

Teenagers and Social Media

by Ellen Niemer

It's unclear who first coined the term "social media." Executives at AOL claim to have begun using it in the early 1990s. Today online social media communities span the globe—and today's teenagers have become the most electronically connected generation of all time.

New generation gap

To many parents and grandparents whose children and grandchildren are constantly connected to music players, cellphones, video game consoles, and computers, this electronic connection is a mystery.

When today's teenagers take an apple to school, it's more likely a cellphone than a fruit. Dubbed by some the "iGeneration," many teenagers have become much more computer savvy—and social media savvy—than their parents.

This technological divide has created a new generation gap. Parents can close this gap by becoming social media savvy themselves, and by providing guidance and setting limits on social media use by their tweens and teens.

What is social media?

There are many definitions of the term "social media" floating around the Internet. While social media is used heavily for marketing, the definition offered by Ron Jones of Search Engine Watch captures what kids are using social networking sites for.

Jones defines social media as "essentially a category of online media where people are talking, participating, sharing, networking, and bookmarking online. Most social media services encourage discussion, feedback, voting, comments, and sharing of information from all interested parties."

As Jones points out, social media is a two-way conversation that allows people to stay "connected or linked to other sites, resources, and people." The key words for teenagers being "stay connected."

Online time

Though it would be difficult to measure exactly how much time children are spending online, surveys have gathered a considerable amount of information about kids' online habits.

Norton Online Family Report (2010)

- 2,800 children aged eight to 17 and 7,000 parents in 14 countries surveyed
- 1.6 hours a day on average spent online
- 48 percent of kids surveyed believed they spent too much time on the Internet

Roiworld's Teens & Social Networks Study (June 2010)

- 600 13- to 17-year-old boys and girls in the US surveyed
- 2 hours and 20 minutes a day on average spent online
- 80 percent of their time online is spent on a social networking site

Where do kids hang out?

- 90 percent of teenagers say they've created an online profile for at least one social networking site
- Facebook and YouTube are the ones most popularly frequented by teens
- 93 percent of Canadian kids hang out online to play games

Who's being social?

According to a survey conducted by Amanda Lenhart of the Pew Research Center in 2009, age and gender are factors in determining whether teens have an online social media profile.

- 86 percent of 15- to 17-year-old girls
- 69 percent of 15- to 17-year-old boys
- 38 percent of 12- to 14-year-olds

How do teens communicate?

- 51 percent of teens who own cellphones use them as their main type of communication
- 42 percent of teens who use social networking sites send daily messages through a site such as Facebook

A new way to socialize

Many parents use computers every day for work, social, and entertainment purposes, and may have their own Facebook account. But many parents may have trouble understanding their children's need to be constantly connected through social media.

Hanging out at the mall may still be a popular activity for teens, but hanging out on social networking websites has become a major way for teens to build social relationships. Through social media, teens are developing a sense of who they are and where they fit into their community and the world.

Benefits

Teens use social media to stay connected with their friends, meet new friends, share photos, play games, blog, do homework, and promote causes they believe in.

A study in *Pediatrics* (2011) revealed that teens use social media in a positive way to

- connect with people with shared interests
- learn about people with varied backgrounds
- enhance their creativity by sharing musical and artistic projects
- expand their ideas by creating blogs, videos, and podcasts
- collaborate on school projects outside of class
- raise money for charity
- volunteer for local charitable and political events

Access to health information

Teens are also using social media to access information on health topics from sexually transmitted diseases to depression. Teens with chronic health conditions are able to access networks that offer support.

Parents should initiate conversations with teens about health matters in order to help teens navigate the massive amount of information on the Internet. Teens need help to ensure the information they've found comes from an accurate, reliable source.

Negative effects

Despite the many benefits of social media use, parents may be more familiar with the negative effects, especially if one's information source is media news reports. Some of the negative effects associated with teens' social media use include

- cyberbullying and online harassment
- sexting
- “Facebook depression”
- lower school grades

Is social media good or bad?

Larry Rosen, professor and past chair of psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills, is a social media researcher. He specializes in the psychology of technology.

“From my research and that of others I see the overall effect [of social media on teens] as both good and bad,” he states. “Some of our research shows, for example, that more Facebook activity is related to more signs of certain psychiatric disorders such as narcissism, while the same research shows that having more friends on Facebook predicts lower depression.

“Other studies out of our lab show that using Facebook helps teens practice and learn how to be empathic in the real world. And still other work shows that shy teens are assisted in learning communication skills by practicing online. The bottom line is that we are just now starting to see both the good and the bad.”

Based on his research, Rosen believes that the positive benefits of social media use are starting to outweigh the negative ones, but parents and teachers need to make a considered effort to ensure that the positives win out.

Addiction or obsession?

Parents who have trouble tearing their teens away from the computer or cellphone may wonder whether their teenager is addicted to technology.

Rosen says that teens are not addicted to social media, but rather they experience an obsession or compulsion to constantly check social media. (A compulsion is a strong urge to repetitively do something. When it comes to checking social media, some parents may be familiar with this urge, too.)

His research shows that a “large number of teens check in every few minutes” to social media. This compulsion stems from an anxiety teens have about missing out on something in their social world.

For many teens, he explains, social media is not just a part of their life, it is their social world. Even if teens talk to their friends on the phone, they still need to feel connected to what’s happening in their social media world.

Who’s in control?

