A PARENT'S GUIDE TO

Social Media

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Attention is the main prize of the internet. Everyone is fighting for it, and the phone is the prime battleground. The most potent of weapons in this war is the incessant, whining notification trying to pull your attention away from whatever you are actually doing and into some other app.

—Zach Hines, "Death by push notification"

It's Driver's Ed, But for Social Media

For basically all of time, parents have taught children how to do things properly—things like building fires, saddling horses, baking bread, plowing fields, or, more recently, making phone calls, answering the door, and driving cars. But over the last few decades, this natural order has been upended, thanks to our immense technological advancements. Now, it's the children who show parents how to send text messages, post on Facebook, use Snapchat filters, and make TikTok videos. As technology continues to advance rapidly, children adapt and learn while parents struggle to keep up.

This Guide will hopefully help put parents back in the driver's seat because children still need guidance, wisdom, and, yes, sometimes even boundaries to keep them healthy and safe on social media as they learn and grow. Though trying to write a Parent's Guide to Social Media is, as one Axis employee put it, like trying to write a Parent's Guide to the Entire Internet (#impossible), we hope to offer a big-picture perspective, conversation starters, and ways to train them to make wise decisions. It's easy to try to be our kids' consciences for them, especially if we've already seen them make poor decisions, but it's better in the long run to do the hard work of training their consciences properly so that they can flourish and thrive the entire time they inhabit our social-media-saturated world.

── The big question: Do the experts think social media is good or bad?

Would it surprise you to hear that many of the top technologists in Silicon Valley see screen time as a negative thing and put severe limits on their own kids' screen time? One of their chief concerns is the addictive nature of devices like the smartphone.

Psychologist and researcher Jean M. Twenge studies differences between generations. In an article on what characterizes today's teens, she says she has found that screen time is connected to increased unhappiness and that people experience greater happiness pursuing interests off their screens. There's even research showing social media to be "more addictive than cigarettes and alcohol," as well as linking it to "increased rates of anxiety, depression, and poor sleep."

We're sure you're aware that almost everyone these days has a smartphone and that parents are giving them to young children. The average age now for kids to receive a smartphone is 10 years old. Pew Research reports that "fully 95% of teens have access to a smartphone, and 45% say they are online 'almost constantly.'"

The reason why all this matters is because much of teens' screen time is spent on social media (even gamers have platforms like Discord), with 41% believing they spend too much time on it.

── What's different about how Gen Z uses social media?

As you might expect, Gen Z (b. late 1990s to late 2010s) consumes more online content than any other generation. They prefer visual over text-based content, as you can see

from the fact that their current [top three favorite apps](#) are YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat.

[One Gen Zer says](#), "Not only are new generations more savvy when it comes to social media, but we tend to express ourselves differently depending on which account we are using, tailoring content to fit the image we want to portray on that account."

Even though we've said that social media is about connecting, Gen Z tends to use social media as [a way to entertain themselves](#), as well as to be educated (i.e. [by watching YouTube videos](#)). The kids of Gen Z [like online anonymity](#). They're more likely to create multiple accounts and profiles on a platform and more likely to direct message people instead of publicly tag them. They tend to prefer apps that allow them to conceal their activity.

▬▬ What do teens think about their social media use?

A plurality of teens (45%) think that social media [doesn't impact them either positively or negatively](#). Around 31% of teens see social media as positive, while 24% think it's negative. (And [other research](#) shows they're more likely to believe it positively impacts them.) Some reason why teens believe social media is positive are:
- It helps them communicate with friends and family members.
- It allows them to meet new people.
- It can connect them with people who have the same interests.
- It allows them to express their emotions and share unique experiences.
- They can find and get support from communities with similar experiences.
- It helps them feel less lonely.
- It gives them greater access to information and news.
- It helps them learn new things
- It helps them feel more comfortable asking for help.
- It's entertaining.

