



## TALKING TO TWEENS AND TEENS ABOUT THEIR ONLINE LIVES

A Supplement to the Children's Mental Health Report on Social Media, Gaming and Mental Health



Like many technological accomplishments, smartphones, the internet and social networks are also a cause of great concern. The popularity of online communication over face-to-face and “in-real-life” (IRL) activities is viewed warily by parents, teachers, legislators, even young people themselves. Is being online making our kids unhappy? Is it hurting them?

Below are tips on talking with tweens and teens about tough subjects and then specific suggestions for using our Children's Mental Health Report ([childmind.org/report](http://childmind.org/report)) to have a conversation about the risks and the benefits of gaming, social media, apps and smartphones.

Turn to the back for practical tips and clinically supported guidelines for helping your whole family establish a healthy diet of social media and internet use.



# Starting the Conversation



## Here are some tips for starting a conversation and building rapport with tweens and teens:

1. Start by listening — not talking! Tweens and teens are more open to hearing you if they don't feel pressured.
2. Show trust. Tweens and teens want to be taken seriously. Look for ways to show you trust them.
3. Give thoughtful explanations. Hearing your take encourages tweens and teens to participate.
4. Make your tween or teen a partner. Let them know why you think it's valuable for them.
5. Give praise. Parents praise younger children, but tweens and teens need the self-esteem boost, too.
6. Control your emotions. Tweens and teens are less able to think critically when they're emotional. If you stay calm, they're more likely to follow your lead.

## Inside, you'll find suggestions on how to talk about important subjects including:

- 🕒 mental health effects of social networking, photo sharing and multiplayer gaming
- 🕒 the research on the internet and depression, autism, ADHD and more
- 🕒 the benefits of online communities

We suggest a fact from the Children's Mental Health Report to start with. Then we provide resources from [childmind.org](http://childmind.org) that you can look at and share with your teen. Finally, we provide a list of discussion prompts and questions to get the conversation started.

You don't have to be an expert to talk to your kids about these issues — just be a good listener, and spend time looking up the facts with your child. Find the report here: [childmind.org/report](http://childmind.org/report)

## Working with (not against) your kid's school

Before you start talking about internet access and social media rules, it's best to know the school's stance. Mixed messages aren't good for tweens and teens. If you're unsure, it's ok to tell your teen you need to gather more information before making a decision.

# The Youth Perspective on Social Media and Gaming



## Fact:



A 2018 survey of teens aged 13 to 17 found that 81% of participants say social media makes them feel more connected to their friends.

Just 32% of teens in 2018 rated their favorite way to communicate with friends as “in person,” compared to 49% in 2012.

## Resources:

### Social Media and Self-Doubt

[childmind.org/article/social-media-and-self-doubt](http://childmind.org/article/social-media-and-self-doubt)

### Why Watch TV With Your Tween or Teen

[childmind.org/article/benefits-watching-tv-tween-teen](http://childmind.org/article/benefits-watching-tv-tween-teen)

## Talk about it:

- ⦿ Compared to earlier generations, children and adolescents today spend much less time connecting with their peers in person and more time connecting electronically.
- ⦿ The majority of tweens and teens and young adults report that communicating online makes them feel better about themselves and more connected socially.
- ⦿ Some teenagers aren't successful in connecting with peers offline, because they are isolated geographically or don't feel accepted in their schools and local communities. For those kids, electronic connection can be lifesaving.
- ⦿ At the same time, research shows a link between social media, depression and isolation among young people, particularly young people at risk for mental health disorders.

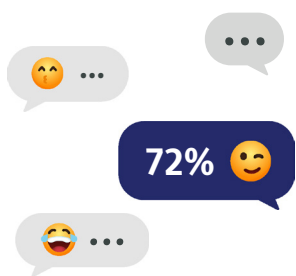
## Questions for your teen

- ⦿ What is the biggest thing you think adults need to know about social media and gaming?
- ⦿ Do you prefer to hang out with your friends online or in person?
- ⦿ Who do you feel most comfortable expressing your feelings to? Is it easier to do it in person or online?
- ⦿ What makes it difficult to express your feelings to another person?
- ⦿ Have you ever gotten help online that you wouldn't have gotten otherwise?
- ⦿ Do any of your friends tell you that they feel lonely, isolated, or alone? Do these people spend a lot of time online?
- ⦿ Do you know what to do or say if you think you (or a friend) might need help?

