

Benefits and Risks of Social Media Use in Children and Adolescents

Many children younger than the minimum age of 13 years participate in social media activity.

Much preadolescent and adolescent social interaction occurs on cell phones or on social networking sites including Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. An estimated 75% of teens own cell phones, 54% use their phones for texting, and about 25% log on to social media sites more than 10 times per day. The American Academy of Pediatrics released a clinical report on the benefits and risks of social media. Among the highlights:

Benefits

- Enhanced communication with family and friends
- Opportunities for community engagement
- Collaboration and exchange of ideas through blogs, podcasts, and videos
- Access to health information

Risks

- Cyberbullying: deliberately using digital media to communicate embarrassing or hostile information about others (the most frequent online risk)
- Online harassment: a broad array of actions including stalking and threats
- Sexting: sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images via cell phone, computer, or other digital devices
- Facebook depression (related to extensive time spent on social media sites) and Internet addiction
- Exposure to inappropriate content
- Privacy concerns and compromised reputation (digital footprint)
- Influence of advertisements on buying habits
- Sleep deprivation

Recommendations for clinicians

- Advise parents to talk to their children about their use of social media.
- Encourage regular family meetings to discuss online issues.
- Supervise online activities.

Comment: Congress has established 13 years as the minimum age for most social media sites, although many younger children participate. These recommendations seem reasonable but are based on principles of "good" parenting rather than evidence. As for the recommendation to supervise online activities, parents tell me that the issue of privacy is most difficult, particularly when teenagers ask parents not to check their social media sites.

— **Howard Bauchner, MD**

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