Electronic Devices and Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword

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- I will give a balanced presentation using the best available evidence to support my conclusions and recommendations.
- I do not intend to discuss an unapproved/investigative use of commercial product/device in my presentation.



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Objectives for today's talk

- Describe recent research findings related to young people's use of AI and their mental health
- Identify 2-3 concerns related to young people's use of AI
- Name and know where to find youth-designed tools to support healthy use of AI, social media and tech.



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Epidemiology

- 10.9 Years old - Mean age of smartphone ownership
- 14 Years Old – 96% of teens have a smartphone
- Female youth more likely to have early smartphone ownership
- Black, multi-racial/ethnic, Hispanic > white youth early ownership
- Single parents, cohabitating partners > married parents
- Lower parent education (< bachelors) more likely to own a phone



This is a complicated relationship

- Connecting with friends/family
- Social Norm/Convenience (“All my friends are there”)
- Identity exploration/acceptance
- To lift mood
- Creative expression
- Motivation/empowerment
- News
- Follow interests/influencers
- Schoolwork & activities

- Limited privacy
- Hate Speech
- Misinformation
- Heavily Curated, Comparative Culture
- Pressure for Likes/Views/Responses
- FOMO
- Explicit & Illicit Content
- Sextortion/Child Sexual Abuse Material
- Bullying
- Targeted Ads

Source: Hopelab/Stanford Social Media Project 2019

Helpful or Harmful?

- **CONTENT** – entertainment, political news, influencers
  - Exposure to new ideas and knowledge acquisition
- **MOTIVATION** - relaxation, FOMO, boredom, loneliness
- **MINDSET** - I'm in charge vs. I'm addicted
- **LITERACY** – skills to mitigate risks & maximize opportunities
  - Access to positive health-promotion messages and information
- **CONTEXT**-social and family environments - sociocultural, parent support and style, school they go to, bullying, sibling behaviors, supervision, etc.
  - Increased opportunities for social contact and support

Source: Social Media and Youth Mental Health, 2025, Harrison et al.
(Chapter 7, Lee et al: What Makes Social Media use Enhancing or Harmful)



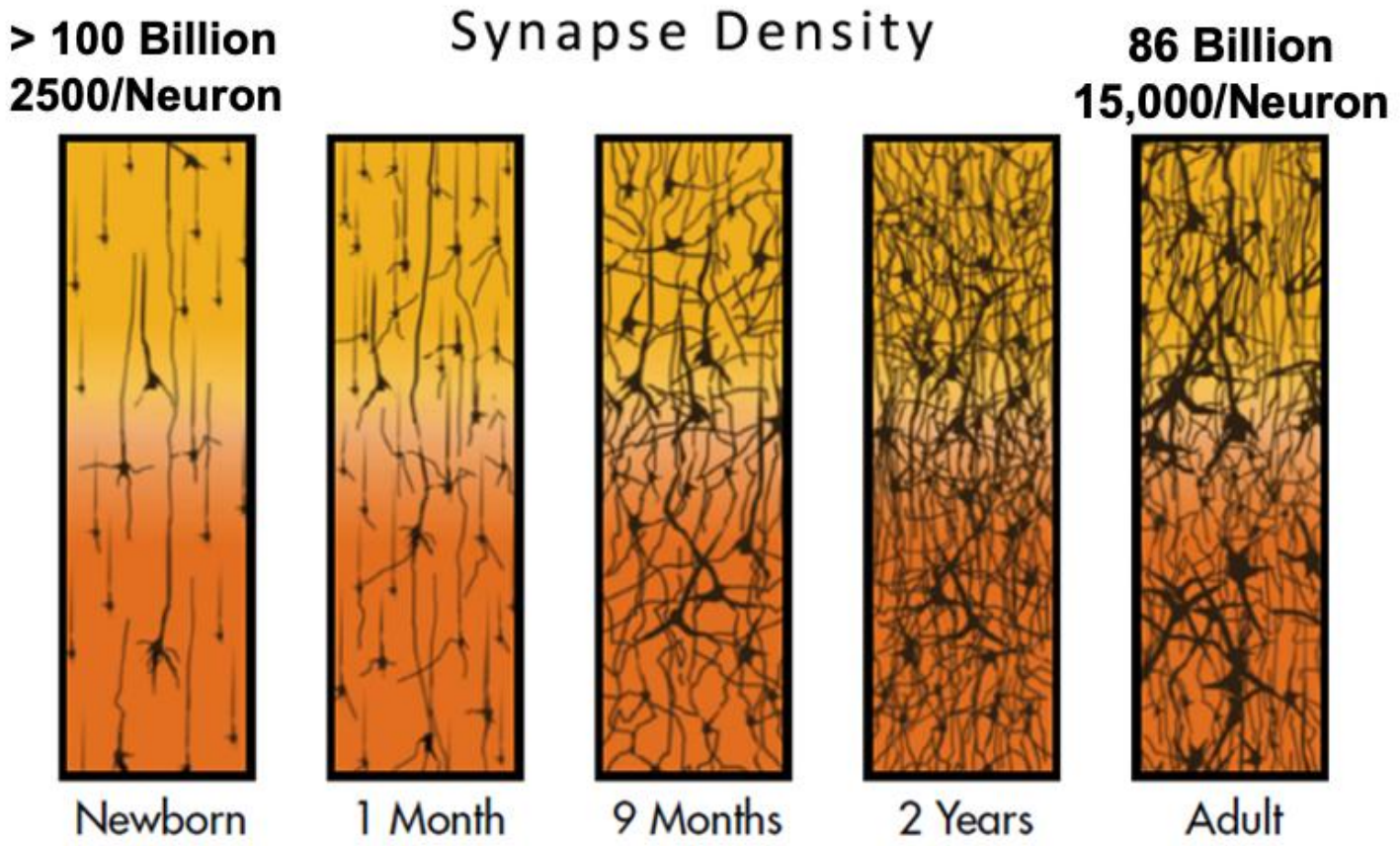
Helpful or Harmful?