Reasons teens mentioned for seeing social media as negative are:
- It's easier to spread hate to a large audience.
- Anonymity makes people more comfortable with being cruel.
- People hurt each other because of what they see on social media.
- It gives a false picture of others' lives.
- It causes people to neglect real-life relationships.
- It distracts people from important tasks like doing homework.
- It causes them to succumb to peer pressure.
- It can lead to "psychological issues or drama."

Really, teens are quite perceptive when it comes to what they see as positive and negative, though we think they may be a bit naive in just how much of an impact it has on them. In addition, it's important to remember that motives matter a great deal when considering if social media is good or bad for a person.

Is social media neutral then? Does it all depend on how a person uses it?

Actually, we don't think social media is neutral. You've heard the expression, "There's no such thing as a free lunch," right? As [Geoffrey A. Fowler of *The Washington Post* says](#), any time we don't pay for a product, we are the product.

While Facebook doesn't charge users money to use it, it's not free; we pay in information. [Investopedia says](#) that "Facebook is free to use because the company makes a lot more money charging advertisers than it would by charging users." In other words, Facebook is "selling users to advertisers."

If you're thinking, "*But we all know teens don't care about Facebook,*" other apps that are popular with teens, like [Instagram](#) (which is owned by Facebook) and [Snapchat](#), also make their money through advertising. TikTok, which is popular with pre-teens and teens, is free to use but makes money through users buying "credits" that are then used to purchase emojis to give to other users

Why does this matter?

It's important for us and our kids to recognize that social media companies are just that: companies. They have to make money to continue to exist, which means that each of them has an agenda. And those agendas, whether we're aware of them or not, shape our online experience and influence our values.

Tristan Harris of the Center for Humane Technology used to be a design ethicist at Google. There, he studied how to guide the decisions of billions of people on social media. In his TED talk, "[How a handful of tech companies control billions of minds every day](#)," he explains that social media platforms are based on a consumerist model, one that's designed to get us to stay on them for as long as possible. As a result, these companies create problems and then solve them for us.

YouTube's autoplay feature is one good example. As soon as you're done watching a video on YouTube, another immediately starts playing, capturing your attention and keeping you on the site. And who chooses the video? An algorithm created by YouTube. Yes, it's based on what you just watched, but it's still YouTube that chooses. By limiting our options and playing to our desire to consume, social media companies are guiding our decisions.

Harris also mentions Snapchat, the main platform teens prefer for communicating with each other. Of its Snapstreaks feature, Harris says:

> [It] shows the number of days in a row that two people have communicated with each other. In other words, what they just did is they gave two people something they don't want to lose. Because if you're a teenager, and you have 150 days in a row, you don't want that to go away.

Teens will actually give their passwords to their friends when they go on vacation so that their friends can keep their streaks going while they're gone. Sound like addictive behavior to you? In "[How Technology is Hijacking Your Mind—from a Magician and](#)

[Google Design Ethicist](#)," Harris says:

> *If you want to maximize addictiveness, all tech designers need to do is link a user's action (like pulling a lever) with a variable reward. You pull a lever and immediately receive either an enticing reward (a match, a prize!) or nothing. Addictiveness is maximized when the rate of reward is most variable.*

Believe it or not, we're not saying all this to be alarmist. We're not saying that we should see social media as evil and never use it again. But we do think it's important to be aware of how it's designed and how it's affecting us. We suggest making learning about a platform's goals and agendas a prerequisite for your teens joining that platform.

What's good about social media?

If we want to disciple our kids and train them how to use social media well, we need to start by acknowledging what's good about it. After all, there are reasons why [billions of people are on](#) at least one social media platform. So if we only ever demonize it, two things will happen: 1. We'll alienate them; and 2. We'll fail to prepare them to thrive in—let alone bring restoration to—today's world.

Connection and Communication. We agree with the teens above who said that social media can allow for greater connection with people. When in history has a person been able to communicate with someone across the world in a few seconds?! However, as with all good things, if this type of communication is used poorly (DMing instead of having a face-to-face disagreement, for example), then its benefits diminish.

