

Social Media and the Internet: Parents, Caregivers, and Trusted Adults



What is social media? Social media is a platform—an internet site or app—that lets people create and/or share information, ideas, messages, images, videos, or other forms of content. Examples include Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter, Snapchat, Reddit, Facebook, Pinterest, and gaming platforms, among many others.

How does social media work? Like societies, social media connects people by shared interest, experience, geography, or ideology. These communities can be inclusive or exclusive, depending on the

community's focus. Social media platforms are **constantly evolving** how they interact with users, how users interact with each other, and how those interactions have effects in the “real” world.

Why is social media and the internet important to young people? Social media and the internet are how individuals communicate and express themselves. It is a portal for youth to access the world and the parts they find interesting. A youth's access and ability to navigate social media equals normalcy and fitting in.

Through social media, youth can: Network; look for jobs or housing; stay in touch with family, friends, and peers; and keep informed about issues that are important to them.

The hard line: As adults, it is easy to believe that the more control you have over something, the more you can expect a certain outcome—and that a ban on social media or the internet is in a youth's best interest. But in an ever-connected world, a youth will need the tools, experience, and **your help** to navigate social media's challenges and engage with the benefits.

Let it go and talk it out: Have a conversation with a youth in your care with the goal of building trust and empowerment, and giving them a foundation for being a **smart “digital citizen.”** This means talking about expectations and setting rules. Ask a youth why and how they use social media, how different apps work, and about their privacy settings. Ask them why they follow someone or something and what they think is the best or worst thing about social media.

The value of “think before you send.”

Although this is true, it does not acknowledge that **everyone** makes mistakes and that the consequences of doing something might only be clear **after** hitting send or post. Help a youth work through their decisions **before** they act.

🎮 A Word on Gaming. . . 🎮

Gaming can be a fun way for a youth to relax, but it can also be an unsafe environment for users, especially young gamers. Gaming communication between users can lead to hurtful name-calling or bullying, and gaming platforms often lack monitoring and reporting systems.

Stay fluent: Hashtags, abbreviations, code words, slang, and emojis may mean one thing to you, but can signify something completely different in various social media communities. If you are uncertain about how a youth uses a word, ask them what it means.





Do the homework: Occasionally search a youth’s name or nickname online to see what images or information are publicly available; adding the name of a social media platform to that search can help refine the results. Caregivers should be aware of phone operating systems that enable hidden content and “vault” apps that can hide content. Multiple apps of the same type, like two calculators, or apps that require passwords, can also signal hidden content.

Build a framework: Help a youth navigate a platform’s privacy settings. Talk with them about posting certain opinions, threats, or about sex or violence. Know that posting about illegal drug sale or use, sex or labor trafficking, unlawful possession of weapons, “revenge porn,” or gang activity is risky.

Who else is looking? Employers, schools, and coaches know to look at social media when making decisions. If those decisions negatively impact a youth, the effects can last for **years**. Law enforcement also routinely reviews and responds to social media posts that indicate potential criminal conduct. Youth who have been juvenile justice-involved should take care with how they interact with social media if what they post could violate the terms of probation, release, or parole.

Model smart digital citizenship.
“Do as I say, not as I do” is confusing and frustrating for any youth. If caregivers use social media and/or are connected with a youth on social media, engaging in activities that break your own rules or advice undermine your efforts.

The importance of consent: Social media has normalized sharing without consent. Platforms can be places to encourage ridicule, share another person’s pain or trauma, or broadcast intimacy—all of which can be victimizing. Using **empathy** and **kindness** as an approach can be helpful in discussing consent with a youth. Caregivers should refrain from sharing content that identifies, discusses, or gives personal information about a youth or their family.

The tough stuff: Cyberbullying, “sextortion,” traffickers, extremist groups, pornography, and depictions of physical and/or sexual violence exist across all platforms. These are not difficult to find, **even if** a youth is not seeking them out. Young people are vulnerable to inappropriate contact or suggestion, particularly youth in out-of-home care and/or who have been trafficked. Instead of avoiding these complicated issues, having a head-on conversation can give a youth the tools needed to handle encounters. Being a trusted adult can mean that **a youth knows who and how to ask for help**.

What’s “a finsta” or “cancel culture”?
A *finsta* is a second Instagram account where a youth will share more vulnerable and personal thoughts.

Cancel culture is when a youth has been “cancelled,” or ostracized, by their own friend group on social media. Being canceled can be devastating and mean that the youth is also ostracized by friends in the real world.

Question what it means to “keep up”: It’s easy for a person to look around social media and feel like their own life isn’t as good as what they see or to believe that they’re missing out. If you notice that a youth might be feeling this way, talk with them about social media being **selective**. Rarely do people share their insecurities, failures, bad days, or boring moments—these things just don’t get many likes. Photo and video editing apps are good enough to fool most people.

Keep the line open: A conversation about social media and internet safety is one that never ends. Periodically check in with a youth on their use, ask them about their interests and activities, and show interest in their online communities.