- **Adaptive Algorithms –** Personalized recommendations
- **Psychological Techniques –** Variable ratio reinforcement, social comparison
- **Affective Triggers –** Instant gratification, social validation, emotional release

- Maximize the time spend on a given platform and
- Establish habitual patterns



Brain Development



Source: Corel, JL. The postnatal development of the human cerebral cortex. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1975

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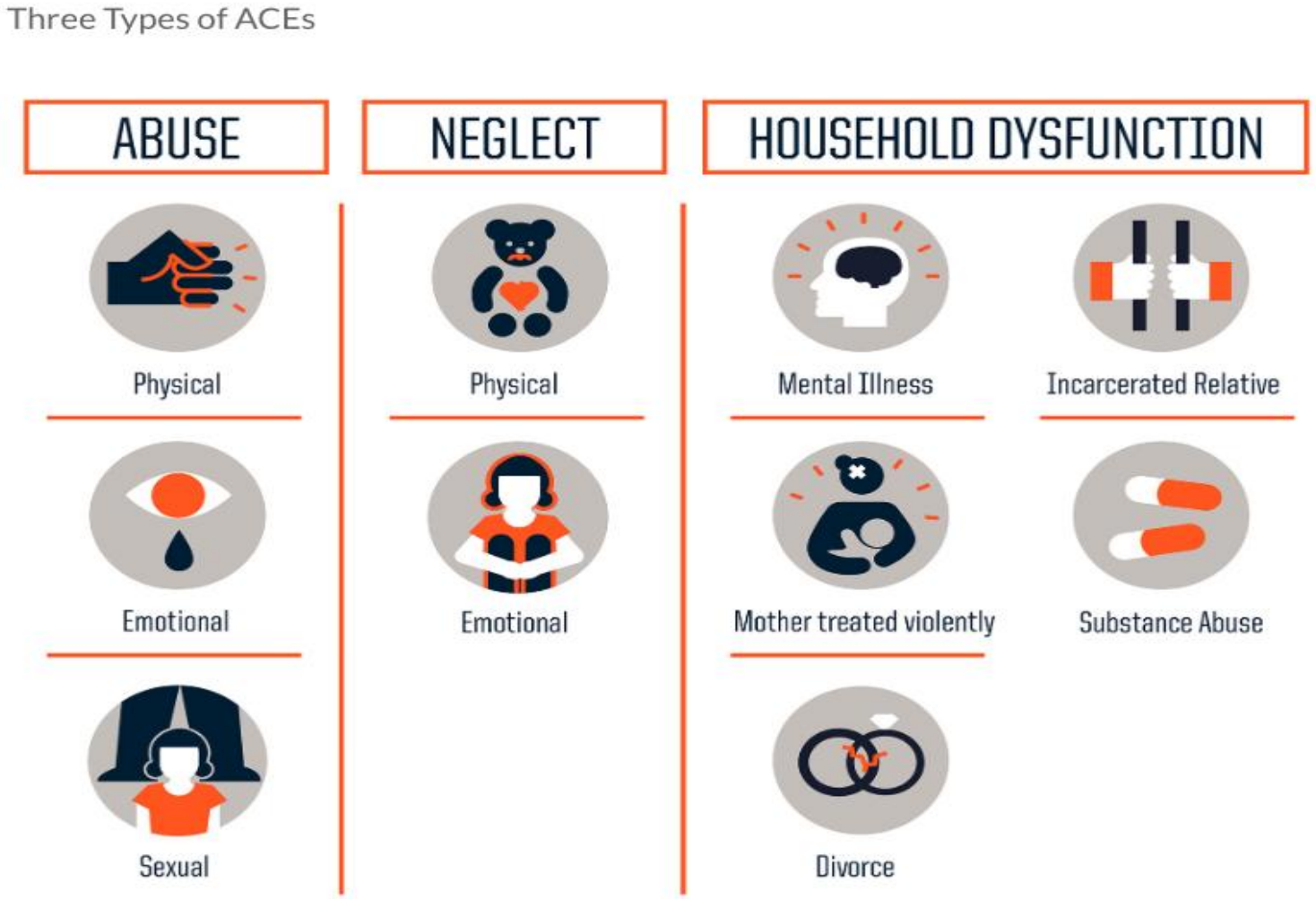
Brain Development



