

Conversation Starters:

How To Talk with Caregivers About Kids and Social Media



Social media is an integral part of daily life in our digital society, particularly for adolescents.

While these platforms offer numerous benefits and opportunities to share, connect and learn, there are accompanying downsides for young people as they newly navigate the world of social interactions.

Educators, who play a pivotal role in their students' growth and development, find themselves at the forefront of discussions about the impacts of social media. And given their vital role in guiding and shaping the lives of their students, they also are in a position to initiate open, constructive conversations with parents and other caregivers about the potential effects of social media on mental health, says Theo Miron, a nationally certified school psychologist and assessment consultant for Pearson.

"The goal is to build bridges with parents and caregivers to assure them you're on the same team and can

work together to keep kids' safety and well-being top of mind."

He acknowledges these conversations can be fraught, despite the best of intentions. After all, **educators discussing a student's social media use with caregivers could potentially be viewed as overstepping bounds, even when the educator is coming from a position of empathy.**

Informed dialogue between educators and caregivers can build bridges to productive conversations. By fostering open communication, you can position yourself as an advocate for healthy social media use — supporting families as they equip children with the skills needed to navigate the digital realm responsibly and safely. Read on to explore ways educators can approach these discussions with caregivers.



Unraveling social media's ripple effect

Social media is embedded in students' lives:

95% of teens in a recent Pew Research Center survey said they have used a social platform and more than half (54%) said social media would be hard to give up.

Although social media brings opportunities for connection and enrichment, high usage comes with downsides that can impact students' academic performance, mental health, social skills and overall well-being. One of the most troubling impacts of social media is its potential to negatively affect mental health. That concern is so widespread that U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released an advisory warning of social media's adverse effects.

Ample research shows excessive reliance on social media can lead to anxiety, depression and a skewed sense of self-worth, fueled by curated online personas that can magnify teens' body dissatisfaction and lower their self-esteem.

Pearson's Miron points out that teens can be especially susceptible to misinformation, and social media also exacerbates their access to inappropriate or harmful content, from pornography to messages about drugs and racism or cultural biases. Also worrisome is its addictive nature. **"With the 'infinite scroll,' kids can engage for hours," Miron says. "It can become isolating if it takes the place of more active pursuits like hobbies, sports or meeting up with friends in real life."**

Social media also can be a pervasive source of bullying and racism, particularly among marginalized communities. "Teens might feel more powerful in the relatively anonymous setting behind a screen," Miron says. "It's easier to jump in and make fun of someone or harass them when there are no immediate consequences."



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Finding the positives

This litany of adverse facets can make it easy to question the rationale of allowing kids to access these platforms at all. However, social media presents a double-edged sword. Despite all these negatives, there are many benefits, as these platforms expose users to diverse perspectives and innovative ideas that enrich their outlook and learning experiences.

The [Pew Research Center](#) found that teens reported a variety of positive associations with social media:

- 80%** feel more connected to what's going on in their friends' lives.
- 71%** feel like they have a place where they can show their creative side.
- 67%** feel like they have people who can support them through tough times.
- 58%** feel more accepted.

Miron agrees that social media has its positives — from the collaborative nature of creating skits and videos to the ability to express themselves via personal vlogs and sharing artistic endeavors.

He underscores the importance of social media helping adolescents discover a sense of belonging, as kids can reach out to people from different cultures and regions, no longer confined to socializing only with those around them. "I see them expanding their horizons and meeting people with whom they share similar hobbies and preferences," he says.

From a mental health lens, he points out, students can also connect with others who are enduring similar challenges, from addiction to depression, which can make them feel less alone or hopeless, especially if they perceive themselves as different from their peers. For example, [The Trevor Project](#) found that feeling safe and understood in at least one online space is associated with lower suicide risk and anxiety among LGBTQ+ youth (and especially LGBTQ+ youth of color).

Given these advantages, the solution is to better manage social media rather than trying to quash its use.

Initiating the conversation with caregivers

While your school might have adopted social media policies designed to encourage safe and healthy digital use, kids are only on campus for a fraction of the day. That's why it's vital to position social media considerations as a partnership with caregivers.

Fortunately, they are likely to be open to the conversation. [Another study from The Pew Research Center](#) found that 71% of parents of a child under the age of 12 are at least somewhat concerned their child may spend too much time in front of screens. They also realize they don't always set the best example themselves, with nearly 70% reporting they feel distracted by their phone when spending time with their kids.

Educators looking to talk with caregivers about kids' social media use should aim to form an alliance with them, Miron says. **The right tone matters. Approaching the situation in a non-judgmental manner can help ensure they are willing to listen to the message.** Miron recommends framing the conversation from the perspective that you work with kids like theirs every day, which gives you the opportunity to observe what makes them tick.

