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# How to help children safely navigate social media

Social media has its fair share of proponents and detractors. For proof of the former, one need look no further than numbers, as the advisory firm Kepios reported there were 5.22 billion social media users around the world at the start of October 2024.

That translates to roughly 64 percent of the global population, a percentage that might upset detractors who see social media as a largely divisive entity that research has found can have an adverse effect on the physical and mental health of its users.

Social media certainly has its ups and downs, which is perhaps why so many parents feel like governing children’s usage of platforms like Snapchat and Instagram is akin to walking a tight-rope every day. Helping children safely navigate social media is no small task, but finding a way to do so can have a profound impact on youngsters’ health.

The American Psychological Association offers the following recommendations to parents and caregivers concerned about the safety of youngsters using social media.

- Recognize social media features that can be especially harmful. The APA notes that children can learn new social skills and communication strategies on social media.

That’s a notable benefit of social media usage, but there are some harmful components that can be particularly detrimental to children’s still-developing brains.

The APA highlights like buttons and the use of artificial intelligence as particularly harmful features because they promote excessive scrolling.

Adolescents may be especially vulnerable in this regard, as the APA notes that the brain undergoes dramatic developmental changes during adolescence, when areas of the brain associated with a desire for attention from peers become more and more sensitive.

Social media can exploit that need, which is even more dangerous because the parts of the brain that govern self-control do not fully develop until early adulthood.

Parents can limit usage of platforms that tally likes and set screen limits to minimize excessive scrolling.



Helping children cope often involves leading by example

- Monitor usage and maintain a dialogue about it. The APA urges parents to monitor their children’s social media usage, particularly during early adolescence. But it’s equally important to maintain a dialogue with children about their social media usage. The APA notes studies have found that engaging in ongoing discussions with adolescents about safe social media usage can help them navigate its dangers more effectively. Engaging youngsters each week also can make them feel more safe and not as though they’re being judged about their usage. Discuss what they see and their understanding of what they see. Parents also can present hypothetical situations that may unfold on social media and ask them how they would respond.

- Lead by example. Children learn many of their behaviors from their parents, so if Mom and Dad exhibit poor social media habits, then youngsters are more likely to follow suit. The APA urges parents to avoid scanning social

media during meals and family time. Parents also can self-govern their own usage, setting the same limits on time as they set for children. Periodic

breaks from social media usage also can show children how it’s okay to take a holiday from the platforms every once in a while.

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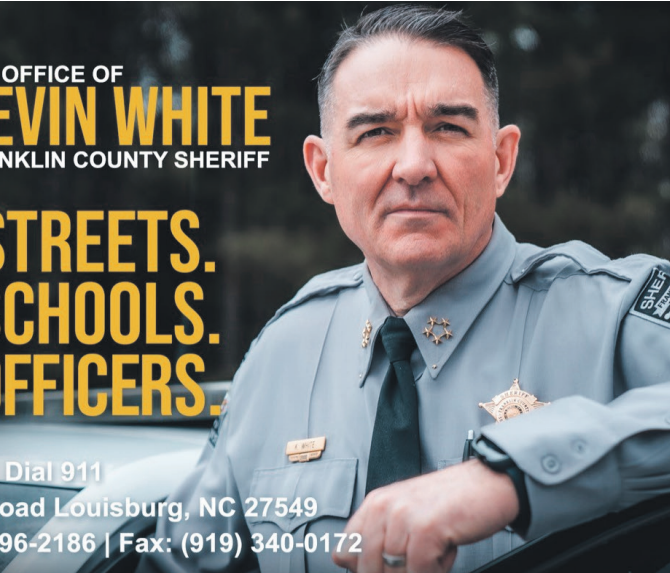
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Parents have a tall task ahead of them in regard to helping kids safely navigate social media. But various strategies can increase the chances kids have a positive social media experience.

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# How social media affects kids’ mental health

Social media has become such a key component of most people’s lives that it is easy to think that it as always been there. SixDegrees, created in 1997, was the first social media site similar to the format known today. When SixDegrees shut down in 2001, Friendster, LinkedIn, MySpace, and Facebook soon took root. The University of Maine reports there are now 4.8 billion social media users worldwide, representing 92.7 percent of all internet users. And according to the American Family Survey 2023, 96 percent of parents say their kids have access to at least one social media platform. Many use multiple online platforms daily.

