

August 2022

# The New Circle<sup>TM</sup>

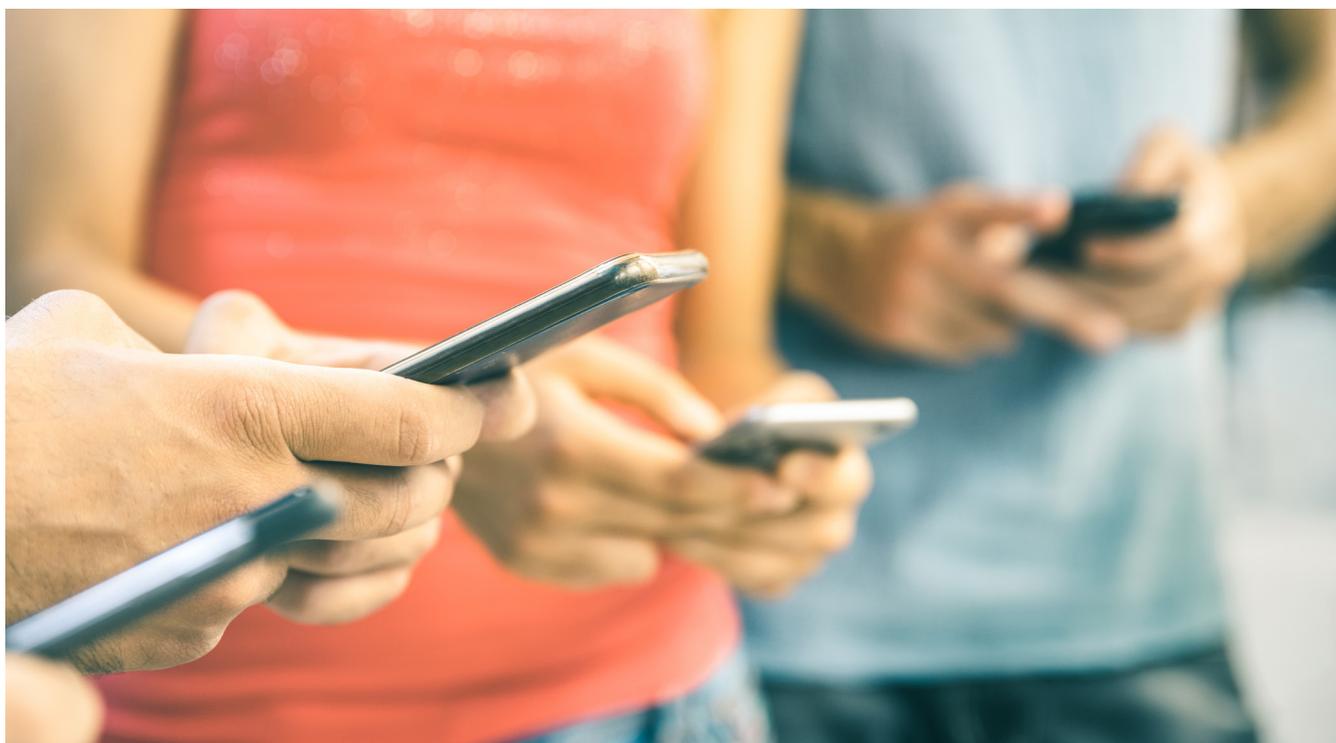
Working with At-Risk Children and Teens



## Social Media and Teens

by Olivia N. Robinson, M.A.  
& Dawn M. Pflugrad, Psy.D.

[www.newcirclemagazine.com](http://www.newcirclemagazine.com)



# Social Media and Teens

DOES IT NEGATIVELY IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING?

by Olivia N. Robinson, M.A. & Dawn M. Pflugrad, Psy.D.

Recent surveys show that 9 out of 10 American teenagers have a smartphone and many spend hours per day using it to watch videos, play games, and communicate via social media. As the use of smartphones and social media has become increasingly more common among teens, the impact of technology has also become an increasing concern among parents and those who work with youths. Perhaps this is even more true given the global pandemic, as the closures of schools as well as social distancing measures have led to limited access to in-person social opportunities. As such, both adolescents and adults alike have been forced to rely more heavily on technology and social media to maintain a sense of connectedness while social distancing. In fact, a survey from 2020 found that Internet usage increased by 50 to 70 percent during the pandemic and half of that time was spent on social media.<sup>1</sup> Now, more than ever, it seems that researchers are scrambling to help us understand the impact social media has on the psychological wellbeing of teenagers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pandya, A. & Lodha, P. (2021). Social connectedness, excessive screen time during COVID-19 and mental health: A review of current evidence. *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, 3(684137). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2021.684137>



---

***Researchers found that there are two distinct periods of adolescence during which social media use was associated with lower life satisfaction.***