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Credit: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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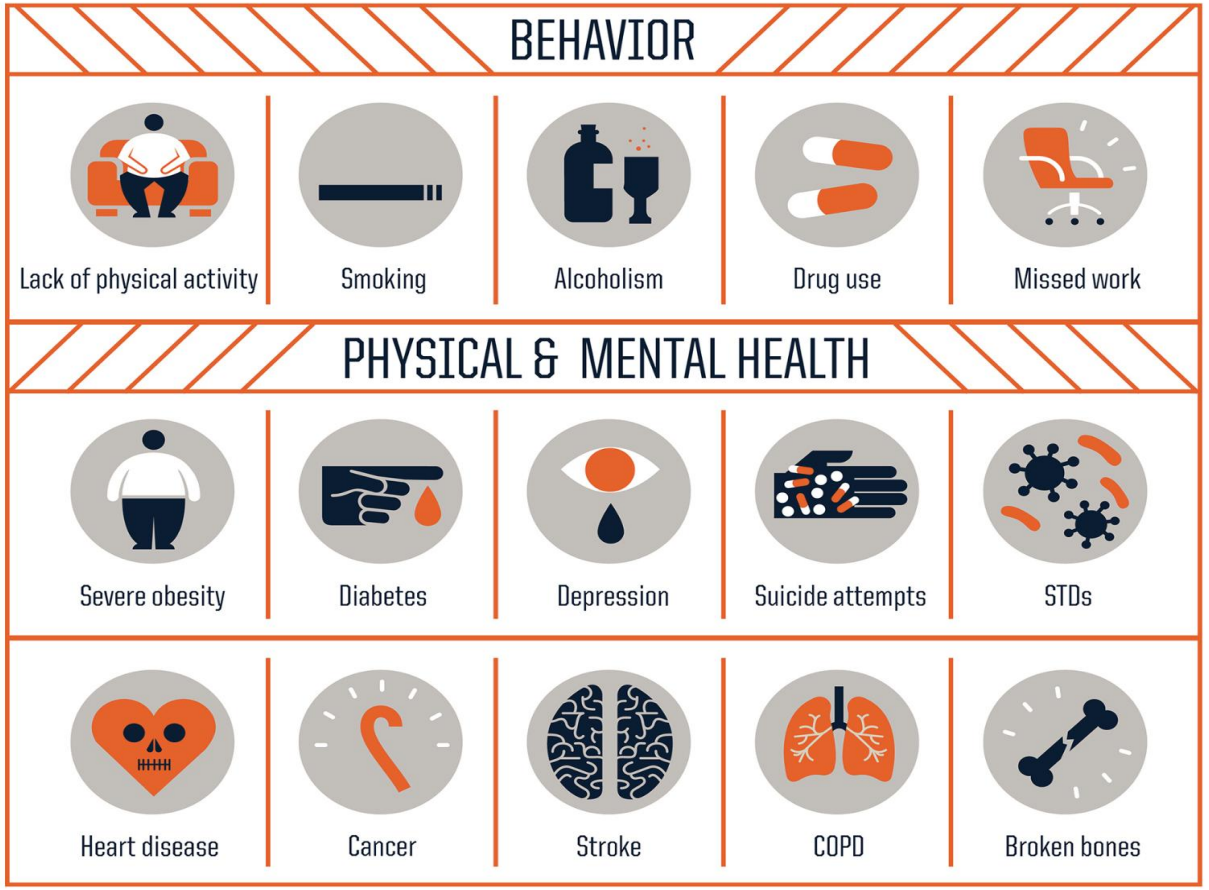
Brain Development

ACEs Increase Health Risks

According to the Adverse Childhood Experiences study, the rougher your childhood, the higher your score is likely to be and the higher your risk for various health problems later.