Education. Indeed, YouTube is a great place to find educational content, assuming that viewers know how to be discerning about what they consume and that companies aren't censoring or tailoring what they show to viewers.

Access. Social media provides greater access not just to content, but also to people from diverse experiences and backgrounds. In general, social media allows us to find out more about what's going on in the world, whether that's news or what's happening in other people's lives.

Voice. Many people who would otherwise have no way of being heard (or who might be ignored by mainstream media) have built up large followings on social media, which has allowed them to share their message in unprecedented ways.

Encouragement and Humor. Many platforms make it easy to find uplifting communities and humor, which has in turn helped people deal with their struggles, circumstances, fears, mental health, and more.

As we'll see in the next sections, despite the good social media offers, it is still limited, and many of its positive aspects can become negative very quickly.

What's bad about it?

As much good as social media has done, it will never be the most wonderful, awesome thing ever. Why? Because it's a tool, and all tools have their limitations.

It was originally created to provide human connection—a noble goal—but it will never be able to approach the depth and richness of face-to-face interactions. Text and images, memes and emojis are all fun, but they can only express so much. Online, we often lose the tone and context for conversations, even when watching videos. So beyond talking about the negatives listed below, it's important to talk about how to use the tool to enhance, rather than detract from, our relationships.

Anonymity, hatred, and cruelty. Because of the anonymity (perceived or actual) social media provides, people feel much more free to be hateful and cruel to each other. "I'm never going to meet this person, so what does it matter if I say terrible things?" Among the most well-known and disturbing examples of this is [the story of Amanda Todd](), a teenager who committed suicide after being bullied online and in real life for sexting.

Distraction. The tendency to be distracted by and dependent on social media is something about which teens in the study above were right on target. In fact, these are issues adults struggle with as well! We all get distracted by our technology, often by trivial things. [MIT Professor Sherry Turkle says](), "Young people tell me it would be nice to have the attention of their friends at meals but that this has become an unrealistic expectation. Social norms work against it." Plus, the teens she's talked to don't want to miss their notifications.

Escape. It's easy for us to rely on our phones for "protection." Uncomfortable talking to the person sitting across from you? Don't want to make awkward small talk? Your smartphone is an easy escape. ([See this article]() for the negative impact of "phubbing," or "phone snubbing.") It's more difficult to have a face-to-face conversation than it is to go online and craft our responses to someone who isn't right in front of us.

Comparison and Validation. The more we use social media, the more we put too much stock in what other people do there. Then our self-worth depends on how we think our lives measure up to what we see of other people's lives. We feel bad if we don't get "enough" attention in the form of comments, shares, or likes. People sometimes joke that if something isn't on Instagram, it didn't happen. While this is a joke, we say this because we actually feel like we need social media to validate our lives.

Expectations and Information. Social media can increase our expectation for instant gratification. Because we *can* be connected all the time, we expect other people to respond or react to us immediately. And we feel like we have to respond to other people immediately. Because of this ability to respond so quickly, we might feel as though situations that are not that big of a deal are actually emergencies.

Greater access to information can be good, but it also makes it harder to sort through what information is actually valuable and reliable. That's a whole topic in itself. And while having and creating supportive communities can be wonderful, it can also be dangerous. We might turn to these communities to justify behavior we shouldn't. For example, we spoke with a man who says that Tinder communities strongly influenced his children to embrace LGBT+ lifestyles. Greater information also increases our FOMO (fear of missing out) because we know more about what we cannot experience.

Time. The sheer amount of time we spend on social media is important. We might not be doing anything bad on it, but what are we not accomplishing or what good are we neglecting through letting it consume so much of our energy? What relationships,

skills, or experiences are we missing out on because we're spending our time in a digital world?

Boundaries. Something the teens in the survey didn't mention was the lack of boundaries online, whether we're talking about sharing too much or how easy it is to connect with strangers. Also, the ease with which sexual content finds people should be among parents' top concerns.