"Building rapport with caregivers and helping them realize you are showing genuine care for their child goes a long way to establish the relationship you want," Miron says.



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of parents of a child under the age of 12 are at least somewhat concerned their child may spend too much time in front of screens.

4 tips for talking about social media with caregivers

Making social media conversations part of your ongoing communication with students' families is the best way to keep the issue top of mind, Miron says. And the great news is that families are hungry for educator insight. Nearly half of parents (45%) in one study said they have turned to teachers for advice or information about screen time.

Miron recommends using the following four techniques:

1. Regularly share key data points and articles from reliable sources in parent newsletters.

Pointing to exact studies about the adverse effects observed on kids' mental health helps to show them that your concern has a factual basis.

2. Explain your screen time policies in a forum that enables caregivers to ask questions.

With the proliferation of online information sources, caregivers may wonder how much kids are relying on technology in their schoolwork. Share your code of conduct, including how and why you allow social media in certain situations, then segue into the reasons your school aims to limit screen time. "It's another way to remind them how it can be linked to poor mental health outcomes," Miron says.



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3. Incorporate discussion of social media usage and mental health into regular conversations.

Make this an ongoing topic at events like back-to-school nights and parent-teacher conferences. Hearing regular messages makes the issue more likely to resonate with caregivers while giving them an opening to note any specific concerns in private exchanges.

4. Discuss how your school is integrating digital literacy into the curriculum.

With a society increasingly reliant on technology, digital literacy has become an essential life skill. It empowers students to navigate social media critically and responsibly, and it gives them tools to help assess the credibility of sources as they learn to distinguish between fact and misinformation. The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) offers digital literacy resources that educators can use to teach students how to vet what they learn online.



Helping the caregiver:

6 ways to promote healthy online engagement

While encouraging mindful digital habits in the classroom setting is important, educators can also serve as allies by providing caregivers with the knowledge and tools to set their own healthy boundaries at home. Here are some tips educators can share with caregivers to temper the effects of social media.

1. Establish tech-free zones and times. Some families insist that younger kids sit in common areas of the home, like the kitchen, while using the internet. That way, a caregiver can quickly and easily vet the websites they're visiting and monitor any conversations happening online. Additionally, most experts agree that switching off cell phones at bedtime contributes to better sleep habits.

2. Develop age-appropriate guidelines for interacting on social media. While younger kids might use some social media sites for homework or to chat with friends, caregivers might decide that true social media participation should be saved for when they are a teen.

3. Create opportunities for more enriching activities. Opening up a social media app and scrolling through posts has become a reflexive action for many adults — and the same is true for adolescents. To avoid cementing this habit, encourage kids to engage in other activities at home, like doing puzzles, playing games or reading the “old-fashioned” way. Find hobbies or activities to get them out of the house; many schools and communities offer low-cost classes and teams.



4. Be empathic as they navigate online relationships. It's easy to dismiss kids who are upset because they posted a cool video and nobody replied or they've discovered that a friend had a party and they weren't invited. **Remember: These affronts are real, and they can be damaging, especially if a child or teen already feels isolated.** Giving them space to talk through angst or questions can open the door to productive discussions about why they're using certain apps or joining certain online groups.

Be on the lookout for signs of distress — such as changes in behavior, mood swings or declining academic performance or interest in activities — that can indicate a bigger mental health issue. Educators can help here, too. They are on the lookout for big changes in students' attitudes, moods and behaviors during the school day. Being receptive to educators' outreach can help caregivers ensure they are in the know when these types of changes happen to their kids at school.

5. Do your own research, too. Try out the social media apps and websites kids are using. Doing so will help you learn more about what that experience entails, including what types of information kids can access on those platforms, to whom their accounts may be visible, and the types of permissions users can set. You might even find you enjoy being on the site yourself. And stay attuned to news of online scams, "challenges" and other trends that can put kids' health and property at risk.

6. Use educators as resources. Realize that teachers, counselors and other educational professionals are around this age group all day, every day. Don't hesitate to ask them about new apps you should be familiar with or whether certain behaviors should be worrisome. Keep the lines of communication open so you're approaching this as a partnership.

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Building bridges to improve students' digital well-being

Educators face challenging conversations with caregivers every day, so it's important to proactively consider how to address complex issues. By fostering collaboration between schools and families on the topic of social media and mental health, you can create a united front and empower caregivers as they guide students toward responsible and healthy social media usage.

Want more ideas for how your school or district can maintain open lines of communication with families? Find additional insight in our playbook, ["5 Ways To Build Bridges With Families To Support Students"](#) and visit our [Mental Health Resource Center](#).





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