# Is Screen Addiction Real?



## Fact:



Half of teenagers say they “feel addicted” to their mobile device and 72% say they feel the need to immediately respond to texts and social networking messages.

- Ⓢ Research shows that excessive gaming — spending two-thirds or more of free time — is linked to anxiety, depression and substance use. Internet gaming disorder (IGA) is a proposed diagnosis for behavior that causes “significant impairment or distress.”
- Ⓢ Problematic Internet Use (PIU) is another proposed diagnosis that highlights the impairing potential of unhealthy internet use. Reviews suggest that PIU co-occurs with mental health disorders, most prominently depression and ADHD.

## Resources:

### Is Internet Addiction Real?

[childmind.org/article/is-internet-addiction-real](http://childmind.org/article/is-internet-addiction-real)

### Healthy Limits on Video Games

[childmind.org/article/healthy-limits-on-video-games](http://childmind.org/article/healthy-limits-on-video-games)

## Talk about it:

- Ⓢ While excessive internet use isn't the same as physical addiction, it is a concerning behavior that is often linked to underlying mental health problems.
- Ⓢ Online habits are problematic when they become compulsive or habitual; may be motivated by the desire for mood alteration; and are related to offline problems.
- Ⓢ The amount of time teenagers spend on phones and other devices isn't an accurate measure of whether it is unhealthy. Many things kids do on their devices are age-appropriate activities that have simply been done offline in the past: socializing with peers, hobbies, shopping, listening to music, schoolwork, watching TV.

## Questions for your teen

- Ⓢ Do you ever feel like you can't stop using an app, or your phone, or playing a game?
- Ⓢ Do your friends seem like “different people” when they are using tech?
- Ⓢ How does this information about risks make you feel about your online life?
- Ⓢ Are there things you do to take a break from your phone and apps?
- Ⓢ What do you think adults need to understand better about social media and tech?

# How Do Social Media and Gaming “Impair” Our Lives? What Are the Benefits?



## Fact:



Excessive internet use in children and adolescents is linked to impairment in thoughts and feelings, making friends and school performance.

## Resources:

### How Using Social Media Affects Teenagers

[childmind.org/article/how-using-social-media-affects-teenagers](http://childmind.org/article/how-using-social-media-affects-teenagers)

### Media Guidelines for Kids of All Ages

[childmind.org/article/media-guidelines-for-kids-of-all-ages](http://childmind.org/article/media-guidelines-for-kids-of-all-ages)

## Talk about it:

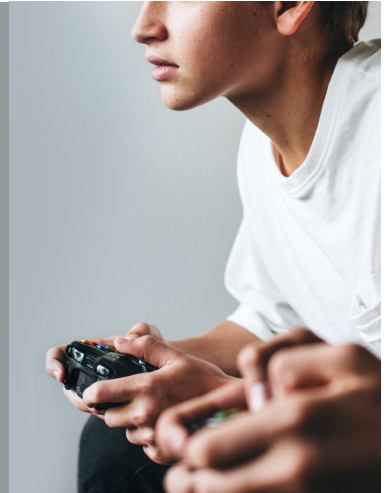
- ⦿ Content online can be unregulated and inappropriate. Another 2018 survey found that 64% of teen social media users say they “often” or “sometimes” come across racist, sexist, homophobic, or religion-based hate content. When the survey was previously completed in 2012, just 43% of respondents encountered racist content.
- ⦿ Bullying online is linked to depression and suicidal ideation for both victims and perpetrators. This link is stronger for at-risk youth, including those with learning disorders and chronic mental health disorders, who are twice as likely to be bullied as their typically developing peers

- ⦿ A study of the online habits of more than 120,000 young people found that less than an hour of gaming a day may have positive effects such as increased resilience and problem-solving skills
- ⦿ Tweens and teens who are highly social offline tend to benefit from social media more. But for those who are depressed or isolated, social media likes and comments may take on outsized importance.