These are all issues we need to be aware of, but not so that we live in fear or put our kids on lockdown in the name of protecting them. Rather, we think a healthy approach is to teach our children how to use social media well and to have lots of conversations with them about it as they use it. That way, instead of running away from social media or carelessly embracing it, our kids can have wisdom and love in how they conduct themselves online.

——— How else does it shape us?

We feel like we should be able to express ourselves, even if we aren't credible authorities on an issue. We love to share our opinions online. Often we are just talking to express what we think, instead of to share and learn worthwhile ideas.

We share too much in the name of being authentic. Authenticity is good, but people often feel comfortable sharing very personal issues on social media. This is likely related to the "anonymity" social media provides. When there's not a group of people actually there with us, it seems safe and even normal to share more than we ought.

We feel like we're doing something meaningful just by posting. There's a term for this: "slacktivism." Slacktivism is when people do something that seems meaningful, but which doesn't require much sacrifice and mainly is for the purpose of making them feel better. An example would be when people put a filter on their profile pictures that supports a certain cause. This only requires a few clicks, but it's easy to feel like we've done something incredibly noble by doing so.

We let it influence how we live, potentially making life-altering decisions. At different times, various trends sweep the internet, and people make decisions because of them. Some trends are lighthearted with good intentions (the Ice Bucket Challenge). Some are bizarre and dangerous (the Tide Pod Challenge). And some are creepy and evil (the MoMo challenge).

——— So based on what you've said, when should I let my kids get on it?

Protect Young Minds recommends that parents not let their kids get social media until they're out of middle school. The first reason for this is legal. The minimum age for getting on most social media platforms is 13. If parents let their kids get on before age 13, they're teaching their kids to lie. The parents are also removing their kids from the protection of laws that keep companies from gathering the kids' information.

We also mentioned that technology and social media have the potential to be addictive. Again, this language is not extreme, but is something that the technologies' creators recognize themselves. It should go without saying that it's unwise to expose children, who are still developing, to experiences that could be addictive. On top of this, we've noted that social media presents a skewed version of reality and that people have a tendency to try to find their self-worth there. If adults are struggling with these behaviors, it's probably not wise to expose young children, who are even more vulnerable, to those behaviors without training them first.

Beyond that, you should consider your kids and their maturity on a case-by-case basis. Protect Young Eyes suggests some areas of maturity parents should evaluate before letting their kids get on social media:
- How well they currently follow your rules/how well you can trust them.
- What their friendships are like—do they have good social skills or serious problems in their friendships (which could get worse if they start carrying them out online)?
- Whether they have inner strength.
- If you've talked to them about porn, sexting, online predators, cyberbullying, etc.

This last one is non-negotiable. The risk is too great for you to let your kids online without talking to them about porn, predators, and sexting. In fact, because of how often our culture is talking about sex and the ease with which porn finds children, we think your conversations on those topics should start much earlier than age 13. See our Parent's Guide to the Sex Talk, Parent's Guide to Tough Conversations, and Parent's Guide to Pornography for more info.

Again, training is key! You'd never let your kids drive a car without teaching them how first. In the same way that you prepare your kids to drive a car, teach them to use social media *before* they get on it. Protect Young Minds has a few recommendations for teaching your kids healthy social media use. First and foremost, encourage them to build relationships in person. Second, start them off with a family account on a device that's not a phone. Follow their accounts, and set time limits for them. Also check out PYM's free PDF, "Is My Child Ready for a Smartphone?"

How do I help my kids not be exposed to social media through their friends?

You should never assume that you're totally keeping your kids from being exposed to *anything.* That's why building strong relationships with them, having conversations about difficult topics, creating a culture of vulnerability and grace, and praying for them consistently are crucial. You will never be able to control everything that happens to them, even when they are very young. Nevertheless, there are steps you can take to try to keep your kids away from social media when they're playing with other children whose parents allow their kids to be on social media.

───── What can I do to encourage healthy social media use in my kids?