Parents who aren’t social media savvy and fear its negative effects, may be tempted to simply prohibit their teens’ use of social media sites, but research has shown that kids will simply seek social media access elsewhere—at school, the library, or friends’ homes.

The *Norton Online Family Report* found that parental attitudes about social media vary from country to country. Sixty percent of Canadian and American parents believe they should have full control over their children’s online activities. Italian and Chinese parents feel that children should be empowered to make their own decisions.

Interestingly, the same study found that children want parents to set limits for them when it comes to online use. A majority of children stated they want to feel they can turn to their parents for help when things go wrong in the online world.

As the way we communicate changes rapidly, our children (and grandchildren) are the first generation to be born into a world that’s constantly connected. Whether we like it or not, social media is a fact of life for our children that isn’t going to go away.

How old should kids be?

Social networking sites, such as Facebook, have an age restriction of 13 years and older (though Facebook wants to lower this restriction). Social media experts recommend that parents stick to the 13-year-old-and-over guideline. But ultimately, only a parent knows when their child is ready to handle the world of social media.

Facebook and other social networking sites are so new that researchers are just beginning to assess the long-term impact of social media on mental health. Rosen believes that psychologists are split on their assessment of Facebook's impact on teens.

"Sadly, the media tends to accentuate the negative and neglect the positive," he says. "But more research will show, I believe, that the benefits to social development outweigh the possible negative impacts."

Social media terms

Learn these terms and you're on your way to being social media savvy.

cyberbullying: deliberately using digital media to communicate false, embarrassing, or hostile information about another person

Facebook: the most popular social networking site with over 900 million active monthly users worldwide, according to Facebook

Facebook depression: believed to be caused by the intensity of online interactions, including acceptance and rejection by one's peers

follower: members of a Twitter user's social network (members can follow other members and be followed by members)

friend: members of a Facebook user's social network

sexting: sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images via cellphone, computer, or other digital devices

social media: any online technology that allows users to publish, converse, and share content online

social networking: socializing in an online community such as Facebook or YouTube

tweetup: an organized or spur-of-the-moment gathering of people who use Twitter to send tweets about a particular topic (for example, a sports game)

Twitterverse: the community (universe) of people who use Twitter

Teens' favourite social networking sites

Social networking site	URL	Main activities
Facebook	facebook.com	creating profiles, sharing photos and videos, and online chatting
YouTube	youtube.com	uploading, sharing, and viewing videos
MySpace	myspace.com	listening to music, watching videos, playing games, and creating profiles
Twitter	twitter.com	creating and posting 140-character messages called "tweets"
Gaia Online	gaiaonline.com	playing games, creating avatars, decorating virtual homes, and participating in forums
Club Penguin	clubpenguin.com	playing games; accessing recipes, outdoor activities, arts and crafts, and colouring pages

Social media safety tips

Parents can help their tweens and teens explore the world of social media as safely as possible by following a few simple tips.

It begins with parents exploring social networking sites for themselves. We teach our teens how to become a safe driver. We can also model appropriate social media use for our teens.

Be social media savvy

- Keep up to date on social networking sites that appeal to teens.
- Set up your own Facebook account so you can “friend” your teen and monitor your teen’s online activity.
- If your teen balks at having a parent for a “friend,” give her 24 hours to clean up her Facebook account, then sit down together and go over her friends, photos, and wall messages. If you can’t be Facebook friends, insist on having free access to your teen’s Facebook page any time you want.
- Use your web browser’s History button to keep track of the websites your teen visits.

Set limits

- Make sure your teen uses privacy settings that limit access to who can view her online profile.
- Have your teen limit friends to people she actually knows, not strangers; review her friend list.
- Help your teen create a safe screen name that won’t reveal identifying personal information, such as where she lives, gender, or age.
- Explain to your teen why some things, such as telephone numbers, addresses, and financial information, should stay private.

Teach online etiquette

- Teach teens to think twice before posting photos and videos; once they’re on the web, they’re out there, perhaps forever.
- Teach teens to use appropriate language and be courteous online.
- Caution teens not to use sex talk and to advise you if anyone approaches them inappropriately online, even if they know the person.

Communication is key

Learn how to communicate openly with your teen. By building an atmosphere of trust and understanding what your teen is experiencing in the social media world, it’s more likely that he or she will come to you if something disturbing happens while on the Internet.

Hold weekly family meetings

- Rosen suggests holding a weekly family meeting. Set aside 15 minutes before or after a meal. Sit on the floor to equalize height (which corresponds with power), and ask your kids questions about their recent online experiences.
- Start the conversation with a question such as, “I heard that some kids have been bullied on Facebook. Do you know anyone who’s been bullied? What happened? How did they feel about it?”
- Really listen to your teen’s answers with a nonjudgmental expression on your face.
- Let your teen talk five times longer than you do.
- Do not criticize your teen; the idea is to build trust and open communication.

Have regular family dinners

- At least four times a week, sit down with all family members for dinner.
- Make this an opportunity to talk to each other by having everyone turn off their cellphones.
- If your family can't make it through a meal without checking their cellphones for messages, have everyone check their phones for one minute prior to eating, then turn them off and place them face down on the table. Set an alarm for 15 minutes. At that time, everyone can check their phones for one minute; then reset the alarm for 15 more minutes of family time.

About the Author

Ellen Niemer is an editor and creative services liaison at alive. She believes in using social media as a positive communication tool (and so does her cat).