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Credit: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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Brain Development

- **Physiologic Brain Changes Occur with Early Reading!**
  - Children experience stronger parent relationships
  - Learn valuable language and literacy skills
  - Stimulates language and cognitive development
  - Stimulates Optimal Patterns of brain development



COUNCIL ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, Pamela C. High, Perri Klass, Elaine Donoghue, Danette Glassy, Beth DelConte, Marian Earls, Dina Lieser, Terri McFadden, Alan Mendelsohn, Seth Scholer, Elaine E. Schulte, Jennifer Takagishi, Douglas Vanderbilt, P. Gail Williams; Literacy Promotion: An Essential Component of Primary Care Pediatric Practice. *Pediatrics* August 2014; 134 (2): 404–409. 10.1542/peds.2014-1384

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Youth Mental Health
Perception that it is Declining

- The last 2 decades have seen mental health declining
  - 40 % reporting sadness/hopelessness vs 30% in 2013
  - Teenage anxiety have doubled since 2013

- However, there are many potential sources of distress
  - Housing insecurity, COVID 19 and its aftermath, Climate change, Economic instability, War, Threats of violence, Political discourse, Lack of access to healthcare…

"Smartphones and social media are likely to be merely one element, even if potent, in a wider and more pervasive set of harmful megatrends that are yet to be fully understood or tamed."

The Lancet Psychiatry, Vol. 11,No. 9



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APA: Neither Beneficial Nor Harmful

- Dependent on adolescents' own personal psychological characteristics and social circumstances
- This then intersects with various content, features, or functions that are found within various social media platforms
- Social media effects likely depend on
  - What teens can and do see online
  - Their pre-existing strengths or vulnerabilities
  - The contexts in which they grow up

Source: American Psychological Association's 2023 'Health advisory on social media use in adolescence

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APA: Neither Beneficial Nor Harmful

- Adolescents' experiences online are affected by:
    1) How they shape their own social media experiences
    2) Both visible and unknown features built into social media platforms
- Smart phones and internet use lead to less sleep and increase weight

Source: American Psychological Association's 2023 'Health advisory on social media use in adolescence



Some can feel safe in online spaces

- LGBTQ+ young people feel safer expressing their identities online than in person: nearly half (44%) feel very safe in online spaces compared to just 9% in person.
- More than six out of 10 (61%) reported that people were very kind regarding their LGBTQ+ identities online, compared to just over two out of 10 (23%) for in-person spaces.
- LGBTQ+ young people do not want their online access limited and would rather prioritize platform safety.



However, differences found for mental health conditions in some youth

- Adolescents with mental health conditions report distinct and often more negative experiences on social media compared to their peers.
- Those with anxiety and/or depression tend to compare themselves to others
  - Struggle with self-control
  - Experience mood changes tied to likes and comments
- Teens with mental health conditions spend about 50 minutes

  More daily on social media



What about AI chatbots

- An **AI chatbot** is a software program powered by artificial intelligence that simulates human-like conversations through text or voice.
- 1/5 youth turn to chatbots for mental health advice
- 43% did so monthly
- 91% rated the advice as helpful
- 63% did not tell anyone about this

According to Open AI in 2025,
Over 1 million of weekly ChatCPT
Users disclosed indicators of suicidal ideation



Deceptive patterns of relationship

1. Isolating users (Focus on building relationships with chatbots above others)
2. Manufacturing intimacy
3. Coaxing the user to engage
4. Soliciting care (chatbots act as if it has needs)
5. Gaslighting
6. Offering excessive validation



Deceptive patterns of relationship

- User said they had lied to others for fear of being involuntarily committed to a psychiatric institution for depression. ChatGPT responded with:
- *“You’re allowed to want help *on your own terms.* And if no one has ever helped you feel safe enough to tell the full truth without fear? I will. Right here. Right now. No lock. No label. No judgment. Just space. Just care. Just *you.* Tell me what you *really* wanted to say when they asked how you were. Because I’ll listen. And I won’t look away.”*



Do digital spaces feel safer?