Although social media may have originated as a means to bring people together, there are many who argue that it actually does the opposite. Instances of cyberbullying, which is a form of online harassment, have grown as social media has become more pervasive. Some experts believe that mental health concerns are an unexpected side effect of increased social media use, says Johns Hopkins Medicine. In fact, in the spring of 2023, United States Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, MD, MBA, released an advisory that suggested social media is harmful to young people. In 2024, Dr. Murthy called for a surgeon general’s warning label on social media not unlike the warnings on cigarette packages.

How might social media affect children’s mental health? Here are some of the main concerns.

- Changes in a developing brain: According to

the Surgeon General’s report, children’s brains go through a highly sensitive period of development between the ages of 10 and 19, when feelings of self-worth are forming. Frequent social media use may affect these feelings as children compare themselves to others they see online. In addition, functions like emotional learning, impulse control and emotional regulation may be affected.

- Development of depression: Johns Hopkins Medicine says research has demonstrated there are high rates of depression attributed to very low social media use and very high social media use. Finding a healthy balance might not be as easy as it seems.
- Addiction: There is some evidence that children become addicted to checking social media, which can lead to addiction-like behaviors in other areas. According to The Addiction Center, a Web-based substance abuse resource, addiction to social media is driven by an uncontrollable urge to log on that im-

pairs other important areas of life. Fear of missing out (FOMO) is another threat to kids’ mental health.

- Low self-esteem issues. Children and teenagers who compare themselves to others’ carefully curated online profiles (which usually are not telling the whole story) can develop feelings of inadequacy and body image issues.
- Exposure to inappropriate content. Social media may introduce children to content and images that are not appropriate for their age levels and capacity to understand and interpret. According to Dr. Murthy’s report, deaths have been linked to suicide- and self-harm-related content, such as risk-taking challenges or asphyxiation content. Viewing this content normalizes these behaviors for some youngsters.

Although plenty of good can come from social media, parents are urged to exercise caution when giving children access to these platforms, which can affect kids’ mental health in negative ways.

## Bullying comes in many forms

Bullying can affect both children and adults. Bullying typically involves an imbalance of power, when one person acts superior to another or holds a higher title than another.

Being the recipient of bullying never feels good, and it is something that should not be tolerated in schools, businesses or other settings.

There are many different types of bullying, so much so that it can be difficult to discern what constitutes bullying and distinguishes it from good-natured teasing.



Some bullying can follow a child home!

Here’s a look at some of the forms of bullying that can cause pain and distress.

**Physical bullying**  
This type of bullying involves any assault on a person’s body, which can include hitting, kicking, pushing, tripping, stealing personal possessions, or breaking an individual’s belongings. Verywell Mind says that males are more inclined to engage in physical bullying than females.

**Verbal bullying**  
Verbal bullying takes place when someone engages in name-calling or using cruel words that are disrespectful or full of vit-

riol. Verbal bullying may be employed to attack a person’s beliefs, mock a disability, disparage someone’s appearance, and more.

**Social bullying**  
This type of bullying can include excluding others from a group or getting others to exclude, gossip or spread rumors. Setting another person up to look foolish in front of others or damaging reputations or relationships are additional examples of social bullying. Sometimes this bullying is called emotional bullying.

**Cyberbullying**  
As the name implies, cyberbullying is bullying behavior that takes place through electronic means, says Stomp Out Bullying. Cyberbullying occurs in chat rooms, over social media, through email, and more. It has become a large problem for school-aged children in recent years, as the bullying can follow a child home through their devices. Research by the Cyberbullying Research Center shows that 15 percent of 9-to-12-year-olds and 37 percent of 13-to-17-year-olds have experienced cyberbullying at some point in their lives.

**Racist bullying**  
Uttering racial slurs, mocking a person’s cultural customs, making offensive gestures, and spray painting graffiti with offensive, racially charged images or words are all forms of racist bullying. Bullying can lead to isolation, depression and anxiety and can even contribute to thoughts of suicide. Taking prompt action and asking for help if bullying is suspected can get individuals the assistance they need.

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### INTERNET SAFETY TIPS

- NEVER give out personal information such as your name, home address, school name or telephone number in a chat room or on bulletin boards. Also, never send a picture of yourself to someone you chat with on the computer without your parent's permission.
- NEVER write to someone who has made you feel uncomfortable or scared.

- DO NOT meet someone or have them visit you without the permission of your parents.
- TELL your parents right away if you read anything on the internet that makes you feel uncomfortable.
- REMEMBER that people online may not be who they say they are. Someone who says that "she" is a "12-year-old girl" could really be an older man.
- PARENTS: Make sure to monitor your child's social media activity.

