

Teen Mental Health and Social Media

We asked mental health experts how they approach social media in their families.

If you have a teen who seems attached to a screen all day, you're not alone. Social media is a big part of daily life for many teens. While there are so many benefits to being online and connected, a lot of parents struggle with how to navigate some of the risks and worry about how their children's well-being can be affected.

We spoke with three psychologists about how they approached social media use in their own families. Andrew Greenfield, Lisa Damour and Pam Tudin-Buchalter share what works well for their families and practical tips for other parents.

1. What have been your main worries about your teenager using social media?

PAM: *I think my biggest concern is my children's belief that they are immune to digital distraction – that somehow they can study, reply to a girlfriend's text and watch a movie, all while handing in a good essay on Napoleon. The endless pings and dings that follow them drive me to distraction, so I know it is affecting them too!*

I also worry that they think they are immune to some of the dangers and that somehow they will be the one to outsmart the predator lurking in chat forums or not fall for an online scam. As a parent who also wears the psychologist hat, I know that no-one is immune to the long list of online challenges that can whack our 'screenagers' out of left field.

LISA: *I worry about social media use when it displaces activities that are essential for healthy development: Getting plenty of sleep, being physically active, doing schoolwork with focus, spending in-person time with friends, and helping out around the home or community. I also worry when teens find themselves involved in peer conflict that plays out online or on the giving or receiving end of [cyberbullying](#).*

ANDREW: *Obviously spending too much time on social media is one of the concerns. And the other thing is believing everything you hear and see on social media, which could be catastrophizing events or believing adverts or viewpoints from unreliable sources.*

2. What benefits of social media have you seen?

ANDREW: *Probably the main benefit I see is connection. We are connected a lot more to people – connected to family, to friends, to people in other states and overseas. That's massive because these are people that we wouldn't connect with at all otherwise.*

Exposure to lots of other information is another positive, although it can be a negative as well. What we have to teach our kids is that it's great to be exposed to this information, but we have to be able to filter out what we think is appropriate, what's not appropriate, what's correct, what's not correct. It does encourage debate and encourages thinking about ideas, and it's our role as parents to help guide them with that and to discuss different viewpoints.

PAM: *With all of my worries I've really seen some astounding benefits to social media! Recently my son joined a group online that was teaching Ukrainian refugees English – he would never have been able to do that without the reach of social media. I see kids who struggle to fit in socially, finding like-minded people online they may not be able to find in the school yard. They travel miles to meet them and land up making a friend circle! I also love how our teens are using social platforms to express themselves about important socio-political issues around them.*

"I've known social media to be a lifeline for young people who struggle to make peer connections in their local community" -Lisa Damour

3. How have you talked about social media use and mental health concerns with your teen?

LISA: *I've talked with my teens about making sure that, on balance, social media makes their lives better, not worse. I encourage them to reflect on why they turn to social media when they do and how they feel while using it. I've also talked*

with my teens about the strong connection between sleep and mental health and, accordingly, the critical importance of making sure that social media doesn't get in the way of a good night's sleep.

ANDREW: *There have been times when my kids have witnessed bullying behavior online and I've talked to them about what do you do. Do you just sit back? Do you comment, do you not comment? Do you say: "Hey guys, this is enough, it's not appropriate on this platform or anywhere"? Do you think it's appropriate to report? If so, who do you report to? I know what I would do, but I'm interested to know what my kids would do. It's important to be able to help and encourage them to think about these issues and stop things from getting out of hand.*

PAM: *I think our kids hear the message when it comes lightly, repeatedly, in different and curious ways. Asking them what they think are potential mental health concerns and really letting them have their view about different social media issues has been a winner in our house. Chatting at the table, asking them what they notice in their friends, in us as parents and then later, asking them about themselves gives them space to really think about the issues rather than fight us on every round.*

4. How do you approach social media use in your family?

ANDREW: *I try to limit wherever I can. I actually try with the older ones to get them to limit the amount of time they spend on devices themselves, rather than it just coming from me, because my 16-year-old is not necessarily going to listen to a great degree. As a parent, you can put a whole lot of different barriers and things in place, but I want to be able to trust them as well. And I think that's what it's all about, trying to give them that trust. But obviously when the self-regulation is difficult, then I have to step in and help.*

LISA: *We do not allow technology at the dinner table or in anyone's bedroom, ever. These simple rules – especially the one about keeping tech out of bedrooms – have worked well for us. Restricting technology use to public spaces seems to have limited our teens' overall time online. And making a rule that all devices charge overnight in the kitchen has gone a long way toward helping our family sleep well.*

PAM: *From day one we made it clear to them that the phone belongs to us – they have it on loan. We contracted the basics – no phones in the bedroom after 7pm, even if it's for homework. Most of the bad stuff goes down at night, so we were clear on no phones in bedrooms after that time. In the beginning, our kids were allowed just two apps so there was never more than say Snapchat and Instagram at one time – if they wanted TikTok, they had to swap one app out. They still have to ask to download a new app and they have to explain why they want it. "All my friends have it" doesn't cut it in our home and they know it. Data is earned.*

