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Homewood Health

# Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time



## Children and Social Media: Setting Healthy Boundaries Together

For many children and teens, social media is a normal part of daily life. It can help them stay connected with friends, explore interests, learn new skills, and express themselves creatively. At the same time, social media can present challenges for developing minds and may affect mental health, self-esteem, sleep, and relationships.

As a parent or caregiver, it can be difficult to know where to draw the line. Rather than focusing only on restrictions, experts encourage families to work together to create healthy habits, set clear expectations, and maintain open communication.

### Effects of social media on developing minds

Children and adolescents are still developing important social, emotional, and critical-thinking skills. During these years, experiences help shape how they communicate, build relationships, regulate emotions, and view themselves.

Research suggests that excessive social media use may affect developing brains in several ways:

- Reduced opportunities for face-to-face social interaction and practice reading social cues.
- Increased exposure to unrealistic images and comparisons that may affect self-esteem and body image.
- Greater difficulty focusing attention due to constant notifications and rewards built into many platforms.
- Potential impacts on sleep, learning, and social development when screen use becomes excessive.

Many social media platforms are designed to encourage ongoing engagement through features such as likes, comments, streaks, endless content feeds, and personalized recommendations. These tools are intended to capture attention and keep users returning to the platform. Each notification, positive interaction, or entertaining piece of content can activate the brain's reward system, creating feelings of enjoyment and motivation that may make it harder to disconnect.

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## The benefits of social media

Social media is not inherently harmful. When used thoughtfully and in balance with offline activities, it can provide meaningful benefits.

Some potential benefits include:

**Connection and Community.** Social media can help young people maintain friendships, stay connected with family members, and find community that shares their interests or experiences. This can be particularly valuable for youth who may feel isolated in their local environment.

**Learning and Creativity.** Children and teens often use social media to learn new skills, explore hobbies, discover educational content, and express themselves creatively through art, music, writing, or video creation.

**Support and Belonging.** For some young people, online communities can provide a sense of belonging and access to supportive peer networks.

The key is helping children use social media intentionally rather than allowing it to become their primary source of entertainment, validation, or social connection.

## Social media and mental health

Mental health experts continue to study the relationship between social media use and youth mental health. While every child is different, research suggests that excessive use may be associated with increased risks of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and low self-esteem. Research suggests that spending more time on personal screens is associated with higher levels of psychological distress, more severe symptoms of depression, and higher reports of suicidal thoughts.

Several factors may contribute to these challenges:

**Social Comparison.** Children and teens often compare themselves to carefully curated images and posts. This can create unrealistic expectations about appearance, success, relationships, or lifestyle.

**Fear of Missing Out (FOMO).** Seeing friends and influencers participate in activities or events can lead to feelings of exclusion or inadequacy.

**Cyberbullying.** Negative online interactions can significantly affect emotional well-being. Research has found strong links between cybervictimization and poorer mental health outcomes among youth.

**Sleep Disruption.** Using devices before bed may interfere with sleep quality, which can in turn affect mood, concentration, and overall well-being. Even when devices are set to silent, keeping them in the bedroom can make it tempting to check them if you wake during the night, which may make it harder to fall back asleep.

Social media alone does not determine a child's mental health. Family relationships, school experiences, peer support, personality, and life circumstances all play important roles.

## Setting healthy boundaries together

Many parents worry about how much screen time is too much. While there is no single rule that works for every family, experts consistently recommend creating clear expectations and involving children in the process.

When children understand the reasons behind family guidelines and have some input into the rules, they are often more willing to follow them.

**Start with Conversation.** Try asking open-ended questions such as:

- What do you enjoy most about social media?
- Are there things online that make you feel stressed or upset?
- Have you ever felt pressured by something you saw online?
- What would help you maintain a healthy balance?

Creating opportunities for calm, judgment-free conversations can help children feel comfortable discussing concerns when they arise.

Children's needs and abilities change as they grow, and social media expectations should evolve with them. What’s appropriate for one child may not be appropriate for another, even within the same family. Age, maturity, and individual circumstances can all influence the boundaries and level of supervision that children need. The goal is not to apply identical guidelines to every child, but to create expectations that support safety, healthy habits, critical thinking, and open communication.

**Consider a Family Media Plan.** A family media plan can help establish shared expectations. Consider discussing:

- Which apps or platforms are appropriate
- Screen-free times, such as during meals, or family time
- Screen-free spaces, such as bedrooms
- Expectations around privacy and online safety
- Daily or weekly limits on recreational screen time

Rather than setting arbitrary limits, create plans that reflect your family's values and priorities.

**Focus on Balance.** Rather than simply counting hours on social media, consider whether social media is interfering with:

- Sleep
- School responsibilities
- Work responsibilities
- Physical activity
- Extra-curricular activities
- Family relationships
- In-person friendships
- Hobbies and other interests

If social media begins interfering with or replacing these important activities, it may be time to reassess boundaries.

## Model the behaviour you want to see

Children learn a great deal from observing the adults closest to them. If you are frequently using your phone during meals, conversations, or family activities, children receive the message that constant connectivity is normal—and that your phone is more important or interesting.

Some ways to model healthy social media use include:

- Creating device-free time
- Setting your phone down when your child begins speaking to you
- Being mindful of what you share with your children on social media
- Talking about your strategies for maintaining balanced social media use

By reflecting on and modifying your own habits, you can demonstrate the importance of balance, self-awareness, and intentional technology use, helping your children develop these skills as well.

## Online safety and emerging Canadian legislation

Families are not alone in navigating these challenges. Governments and organizations are increasingly focusing on children's online safety.

Australia and Brazil were the first countries to implement social media bans for youth under 16. Many other countries, including Canada, are in the process of, or have recently passed legislation to restrict social media access to children.

While legislation may help reduce risks, experts agree that family conversations, digital literacy, and healthy boundaries remain essential.

In addition to understanding privacy settings, online interactions, and cyberbullying, children benefit from developing strong digital literacy skills. Learning how to question sources, recognize misinformation, identify advertising and sponsored content, and evaluate AI-generated material can help young people make safer and more informed decisions online.

Although digital literacy is increasingly being incorporated into school curricula, parents and caregivers also play an important role. Talking about what children see online, encouraging critical thinking, and exploring digital content together can help reinforce these skills and support safer online experiences.

## Finding the right balance

Social media is likely to remain an important part of children's lives. The goal is not necessarily to eliminate it, but to help young people use it in ways that support learning, connection, creativity, and well-being.

Parents do not need to be technology experts to make a positive difference. By staying engaged, setting reasonable expectations, modelling healthy habits, and maintaining open communication, families can work together to create a healthier relationship with social media.

## Looking for additional support?

Parenting in the digital age can be challenging, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to social media. If you're concerned about your child's screen time, online behaviour, mental health, or the impact social media may be having on your family, support is available.

Through your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP), you can access confidential support and guidance for a wide range of parenting and family concerns. Counsellors can help you navigate challenges such as setting healthy boundaries, managing family conflict related to technology use, supporting a child who may be struggling emotionally, and developing strategies that align with your family's values and needs.

You may also have access to parenting resources, coaching, and self-directed learning tools designed to help you build confidence and strengthen family well-being. To learn more about the supports available to you, log in to your EFAP platform or contact your EFAP directly.

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