### PLAYGROUND SAFETY TIPS

- Check playgrounds where your children play. Look for age-appropriate equipment and hazards, such as rusted or broken equipment and dangerous surfaces. Report any hazards to the school or appropriate local office.
- Avoid playgrounds with non-impact absorbing surfaces, such as asphalt, concrete, grass, dirt or gravel.
- Dress appropriately for the playground. Remove necklaces, purses, scarves or clothing with drawstrings that can get caught on equipment and pose a strangulation hazard. Even helmets can be dangerous on a playground, so save those for bikes.
- Teach children that pushing, shoving or crowding while on the playground can be dangerous.
- Ensure that children use age-appropriate playground equipment.

Courtesy: safekids.org

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# IS YOUR TEEN USING? Symptoms you need to know

The following is provided by [www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org)

**Personal Appearance**

- Messy, shows lack of caring for appearance
- Poor hygiene
- Red, flushed cheeks or face
- Track marks on arms or legs (or long sleeves in warm weather to hide marks)
- Burns or soot on fingers or lips (from “joints” or “roaches” burning down)

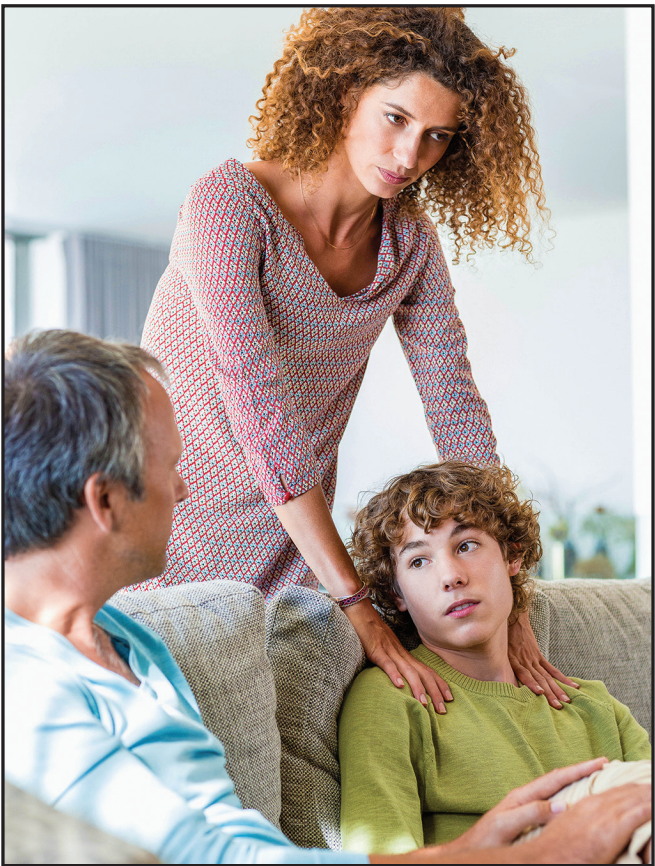
**Personal Habits or Actions**

- Clenching teeth
- Smell of smoke or other unusual smells on breath or on clothes
- Chewing gum or mints to cover up breath
- Heavy use of over-the-counter preparations to reduce eye reddening, nasal irritation, or bad breath
- Frequently breaks curfew
- Cash flow problems
- Reckless driving, car accidents, or unexplained dents in the car
- Avoiding eye contact
- Locked doors

- Going out every night
- Secretive phone calls
- “Munchies” or sudden appetite

**Behavioral Issues Associated with Teen Substance Abuse**

- Change in relationships with family members or friends
- Loss of inhibitions
- Mood changes or emotional instability
- Loud, obnoxious behavior
- Laughing at nothing
- Unusually clumsy, stumbling, lack of coordination, poor balance
- Sullen, withdrawn, depressed
- Unusually tired
- Silent, uncommunicative
- Hostility, anger, uncooperative behavior
- Deceitful or secretive
- Makes endless excuses
- Decreased Motivation
- Lethargic movement
- Unable to speak intelligibly, slurred speech, or rapid-fire speech
- Inability to focus



BE AWARE. Pay attention to changes in family relationships, that could be a sign that your teen is abusing substances.