5. What has worked well for your family?

LISA: *As parents, it has worked for us to hold ourselves to the same rules we make for our teens. When our teens have asked to have their phones in their rooms, we've been able to say, "Having tech in the bedroom – even during the day – undermines the quality of sleep you get in that room. We keep our tech out of the bedroom to protect our sleep and, with it, our physical and mental health. Keeping tech out of our room and leaving it in yours would be like getting in the car and putting on our seat belts, but not requiring that you put on yours."*

PAM: *Screen time has never been about 'how much' in our home – it really is measured against how they are managing all the important bits of their lives – exercise, real time connection with friends, homework, chores at home. When those are in place, we are happy for them to be on their devices for some downtime, if one falls by the wayside we make the observation and give them a week to rectify. If they can't get it right, we simply say we are going to hold the phone until they get their balance back. They don't always love it, but they get it. It keeps us out of the power struggle and the screaming matches.*

ANDREW: *We all know parents are on devices as well, and it's important to model good behavior. Of course, parents do a lot of different things to kids online, like organizing lifts or paying bills, and it's important kids are at least aware of that. But if we can't put a device down and read a book or have a conversation, how do we expect our kids to? Try to interact as much as you can with your kids. Even if it's something as simple as 15 minutes a day. It doesn't have to be a long time,*

it's more about the quality rather than the quantity. Spending 15 minutes a day with your child and giving them your undivided attention can be hugely powerful for that child because it shows them that you care. There's enough [stress](#) in life with everything else, so we need to make that time even for the older ones.

"If we can't put a device down and read a book or have a conversation, how do we expect our kids to?"

Andrew Greenfield

6. What would you do differently?

LISA: *I wish I had talked earlier with our older teen about the algorithms that drive what shows up in social media feeds. Teens need to understand that everything they do when online – what they look at, what they like, what they comment on, what they scroll past – loads into a powerful database that determines what they'll see next. The algorithms are designed to fill social media feeds with posts that are very hard to ignore, regardless of whether those posts are good for teenagers or not.*

PAM: *I think I would have delayed giving them a device for longer!*

7. What advice do you give parents of teens who aren't on social media yet?

ANDREW: *It does depend on the actual platform, but by far the biggest thing that I tell parents of kids who aren't on social media yet is to be aware that whatever you post or put online is there for everyone to see. Yes, you can have different security settings, but people can access these things. Just be really aware of that and obviously that's the same for any child, no matter whether they've been on it or not – people really underestimate the fact that these images are out there.*

LISA: *I think it's best to delay giving teens access to social media until they can't maintain their friendships without it. Young teens can often keep up with their peers and make social plans through texting alone. Adults who want to give their teen a smartphone can start by providing one without a browser or social media apps. From there, apps and a browser can be added as needed, and only when a teen has shown good judgment while texting. By age 14, teens' brains have usually developed a strong capacity for skepticism. The more skeptical teens can be about social media, the better.*

PAM: *Plan on being the soft-landing place when things go wrong – rather than default to immediate banning of the device or taking it away, hear them out. That way we ensure that they come to us first when things go wrong. I'm not saying no consequences, those can come later. But first be the parent that says: "I've got your back, how can I support you right now". If we immediately resort to hysterics, fury and punishment, our teens will take their online mistakes underground. And then things can really unravel badly!*

"Wait as long as you can because once you are on the social media bus, it morphs quickly into a run-away train!"

Pam Tudin-Buchalter

8. What do you tell parents who struggle to get their teens to disconnect from social media?

ANDREW: *A lot of kids these days put their hands up and say: "Well, if I'm not on a screen, then what do I do?" They are so used to going to a device as a default. So rather than just saying "get off" or "stop", I think it's important parents engage with them and teach them what they can do when they're not on a device. Give them some ideas, play games with them and get outdoors if it's an appropriate time of day.*

LISA: *To help teens spend less time online we should acknowledge that they often turn to social media when they need a distraction – and that's not always a bad thing. Indeed, plenty of adults – myself included – go online when we are feeling bored or frustrated because a quick scroll can offer a needed emotional reset. Here's what I've said to my own teens: "Using social media for distraction is not necessarily a problem – but you need to manage the dose of that distraction. Spend just enough time on social media to get the boost or break you need. Don't use it so much that it creates new challenges, such as causing you to fall behind on your schoolwork."*

PAM: *Telling teens to get off devices doesn't work – it's hard for me to let go of a good series too sometimes! We have to create an environment that gives our teens something that feels better than a screen and that something is real, non-judgmental connection and healthy risk opportunities. The teen brain needs risk to develop so when they ask to go bungee jumping say yes!! Do it with them. Let them find risk and dopamine kicks in other places, so that they don't turn to risky behaviours online.*

<https://www.unicef.org/parenting/mental-health/social-media-teens>