## Questions for your teen

- ⦿ Do you think when your friends post on social media they are posting about how their lives really are or how they want them to appear?
- ⦿ Do you feel pressure to look or act a certain way because of other people’s profiles?
- ⦿ Do you feel your online life is balanced with face-to-face interactions?
- ⦿ How can we set healthy limits for the amount of time you spend on social media?
- ⦿ Do you know what to do if you or a friend is the victim of cyber-bullying?

# Social Media, Gaming and ADHD



## Fact:



A study of 3,000 children and adolescents followed over 3 years found that youth who spent more time playing video games were more impulsive and had more attention problems.

## Resources:

### Do Video Games Cause ADHD?

[childmind.org/article/do-video-games-cause-adhd](http://childmind.org/article/do-video-games-cause-adhd)

### How Phones Ruin Concentration

[childmind.org/article/kids-shouldnt-use-phones-during-homework](http://childmind.org/article/kids-shouldnt-use-phones-during-homework)

## Talk about it:

- ⦿ Screens and video games don't cause ADHD, but many researchers and clinicians believe too much media can compound existing attention problems.
- ⦿ Many experts point out that it makes sense the kids with ADHD would find games more compelling than the average person. The continuous activity doesn't require sustained attention, and constant shifts in focus provide instant gratification and reward.

- ⦿ A study following 3000 10th graders into their senior year in high school between 2014 and 2016 found a small but significant causal link between self-reported digital media use and later self-reported ADHD symptoms.
- ⦿ A meta-analysis of the link between problematic internet use (PIU), a proposed diagnosis of excessive and impairing online behavior, and various symptoms of mental health disorders found strong evidence for a link with ADHD.

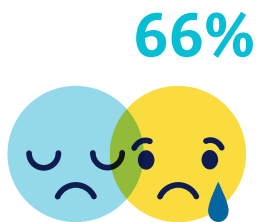
## Questions for your teen

- ⦿ Do you feel attracted to fast-paced video games and online content?
- ⦿ Do you notice that you are less able to pay attention to schoolwork or "boring" things when you play a lot of video games?
- ⦿ Do you enjoy the social part of playing games and being online? Or is more solitary?
- ⦿ How can I help you enjoy the positive aspects of gaming and online while lessening the negatives?
- ⦿ What do you think we as parents can understand better about your online life and gaming?

# Social Media, Gaming and Depression



## Fact:



Teens and young adults who use social media intensely are as much as 66% more likely to report being depressed than casual users

- ⦿ Researchers have found that depression is associated with problematic online and smartphone behavior, including repeated phone checking behaviors. It is unclear if one causes the other, or what the direction of the association is.
- ⦿ Sleep is often identified as a likely factor connecting internet use and depression symptoms. Adolescents who used social media more – both overall and at night – and those who were more emotionally invested in social media experienced poorer sleep quality, lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression.

## Resources:

### Does Social Media Cause Depression?

[childmind.org/article/is-social-media-use-causing-depression](http://childmind.org/article/is-social-media-use-causing-depression)

### Managing Social Media Stress With Mindfulness

[childmind.org/article/social-media-stress-mindfulness](http://childmind.org/article/social-media-stress-mindfulness)

## Talk about it:

- ⦿ A recent study of young adults showed correlation between the time spent on social media and perceived social isolation (PSI), similar to “fear of missing out,” or FOMO.
- ⦿ The internet is also a lifeline for some youth. In one study, 10- to 16 -year-old participants who reported being lonely also communicated online significantly more frequently about personal and intimate topics.