There's a lot you can do! Here are some thoughts.

- Learn what they enjoy about social media and why.
- Educate yourself on the apps they're using.
- Avoid using technology to babysit your kids.
- Set an example of healthy social media use.
- Make a social media "contract" or set of family rules that you all follow. These rules could include no devices in bedrooms at night and that all devices need to be charged together in a public area.
- Teach them what information is and isn't appropriate to share online.
- Teach them how to find and verify good information and how to recognize bad information.
- Emphasize how to use social media for good, instead of dwelling on how it's bad.
- Prepare your kids for what to do if someone online flatters them, approaches them inappropriately, or threatens them.
- Help them to be self-aware about why they're on social media and to manage their expectations when people act in a way they don't like.
- Help them to build real-life friendships.
- Teach them a biblical understanding of FOMO.
- Encourage them to think about others before themselves. They're not responsible for how other people react, but it's thoughtful to consider if a post will make someone else feel bad, even if it's just a post about a enjoyable time your kids had.
- Teach them to be ok with quiet and stillness apart from their devices.
- Challenge them not to use their phones to protect themselves, but to be brave enough to try to have a conversation, even if no one else seems interested.

───── What are important conversations to have with my kids about social media once they've started using it?

- What do you like about social media?
- What are your favorite platforms and why?
- How have you seen people use social media for good?
- How have you seen people use social media for bad?
- Why do you turn to social media most of the time? Can you tell if your focus tends to be on yourself or on building others up?
- What are ways you can use your social media to encourage other people?
- Do ever feel like you have to check social media? What would happen if you didn't check it regularly?

- Do you think you spend too much time on social media? Explain.
- Do you ever use your phone to escape uncomfortable situations? How could you not rely on your phone this way?
- How private is what you put on social media really, even if it's in a private message?
- Do you realize when you send a message, it's possible other people see it besides just the person you sent it to?
- Do you think it's possible for the same post to be either good or bad, depending on the person's motivations for posting? What might this look like?
- What can you do when someone doesn't respond to you when you expect them to or when you feel bad for missing out on something?
- How can you rest well? How does social media fit into your goals to rest well?
- Do you realize that social media is designed to keep you on it for as long as possible? Do you see any evidence for this on your favorite platforms?
- How could a desire to fit in affect your social media use?
- What do you think about how we use social media? Is there anything you think we should do differently?

Much of what we've discussed in this guide pertains to other content we've created to help you. We recommend you check out our Social Media Conversation Kit, Reclaiming the Smartphone free video series, and the following Parent Guides:

- Pornography
- FOMO
- Sexting
- Snapchat
- Instagram
- YouTube
- YouTube Stars
- TikTok

- The Sex Talk
- Tough Conversations
- (Cyber)bullying
- iOS or Android
- Internet Filtering & Monitoring
- Smartphones
- Making Your Home a Safe Place

Conclusion

Social media is part of our culture for the foreseeable future. It would be easy to decide that it's either all good or all bad, but it's simply more complicated than that. In fact, we've barely scratched the surface of everything we could talk about.

So we'll end by emphasizing again that even if you feel like you're barely keeping up, your kids still need your wisdom and guidance. Whether your kids have been on social media for years or they're just starting to ask about it, it's never too late or too early to start "Social Media Ed." We hope and pray that, as you have these conversations, you'll be able to teach your kids how to honor God in *everything* they do—including how they use social media—and how to truly flourish and thrive in our modern world.

Additional Resources

- "5 Must-Know Online Trends for Parents and Kids to Talk Over Now," Protect Young Minds
- "What Is Sextortion? 3 Prevention Tips for Families," Protect Young Eyes
- "The History of Social Media [Infographic]," SocialMediaToday
- "How the West became a self-obsessed culture," Vox
- "Digital Kidnapping: Your Kids and Social Media Privacy," Protect Young Eyes
- "Are You Ready for the Nanoinfluencers?" *The New York Times*

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