall.org/shifts
- **Teachers:** Build a body-healthy school culture at withall.org/schools
- **Coaches:** Get your free What to Say certification at withall.org/coaches
- **Healthcare providers:** Earn CME credit at withall.org/healthcare

Support This Work

This guide is one piece of WithAll's work to help kids feel good in their bodies and with food. That work only happens because individuals and businesses fund it directly. If it helped you, consider making a gift at withall.org/donate.

Get Financial Help

If you or someone you love is facing an eating disorder, you are not alone. Our Recovery Support Program provides grants for groceries and housing during intensive treatment. Apply at withall.org/apply.

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