## Questions for your teen

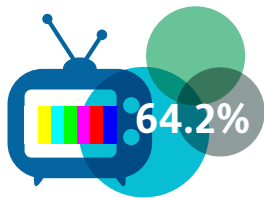
- ⦿ Do you have problems that are easier to share about online?
- ⦿ Are there different apps or sites that you find helpful?
- ⦿ Are certain apps or sites more likely to make you feel bad, or down?
- ⦿ Are you worried about what your friends post about online? Do you feel like you need to “keep up”?
- ⦿ Do you think feeling down makes you want to go online? Or does going online make you feel down?
- ⦿ How can I help you enjoy the positive aspects of social media and online communities while reducing the negatives?
- ⦿ What do you think we as parents can understand better about your online life?



# Social Media, Gaming and Autism



## Fact:



Autistic teens are much more likely to watch TV or play video games (64.2%) than use social media or messaging (13.2%)

## Resources:

**How to Help Kids Deal With Cyberbullying**  
[childmind.org/article/help-kids-deal-cyberbullying](http://childmind.org/article/help-kids-deal-cyberbullying)

**What Every Autistic Girl Wishes Her Parents Knew**  
[childmind.org/article/every-autistic-girl-wishes-parents-knew](http://childmind.org/article/every-autistic-girl-wishes-parents-knew)

## Talk about it:

- ⦿ Adolescents with ASD tend to spend much more time using screens than not.
- ⦿ Boys with ASD are at greater risk for problematic video game use than boys with typical development.
- ⦿ Another study finds that autism is tied to decreased emotion regulation, lower school connectedness and increased internet gaming addiction (IGA).
- ⦿ Adolescents with autism report high rates of being a victim or perpetrator of cyberbullying.
- ⦿ Although excessive gaming and bullying are of concern, technology can also be a powerful coping tool for youth with ASD. Adolescents with ASD who watch television with parents or engaged with friends online reported more positive interpersonal relationships
- ⦿ Additionally, electronic screens and media can be helpful in reducing anxiety and problem behavior among youth with ASD.

## Questions for your teen

- ⦿ Do you feel more comfortable communicating with other people online?
- ⦿ Are there different apps or sites that you find helpful?
- ⦿ How does playing video games make you feel?
- ⦿ Do you feel like you need to go online or play games?
- ⦿ Are you open to spending time online or playing games with me? How can we make that happen?
- ⦿ What do you think parents can understand better about your gaming and online life?

# Social Media, Gaming and Sleep



## Fact:



Teens who spend three hours a day on devices are more likely to get less than seven hours of sleep

- ⦿ 36% of teens wake up and check their mobile device for something other than the time at least once a night.
- ⦿ Teens who don't sleep enough report higher levels of depressive symptoms than well-rested peers.
- ⦿ Problematic internet use and internet gaming are associated with poor sleep, and researchers believe the high correlation between internet use and depression may stem from difficulty with sleeping.

## Resources:

### When Should You Come Between a Teenager and Her Phone?

[childmind.org/article/when-should-you-come-between-a-teenager-and-her-phone](http://childmind.org/article/when-should-you-come-between-a-teenager-and-her-phone)

### Teens and Sleep: The Cost of Sleep Deprivation

[childmind.org/article/happens-teenagers-dont-get-enough-sleep](http://childmind.org/article/happens-teenagers-dont-get-enough-sleep)

## Talk about it:

- ⦿ While adolescents should get between 9 and 9.5 hours of sleep per night, most get about 7.
- ⦿ 60 percent of adolescents are looking at their phones in the last hour before sleep, and they get on average an hour less sleep than peers who don't use phones before bed.

## Questions for your teen

- ⦿ Do you think you do a good job managing the balance between sleep and online friends and posts?
- ⦿ Do you feel like you "have to" check your phone whenever you get a notification?
- ⦿ What do you think we can do as a family to have better sleep habits?
- ⦿ Do you think you can go without screens for an hour or two before bed?
- ⦿ Do you talk with your friends about sleeping habits?

# Strategies, Tips and Resources



## What families can do together for a healthy “digital diet”

Parents should check in regularly about social media use. Make sure it's positive and healthy; if not, guide kids towards new habits. If you notice signs of depression, take them seriously. Ask tweens and teen how they're doing, and don't hesitate to consult a mental health provider.

