Be Well Comments

About this series

Our *Cognita Be Well Comments* series looks at nine key areas related to young people's wellbeing, providing a summary of published research in each area along with practical tips for parents. In preparing the series, we commissioned experts from University College London (UCL) to conduct a review of all published research in these areas.

This document incorporates the review by Kelly Dickson and James Thomas in the area of social media and offers tips for parents based on the experience and expertise of Cognita's education and wellbeing team.

Social Media

Many children and young people learn how to use social media at an early age, developing their own profiles and sharing personalised videos and other content.

While there is undoubtedly concern surrounding social media use by children and young people, it is an unavoidable aspect of life today. Indeed, it can even be beneficial. It is where they gather to talk and share experiences, to encourage and console, to deal with the stresses and strains of growing up. It is as essential a means of communication as face-to-face interaction.

SOCIAL MEDIA | SCREEN TIME | SLEEP | THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN | MINDFULNESS | RESILIENCE | STRESS AND EXAM PRESSURE | EATING | STUDENT TRANSITION

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Social Media:
the good and the bad

Social media offers opportunities for children to learn and play. For children who are struggling, the internet can be a space to express their thoughts and beliefs, access support and reduce isolation. However, we are right to be concerned about its use.

Social media channels such as Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube and Instagram, to name a few, can negatively impact people's psychological health. This is especially true for youngsters still learning their way in the world who might be more susceptible to negative emotions, feelings of alienation and a lack of self-worth.

It can exploit individual anxieties and feelings of envy and jealousy, so the answer to the question 'is social media bad or good for children?' is therefore 'both', it depends on the child.

Problems often arise when children use social media profiles to project a 'picture-perfect' version of themselves, particularly with image-focused sites such as Instagram. This adds pressure to the way they view themselves at a time when they are going through intense physical, emotional and psychological change. In trying to 'belong' on social media sites, they could end up feeling isolated.

On social media, situations that would otherwise be resolved through discussion can all too often become much worse when harsh words or insults get posted in a matter of seconds, without thought of the consequences. The expectation that life is lived through a lens has robbed some adolescents of the ability to work problems or disagreements out between each other. In the world of social media, sharing can all too often spin out of control, becoming unnecessary and widespread.
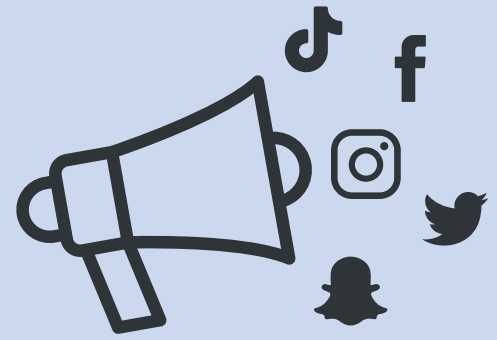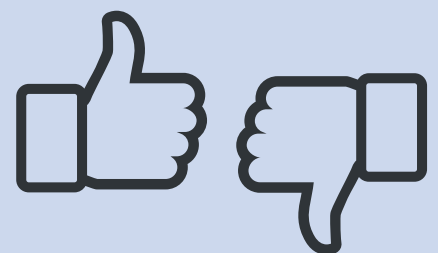
72% of teens feel compelled to respond immediately

This includes texts, social posts and notifications.

3+ hours of social media use a day is linked to depression

Studies show a correlation between time spent and perceived social isolation.

Increasing dependence on "likes" and comments

Feedback on social media posts becomes a form of validation.

What the evidence says

The rapid growth of cyber-bullying is a real concern for educators and parents alike. Its capacity to be less easily detected and more invasive and relentless than traditional playground bullying has resulted in devastating consequences for some children and their families. The issue is therefore high on the agenda of governments, many of which are working with social media giants to put measures in place to protect children.

Due consideration must be given to the amount of time young people are spending on social media. There is a lack of longitudinal research evidence in this field so it is not possible to show a direct link between the use of social media and declining health. Nevertheless, if your child's use of social media reduces their time on beneficial activities like sleep and exercising, it follows that their physical and mental health will be indirectly, and negatively, impacted.

There is some evidence that **active** use of social media (for example, producing content or interacting with a friend or group) rather than **passive** use (in which users consume or observe content without having to interact with anyone) can be good for people's emotions. However, it is important to understand the risks in order to support and guide children in using social media actively with appropriate caution.

There is also compelling evidence that social media can benefit people already dealing with a range of issues by helping them build and access online communities that provide a source of emotional support. Navigating them towards beneficial support sites should be a key part of educating young people to become responsible and confident digital citizens.

'active rather than passive use of social media can actually be beneficial'

Top Tips

Most adolescents use or think about social media three or more hours each day. This will play a role in shaping who they are, what they care about, how they view themselves and how they interact with others.

Parental guidance, support and boundaries are therefore critical to ensure this powerful influence is a positive one.

1 Discuss and agree age-appropriate boundaries around your child's use of social media apps. Include age limits, privacy settings, the posting of images and comments, and be clear about how you will monitor this.

Common Sense Media has a helpful resource for parents. To view it, go to **commonsenemedia.org** and click on 'Social Media apps that parents should know about'.

2 Avoid being constantly negative about social media or threatening to ban it. This can be divisive and doesn't recognise the positive aspects of social media.

3 Social media (and screens generally) negatively impacts sleep. There should be no screen time within an hour of bedtime and phones should not be in the bedroom overnight.

4 Be aware of and track your child's mood and behaviour during and after they use social media. If you're concerned, talk to them to make sure there isn't an issue, e.g. bullying or coercion.

5 Help your child understand that their 'digital footprint' is permanent – what they post on social media apps now will still be accessible in years to come.

6 If your child receives disturbing content, is unhappy about an image that has been shared of them or is worried about anything online, www.childnet.com is an international organisation that provides help and support.

Above all, reassure your child that IF they make a mistake online, you will be there to support them – no matter what.
For more resources visit **cognita.com/cognita-be-well**

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