

## Promoting Healthy and Safe Use of Social Media

Today, using social media is ubiquitous in daily life and it affects every developmental stage. Prospective and new parents search online for accurate information on parenting and early child development. Children and families use social media as a learning and communications tool. Adolescents and young adults use Internet sites and social media platforms for a wide range of social, school, and interactive purposes.

Social media—the websites or applications that allow users to create and share content and to interact with other users—have many benefits, including providing children and families with positive social networks, social support, and opportunities for learning and education.

At the same time, social media have risks. Some risks are associated with their ability to amplify and make public the actions and statements of children and youth, which often lead to unsafe situations. Others include distraction and sleep problems that can be related to their use. Health care professionals and clinical teams can play an important role in educating children, youth, and families about social media and possible problems that may arise from using them.

### SUPPORTING CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES IN THE HEALTHY AND SAFE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

**1. Help Families Use Reputable Sources of Information:** Social media expose parents, children, and youth to a wide variety of information, some of which may be inaccurate, misleading, or biased. For adolescents, who may be reluctant to discuss reproductive or other sensitive issues with their parents, the Internet may be the natural place to go for information. Being able to determine whether information comes from a reputable, trusted source is an important part of health literacy. Health care professionals can help families be smart in how they navigate the Internet by:

- Providing reliable, vetted websites, parenting sites, blogs, podcasts, and other online sources.
- Offering suggestions to help parents, children, and youth determine whether a source is reputable. (Is the source a U.S. government site or funded by the government? Is the source a well-known national health or scientific organization?)

**2. Educate Families About Potential Risks of Social Media Use:** Helping parents, children, and youth understand the risks of social media use is an important first step in working together to develop strategies for healthy and safe use. These risks include:

- **Distraction.** Increasingly, people have their eyes on their device while they are doing other things, such as walking, biking, or driving. This distraction can lead to physical injury, sometimes with devastating consequences.

### ABOUT BRIGHT FUTURES

Bright Futures is a national health promotion and prevention initiative, led by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and supported by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Health Resources and Services Administration. The *Bright Futures Guidelines* provide theory-based and evidence-driven guidance for all preventive care screenings and well-child visits. Bright Futures content can be incorporated into many public health programs such as home visiting, child care, school-based health clinics, and many others. Materials developed especially for families are also available. Learn more about Bright Futures and get Bright Futures materials by visiting [brightfutures.aap.org](http://brightfutures.aap.org).



- **Displacement.** Social media use can take the place of personal interactions with friends and family. Time spent on social media also can displace time for school work, physical activity, reading, and other activities.
  - **Privacy issues.** Anything posted online can potentially become public. This loss of privacy can have many negative consequences, from hurt feelings among recipients of the content, to financial loss or even physical risk.
  - **Sleep issues.** Use of computers and other devices can interfere with sleep. Inadequate sleep has been associated with daytime sleepiness, school difficulties, increased injuries, a higher risk of mental health problems, possible immune dysfunction, and a higher risk of future cardiovascular disease.<sup>1</sup>
- 3. Discuss Strategies for Promoting Healthy and Safe Use of Social Media:** Health care professionals play a key role in helping parents, children, and youth develop strategies for social media use and in being a resource should problems arise.
- Role modeling of healthy and safe use of social media  
Children often pay more attention to what their parents do than what they say. Help parents become more aware of their own social media habits and postings and discuss ways they can set a good example for their children. Health care professionals can
    - Examine their own media use habits. Health care professionals who watch substantial amounts of TV are less likely to advise families to follow AAP media recommendations.<sup>2</sup>
  - Open communication about social media use  
Health care professionals should encourage parents to talk openly and often about social media use with their children so that healthy and safe use is a well-understood and familiar topic. Help parents adjust these conversations to meet the changing needs of their children as they mature and their use evolves. Health care professionals can encourage parents to
    - Talk with children about platforms and mobile applications and choose with them the ones that are best suited to their ages, temperaments, and abilities.
    - Help children understand that nothing is truly private. Remind them that “once you send it, you never get it back.”
- Remind children that what they share online is often passed on to others, and perhaps to people they would not want to share with. Help children understand how content can be misunderstood and hurtful.
- Steps to ensure healthy and safe use  
Parents can take a number of actions to ensure that their children’s social media use provides positive opportunities for social interaction, entertainment, and learning but avoids the risks of distraction, displacement, loss of privacy, and physical or emotional harm. Encourage parents to
    - Install safety guards and site blockers on computers and devices.
    - Tell their children to never reveal information that would allow a stranger to find them (eg, address, phone number, school).
    - Tell their children to take care when posting pictures to any site. Once posted, they can never be removed.
    - Keep track of how much time their children and youth spend on computers and devices. Remind parents to count tablet computers, phones, and other digital devices when adding up overall screen time for their child.
    - Turn off all screens, including tablets, at least 1 hour before bedtime for young children.
    - Create and maintain a [Family Media Plan](#), which helps all family members balance their daily activities against time available for media use.

**MAKE THE MOST OF HEALTH SUPERVISION VISITS BY USING THE BRIGHT FUTURES TOOL & RESOURCE KIT**

The *Bright Futures Tool & Resource Kit*, 2nd Edition, provides the forms and materials that health care professionals need to carry out preventive health supervision and health screening for infants, children, and adolescents. These materials can help health care professionals discuss the healthy and safe use of social media with families.

The toolkit’s Core Tools provide valuable resources that help health care professionals focus on social media use during the health supervision visit. Reviewing parents’ and

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adolescents' responses on the **Previsit Questionnaires** gives insights into social media use, providing a foundation for discussion during the visit. The **Visit Documentation Form** is a convenient resource for documenting activities during the visit. This form can be adapted for use in electronic health record systems. The **Parent-Patient Education Handout** can help reinforce the discussion and provide additional information on healthy social media habits.

Example: 9 Year Visit Previsit Questionnaire

Example: 9 Year Visit Documentation Form

Example: 9 Year Visit Parent Education Handout

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The [AAP Family Media Plan](#). This tool helps parents think about their family's media use and create goals and rules that align with their family's values.
- [Healthychildren.org](#). This website provides information on AAP's media use guidelines for children.
- [Common Sense Media](#). This website offers developmentally age-appropriate, unbiased information to help families decide what media is right for them.
- Bright Futures/AAP [Periodicity Schedule](#). This schedule is an easy way for health care professionals to stay up to date with AAP recommendations for health supervision screenings and assessments.

## REFERENCES

1. American Academy of Pediatrics Adolescent Sleep Working Group, Committee on Adolescence, Council on School Health. [School start times for adolescents. Pediatrics](#). 2014;134(3):642-649.
2. American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Communications and Media. [Children, adolescents, and the media. Pediatrics](#). 2013;132(5):958-961.



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