### Signs of depression:

- ⦿ Unusual sadness, persisting even when circumstances change
- ⦿ Reduced interest in activities once enjoyed; reduced feelings of anticipation
- ⦿ Involuntary changes in weight
- ⦿ Shifts in sleep patterns
- ⦿ Sluggishness
- ⦿ Harsh self-assessment (“I’m ugly. I’m no good. I’ll never make friends.”)
- ⦿ Thoughts of or attempts at suicide

## Helping tweens and teens engage in healthy social media use

### ⦿ Focus on balance

Make sure tweens and teens are also engaging in social interaction offline and have time for activities that help build identity and self-confidence.

### ⦿ Turn off notifications

App notifications lure users to interrupt whatever they're doing to engage constantly with their phones. Don't let them; turn off notifications in settings.

### ⦿ Look out for tweens and teens at higher risk of depression

Monitor those who are going through a particularly tough time. Negative effects of social media can have more impact when confidence is down.

### ⦿ Model restraint and balance in your own media diet

Set an example by disengaging from media to spend quality family time together, including phone-free dinners and other activities.

### ⦿ Phone-free time before sleep

Enforce a policy of no smartphones in the bedroom after a specific time and overnight. Use an old-fashioned alarm clock to wake up.

### ⦿ Teach mindful use of social media

Encourage teenagers to be honest with themselves about how they feel and disengage from interactions that increase stress or unhappiness.

# Strategies, Tips and Resources (continued)



## Resources for family decision making on internet and screen use

### Media Guidelines for Kids of All Ages

Tips for making sure screen time is healthy  
[childmind.org/article/media-guidelines-for-kids-of-all-ages](http://childmind.org/article/media-guidelines-for-kids-of-all-ages)

### A Parent's Guide to Dealing With Fortnite

Understanding the appeal and setting boundaries  
[childmind.org/article/parents-guide-dealing-fortnite](http://childmind.org/article/parents-guide-dealing-fortnite)

### When Should You Get Your Kid a Phone?

It's not just a question of the right age  
[childmind.org/article/when-should-you-get-your-kid-a-phone](http://childmind.org/article/when-should-you-get-your-kid-a-phone)

### How Using Social Media Affects Teenagers

Experts say kids are growing up with more anxiety and less self-esteem  
[childmind.org/article/how-using-social-media-affects-teenagers](http://childmind.org/article/how-using-social-media-affects-teenagers)

### When Should You Come Between a Teenager and Her Phone?

The pros and cons of every parent's nuclear option  
[childmind.org/article/when-should-you-come-between-a-teenager-and-her-phone](http://childmind.org/article/when-should-you-come-between-a-teenager-and-her-phone)

### Can Screen Time Be Educational for Toddlers?

How to choose media that's good for young children  
[childmind.org/article/value-screen-time-toddlers-preschoolers](http://childmind.org/article/value-screen-time-toddlers-preschoolers)

## Mindful media use (good for parents, too!)

### ☉ Check in with yourself

Work on being more self-aware about your response to using social media. Ask yourself: How is this app or picture making me feel? Look for changes in your mood and see if you notice patterns. Don't judge how you are feeling — but do acknowledge the emotion. Being conscious of feeling jealous or sad can be powerful. It helps take some of the bite out of the bad feeling.

### ☉ Mindful reality check

Mindfulness can give you a reality check. If something is consistently making you feel bad, practicing mindfulness can help you identify that and see if there is something you can do that might help. Taking the time to notice — and value — how you are feeling is an important skill that will make you happier and more confident in all areas of your life.

### ☉ Use technology

Using technology to track technology is another strategy. There are apps designed to help you track how you use your phone. And iPhones can show you how much time, battery and data you're using on each app. See how much time you spend on certain things. What are you doing? What are your emotions? Seeing the data helps you notice patterns and develop better habits.

### ☉ Perspective

The best way to get a little perspective is to take occasional breaks from social media. Do yoga, go for a run, spend time with friends or in nature. Doing things offline can be a big stress reliever and in a way that scrolling through a feed never will. Try to practice self-awareness during offline activities, too. Notice what genuine "fun" feels like. You might surprise yourself.