

COUNSELLOR'S CORNER

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SHARING IMAGES

In my role as College Counsellor, I am privileged to gain insight and understanding about common problems and challenges that our students face daily. Themes of loneliness, stress, anxiety, time management, friendship challenges, poor self-esteem and being highly self-critical are common matters that I hear about. Often, we can draw lines of connection between these feelings and their social media use.

Research carried out in the United States by Common Sense Media found *that teenagers spend an average of 7 hours and 22 minutes on their phone each day*. This screen time doesn't include any schoolwork or activities related to reading or listening to music

It's no secret social media has become an essential part of the average teenager's everyday life. Whether it's sharing photos on Instagram, messaging friends on Snapchat or choreographing a dance on TikTok, teens are enveloped by the online world of social media.

Between the ages of 10 and 25, the brain undergoes changes that have important implications for behaviour. And, as it is still developing, the adolescent brain is highly vulnerable to time spent online. The biggest changes in the folds of the brain during adolescence occur in the parts of the prefrontal cortex, which is involved in decision making and cognitive control as well as processing emotional information.

Since teens can sometimes struggle to self-regulate their screen time, their exposure – and the risk of harm – increases.

Research investigating the amount of time Australians spend on social media reveals young women between the ages of 14 and 24 are the most prolific users of all types of social media.

Social media platforms allow teens to create online identities and be part of a community, build social networks, find entertainment, distraction, humour, education and information about social movements and human rights issues. While most have positive experiences online, there are risks involved.

It's not just a case of losing sleep and getting distracted during the day – social media can have far-reaching negative effects on a teen's mental health. While research on social media and the impact on mental health is still in its early stages, we know the significance of social media in a teen's life, and we can already see the complications of this.

If you're not online, you're missing out – you're not part of the group

Many teens are deeply devoted to their social media accounts and content, which leads them to feel an immense amount of stress – to respond quickly, to post perfect photos with witty captions and, of course, to receive lots of likes. Add cyber-bullying and other offensive online behaviours to the mix, and it's easy to see why social media causes a great deal of stress and anxiety for teens.

Social media platforms have been deliberately designed to hold users' attention for as long as possible, tapping into psychological biases and vulnerabilities relating to our desire for validation and fear of rejection. Too much passive use of social media – just browsing posts – can be unhealthy and has been linked to feelings of envy, inadequacy and less satisfaction with life. Studies have even suggested that it can lead to ADHD symptoms, depression, anxiety and sleep deprivation. Teens are particularly vulnerable to feeling down about themselves and their bodies and these insecurities are easily exacerbated by social media use.

A teen's developing brain places them at a greater risk of being reactive in their decision-making, and less able to consider the consequences of their choices. Knowing how to manage your emotions and knowing how to handle conflict are important skills that cannot be developed on Snapchat.

The dissemination of violent, hurtful, and humiliating words and images can occur with a heat of the moment tap of a key - and teens can have no awareness of the actual harm they are inflicting on others or, unknowingly onto themselves.

Two areas that have been of an increasing concern for High School Students throughout ACT and NSW are sexting/distributing intimate photos and filming/distributing content of young people fighting.

If you create, keep, share, or ask for material that shows someone under 18 being physically abused, tortured or subject to cruelty, you could be charged with breaking Australia-wide laws aimed at protecting children from abuse.

Teens could get in trouble with these laws if they:

- film a young person fighting
- post or share a video of a young person in a fight on social media
- keep a video of a fight involving a young person that was sent to you, whether you asked for the footage or not
- ask someone to send you a video of a fight involving a young person.

Sexting is using the internet or your phone to share nude or sexy pictures of yourself or another person. Sexting is a crime when it involves people under 18 and can be considered as image-based abuse or child pornography. This can include real pictures, photo-shopped pictures, videos, and cartoons. It is also a crime when it involves harassing people of any age or when a person does not consent to the distribution of an image of themselves. In the ACT, a person under 18 is not able to consent to having their intimate images taken or shared.

Teens can get into trouble with these laws if they:

- ask for nudes or intimate images
- take or create nudes or intimate images
- receive and keep material
- are engaged in sending, posting, or passing around intimate images

These actions are crimes even if the picture is only of you, your boyfriend/girlfriend or someone else who says it's ok. Remember, the laws about nude/sexy pictures say a person under 18 can't agree to sexting.

Tips For Teens:

- **Make sure you ask before sharing**
If you take a photo or video of someone, ask before you share it publicly with other people. Respect their decision if they don't want it to be posted or shared online.
- **Take down uploads when someone asks**
If someone asks you to take down something you have posted or upload online, then take it down. Respect your friend's personal privacy so they will respect yours.
- **Don't forward or share something if it's embarrassing**
If you receive a photo or video that you know would be embarrassing for the person in it or you know they wouldn't want other people to see it then stop, don't forward it and tell the original sender to stop forwarding it too.
- **Don't be afraid to speak up**
It's OK not to want an image of yourself to be captured. If you notice someone with a camera about to take a photo with you in it, speak up and let the person know you don't want your photo taken.
- **Change your relationship with social media**
Instead of using social media for the kind of public broadcasting and passive browsing that leads you to compare 'likes', it may be more beneficial to use it to reinforce relationships by having more one-on-one interactions with close friends through comments and messaging.
- **Shut off your notifications**
Turn off just two or three of your push notifications and try it for a couple of weeks - you'll feel better. It's one thing to actively look for something, it's another for it to just show up without you even asking for it to show up.

Tips For Parents:

- **Encourage face-to-face contact with friends** Social media usage should be moderate and balanced with real social time with family and friends.
- **Set reasonable limits.** Talk to your teen about how to avoid letting social media interfere with their activities, sleep, meals or homework. Encourage a bedtime routine that avoids electronic media use and keep phones and tablets out of teens' bedrooms. Set an example by following these rules yourself.

- **Explain what's not OK.** Discourage your teen from gossiping, spreading rumours, bullying or damaging someone's reputation — online or otherwise. Talk to your teen about what is appropriate and safe to share on social media.
- **Talk about social media.** Ask your teen how he or she is using social media and how it makes him or her feel. Remind your teen that social media is full of unrealistic images.
- **Look for symptoms.** If you think your teen is experiencing signs or symptoms of anxiety or depression related to social media use, talk to your child and seek support

For more information and cyber support for both families and young people, check out :

ESafety : [Mind the Gap | eSafety Commissioner](#)

Youth Law Australia : [Internet, phones and technology | Youth Law Australia \(yla.org.au\)](#)

It is important to note that School counselling is not a crisis service but should you feel your daughter may benefit from school counselling, please speak with your daughter's house co-ordinator or email me on: counsellors@merici.act.edu.au.

Hannah Johnson

Counsellor