---

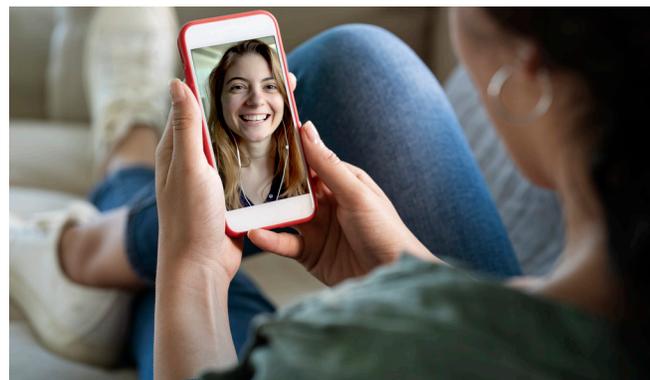
A March 2022 New York Times article highlighted the ongoing debate regarding the impact of social media.<sup>2</sup> Whereas some researchers posit that the use of technology is a powerful contributor to declining mental health, others suggest its negative impact on psychological wellbeing is trivial. However, the article discussed a recent study which took a rigorous approach in examining the relationship between social media and adolescents' feelings regarding life. The study included two surveys conducted

in Britain, with researchers analyzing responses of more than 84,000 people. One survey, more focused on adolescents and teens, followed over 17,000 of them between the ages of 10 and 21 over a one-year period to examine social media use and life satisfaction.

Given that adolescence is a period of tremendous growth and change, in terms of physical development, as well as personality and identity development, it is perhaps not surprising that the impact of social media varies by age and across time. Researchers found that there are two distinct periods of adolescence during which social media use is associated with lower life satisfaction. The first period is around puberty, or about ages 11 to 13 for girls and 14 to 15 for boys. The second period for both genders occurs at about the age of 19, corresponding to another period of change and transition for teens as they may be starting college or a new job or beginning to live independently for the first time.

Overall, the study found that social media had little impact on the psychological wellbeing of most adolescents. However, for a particular subset of teenagers, social media may have harmful effects. As such, the question becomes what can professionals and parents do to mitigate these potentially harmful effects?

- Parents and persons working with teens should continue to educate them on the risks and benefits of social media use. These discussions should be age-appropriate but informative.



---

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, V. (2022, March 28). Does social media make teens unhappy? It may depend on their age. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/28/science/social-media-teens-mental-health.html>

---

***Despite some of the concerning findings in this study, there have also been benefits to social media use for adolescents and teens during the pandemic.***

---

- Parents/caregivers and individuals who work with teens should engage them in regular conversations about their use of social media. It is important to establish a safe, open environment in which they feel comfortable discussing their experiences with trusting, responsive adults.
- Set boundaries or guidelines around social media use. This may include having rules related to when and for how long teens can use social media. It may be beneficial for parents and caregivers to limit teens' social media use to a certain amount of time per day, such as 30 minutes. This task is even easier to manage given that some smartphones have built-in features for limiting time spent on a certain apps.
- Parents and caregivers should familiarize themselves with the parental control features on some devices. These features allow you to set time limits and monitor teens' online activities. They can be especially helpful when a young person is just starting to use social media.
- Finally, be vigilant. It is easy for parents and caregivers to dismiss the risks and believe that online issues will not occur with the youths in their care.

Despite some of the concerning findings in this study, there have also been benefits to social media use for adolescents during the pandemic. Social media has allowed most young people to maintain their connections to positive support peers and adults. Again, this research highlights the two fundamental elements of our work with others: communication and connectedness. For a majority of teens, it appears that social media allows them to





stay connected with important people in their lives, assisting them with maintaining their mental health, rather than negatively impacting it. That being said, positive social media outcomes tend to occur within supportive environments in which adolescents have clearly defined boundaries and where open communication is encouraged. The takeaway message is that with appropriate parameters, education, support, and boundaries, social media may be a positive tool for young people that facilitates connectedness.

You will find resources and helpful information about guiding your child's social media wellbeing at these two websites:

- [The Digital Futures Initiative](#)
- [START](#) (Stand Together and Rethink Technology)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**OLIVIA ROBINSON**, M.A., is currently finishing her PsyD at Xavier University and is pursuing additional training in the area of forensic assessment. She has a Bachelor's degree in psychology from Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio and continued her education at the University of Denver, obtaining her Master's degree in forensic psychology. Ms. Robinson has conducted research with veterans and with women who have perpetrated sexual offenses.

**DAWN PFLUGRADT**, Psy.D., is a licensed psychologist with advanced degrees in psychology, social work and bioethics. She works in the area of sex offender assessment and treatment and is an associate professor at the Wisconsin School of Professional Psychology where she teaches courses in developmental psychology, personality disorders, and ethics. In addition to her years of clinical experience, Dr. Pflugradt has published numerous articles and book chapters in the areas of pediatrics and sex offender assessment and treatment.