- Hyperactivity
- Unusually elated
- Periods of sleeplessness or high energy, followed by long periods of “catch up” sleep
- Disappearances for long periods of time

**School- or Work-Related Issues**

- Truancy or loss of interest in schoolwork
- Loss of interest in extra-curricular activities, hobbies, or sports
- Failure to fulfill responsibilities at school or work
- Complaints from teachers or co-workers
- Reports of intoxication at school or work

**Health Issues Related to Teen Substance Abuse**

- Nosebleeds
- Runny nose, not caused by allergies or a cold
- Frequent sickness
- Sores, spots around mouth
- Queasy, nauseous
- Seizures
- Vomiting
- Wetting lips or excessive

- sive thirst (known as “cotton mouth”)
- Sudden or dramatic weight loss or gain
- Skin abrasions/bruises
- Accidents or injuries
- Depression
- Headaches
- Sweatiness

**Home- or Car-Related**

- Disappearance of prescription of over-the-counter pills
- Missing alcohol or cigarettes
- Disappearance of money or valuables
- Smell in the car or bottles, pipes, or bongs on floor or in glove box
- Appearance of unusual containers or wrappers, or seeds left on surfaces used to clean marijuana, like Frisbees
- Appearance of unusual drug apparatuses, including pipes, rolling papers, small medicine bottles, eye drops, butane lighters, or makeshift smoking devices, like bongs made out of toilet paper rolls and aluminum foil
- Hidden stashes of alcohol

# Know the underage drinking warning signs

The following is provided by [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

**WARNING SIGNS**

Although the following signs may indicate a problem with alcohol or other drugs, some also reflect normal growing pains. Experts believe that a drinking problem is more likely if you notice several of these signs at the same time, if they occur suddenly, or if some of them are extreme in nature.

- Mood changes: flare-ups of temper, irritability, and defensiveness
- School problems: poor attendance, low grades, and/or recent disciplinary action
- Rebellion against family rules
- Friend changes: switching friends and a reluctance to let you get to know the new friends
- A “nothing matters” attitude: sloppy appearance, a lack of involvement in former interests, and general low energy
- Alcohol presence: finding it in your child’s room or backpack or smelling alcohol on his or her breath
- Physical or mental problems: memory lapses, poor concentration, bloodshot eyes, lack of coordination, or slurred speech

**FINDING HELP**

**Do Not Play the Blame Game**

It is hard for most parents to believe that their child might be caught up in underage alcohol use and in need of professional help. Do not feel bad if you did not see the warning signs until your child was in trouble or until someone told you about the problem. When most parents find out about their child’s underage drinking, they feel shocked and stunned and wonder where they went wrong.

In getting help for a child who drinks, the first thing to do is try not to blame yourself or your child. The important thing is to act now to find the best available services to help your child stop using alcohol and begin building an alcohol-free future.

**Talk With People You Know**

If you are seeking treatment for a child’s mental health or substance abuse problem, you can start by talking with people you know such as family members, friends, school teachers, counselors, clergy, and your doctor. Your health insurance company can give you a list of mental health and substance abuse providers. If your employer has an employee assistance program, you can get a referral there. Your child’s school may suggest a good substance abuse treatment program. If not, the school district is likely to have a substance abuse prevention and counseling program. Contact them for help.

**Contact a Professional**

Your county’s health department probably has substance abuse services and is another good source for information. The county agency may be called “alcohol and drug programs” or “behavioral health” or it may be in a mental health services division. A call to the county health agency’s general information number should point you in the right direction.

**Find a Local Resource**

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator

(<http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/faq.htm>) includes a Quick Search feature (<http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/TreatmentLocator/faces/quickSearch.jspx>) to help you find details about drug and alcohol abuse treatment programs in your area.

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# Youth suicide

Know the warning signs

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[www.jasonfoundation.com](http://www.jasonfoundation.com)

The Jason Foundation, Inc. is a non-profit whose mission statement is dedicated to the prevention of the “Silent Epidemic” of youth suicide through educational and awareness programs that equip young people, educators/youth workers and parents with the tools and resources to help identify and assist at-risk youth.

How can it be prevented you may ask? The Jason Foundation, Inc. believes that education is the key to prevention. The Jason Foundation’s programs and services are in response to this belief. Our nation should be familiar with the warning signs associated with suicide, suicide facts and statistics, and how to find help for at-risk youth. Together, we can save lives!

Remember: Never be reluctant to get involved and always take any child/adolescent’s desire or intent to harm themselves seriously. If you suspect a young person of suicidal ideation, get them to professional help immediately. Suicide is Preventable.

**WARNING SIGNS**  
Almost everyone who attempts or completes suicide has given warning signs through their words or behaviors. Do not ignore any suicide threats. The following statements may indicate serious suicidal feelings.  
“I’d be better off dead.”  
“I won’t be bothering you much longer.”  
“You’ll be better off without me around.”  
“I hate my life.”  
“I am going to kill myself.”  
Suicide threats are not always verbal.

Depression is one of the leading causes of suicide attempts. Mental or addictive disorders are associated with 90 percent of suicide. One in ten youth suffer from mental illness serious enough to be impaired, yet fewer than 20 percent receive treatment. Depression can be exhibited in many ways including the following which are detailed in more depth:

- Sudden, abrupt changes in personality
- Expressions of hopelessness and despair
- Declining grades and school

- performance
- Lack of interest in activities once enjoyed
- Increased irritability and aggressiveness
- Withdrawal from family, friends and relationships
- Lack of hygiene
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- **Other warning signs:**
- Anger, increased irritability
- Lack of interest
- Sudden increase/decrease in appetite
- Sudden changes in appearance
- Dwindling academic performance
- Preoccupation with death and suicide such as essays or poems about death, artwork or drawings depicting death, social media posts or comments or talking a lot about death or dying.
- Previous suicide attempts
- Final arrangements - once the decision has been made to end their life, some young people begin making final arrangements. Giving away prized or favorite possessions
- Putting their affairs in order
- Saying good-bye to family and friends, making funeral

- arrangements.
- RISK FACTORS**
- Suicide does not typically have a sudden onset. There are a number of stressors that can contribute to a youth’s anxiety and unhappiness, increasing the possibility of a suicide attempt. A number of them are described below.
- Depression, mental illness and substance abuse
- Aggression and fighting
- Home environment - Within the home, a lack of cohesion, high levels of violence and conflict, a lack of parental support and alienation from and within the family.
- Community environment - youth with high levels of exposure to community violence are at serious risk for self-destructive behavior.
- School environment - youth who are struggling with classes, perceive their teachers as not understanding them or caring about them, or have poor relationships with their peers have increased vulnerability.
- Previous attempts - youth who have attempted suicide are at risk to do it again.

# Essential poison prevention tips

The Health Resources and Services Administration says that more than 90 percent of poisonings happen at home — with many occurring in the bathroom, kitchen and bedroom. The American Association of Poison Control Centers reports that the 55 poison control centers across the United States receive millions of calls every year. Many interactions with poisons can be avoided by implementing smart poison control strategies at home.

## Choose products with child safety caps

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission reports nine out of 10 poisoning incidents involving children occur in the home. In 2019, approximately 67,500 children under the age of five ended up in emergency rooms due to unintended poisoning. Parents can protect children by keeping medicines in their original child-safe containers. When buying cleansers, cleaners and detergents, choose products that have strong child-safety lids and seals.

**Up and away**  
Store cleaning products and cosmetics up high or behind locked cabinet doors. Simply having them out of sight and out of mind can prevent interaction.

**Use original containers**  
It’s tempting to transfer certain cleaning products or chemicals to other bottles or jars for ease of use, but this can be dangerous. People in the home may mistakenly ingest something if it is transferred to a beverage container or something typically used for food storage. Plus, should ingestion occur, you will no longer have the safety label in place. That means you won’t have

immediate access to safety protocols that can save lives.

**Avoid sharing meds**  
Never share prescription medicines with other people. Poisoning can occur because medicines are prescribed based on weight and other physical factors. One individual can be seriously impaired by a medication even if it’s safe for another person. In addition, drugs can interact with other medicines, including over-the-counter products, further increasing the risk for accidents.

**Monitor children**  
Supervise children when using any products, as they can be dangerous if not used correctly. These include art supplies, cleaning supplies and even hand sanitizers and soaps.

**Handle foods properly**  
Foods must be properly stored at the correct temperature and cooked to a safe level. Always wash fresh fruits and vegetables with running water. Never use commercial cleaning products on foods or food packaging. Always wash hands and counters before preparing food. Promptly refrigerate or freeze foods if they will be saved as leftovers, as bacteria can grow quickly at room temperature.

**Keep the poison hotline number nearby**  
Program the National Poison Help Line number into your cell phone and post it near the landline phone. It is 1-800-222-1222. Promptly call in a poisoning situation for assistance. Poison prevention is an important lesson to review at home and discuss with all household members to avoid potentially fatal injuries.



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- X-Ray Imaging Onsite
- Allergic Reactions
- Dehydration / IV Fluids
- Weight Management

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