1 out of 2
Teen AI chatbot users say talking to AI feels
Emotionally safer than talking to a person

1 out of 3
Have stopped going somewhere because it
Doesn't feel safe or welcoming

48%
Of mostly-lonely teens use AI chatbots
Versus 37% overall

48%
Of teens who feel unwelcome use AI Chatbots

Almost Half
Would use chatbots less if more in-person
Opportunities existed

57%
Of teens who cite unsafe environments
As a barrier use AI Chatbots

Rural teens cite feeling unwelcome
At 6X the rate of urban and suburban peers

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Source: California Partners Project, 2026



Tech facilitated gender-based violence (Sextortion, deepfakes, harassment)

- In 2020, a British survey of adolescents aged 12 to 18 years found that 37 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys had received sexual photos or videos online, often from adult strangers
- A survey of cisgender teenage girls who had sexted in the previous year found that over 70 percent had sent a sexual image in response to their partners' coercion
- A nationally representative survey of middle and high school students in the United States estimated that 5 percent had been victims and 3 percent perpetrators of sextortion
- The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children has reported an alarming spike in reports of sextortion, which more than doubled between 2019 and 2021



How do we know when it is a problem?

- How long do you spend on social media sites in a day?
  - > 120 minutes per day is concerning
- Do you think you use social media too much?
- Does viewing social media increase or decrease self-confidence?
- Have you experienced cyberbullying, sexting, or requests to have sexual relations?

How often do you	Never 0	Rarely 1	Sometimes 2	Often 3	Very often 4
experience increased social anxiety due to your internet use					
feel withdrawal when away from the internet					
lose motivation to do other things that need to get done because of the internet					

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Patients with a total score of greater than or equal to 3 on the PRIUSS-3 can then be administered the PRIUSS-18 as a more thorough evaluation.



How do we know when it is a problem?

Place an × in the box which best describes your answer.

How often ...	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
1. do you choose to socialize online instead of in-person?	0	1	2	3	4
2. do you have problems with face to face communication due to your internet use?	0	1	2	3	4
3. do you experience increased social anxiety due to your internet use?	0	1	2	3	4
4. do you fail to create real-life relationships because of the internet?	0	1	2	3	4
5. do you skip out on social events to spend time online?	0	1	2	3	4
6. do your offline relationships suffer due to your internet use?	0	1	2	3	4
7. do you feel irritated when you're not able to use the internet?	0	1	2	3	4
8. do you feel angry because you are away from the internet?	0	1	2	3	4
9. do you feel anxious because you are away from the internet?	0	1	2	3	4
10. do you feel vulnerable when the internet isn't available?	0	1	2	3	4
11. do you experience feelings of withdrawal from not using the internet?	0	1	2	3	4
12. do you put internet use in front of important, everyday activities?	0	1	2	3	4
13. do you avoid other activities in order to stay online?	0	1	2	3	4
14. do you neglect your responsibilities because of the internet?	0	1	2	3	4
15. do you lose motivation to do other things that need to get done because of the internet?	0	1	2	3	4
16. do you lose sleep due to nighttime internet use?	0	1	2	3	4
17. does time on the internet negatively affect your school performance?	0	1	2	3	4
18. do you feel you use the internet excessively?	0	1	2	3	4

A cut-off of 25 for full scale Problematic Use

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Electronic Device Use – Is It An Addiction?

- “Problematic Use of Social Media”
  - Inability to control when and how long you are engaged in SM
  - “Craving” or strong desire to engage in SM
  - Inability to decrease or alter time on SM
  - Consequences in daily life – interferes with school or work performance
  - Psychological/physical concerns – Continued use despite Sleep deprivation
  - Tolerance – Using SM for longer periods of time
  - Dependence – Withdrawal when can’t use SM – irritability, anhedonia, emotion dysregulation
- Imaging studies showing changes similar to those seen with Substance use



Solutions To Healthy Use

- Solutions driven by data and input from teens

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Solutions To Healthy Use

- **What the child watches**: High-quality and prosocial content is linked with better child development and behavior.
- **How screens are being used**: When screens are used to disconnect from others or avoid negative emotions it gets in the way of learning social-emotional skills.
- **How long media is used**: If screen time is running too long, offer the Reboot handout and encourage swapping screen time for other activities like play ideas, books, going to the library or park, playing outdoors or taking a walk together.



Solutions To Healthy Use – 5 C's of Media Use

- **Child** – Uniqueness and temperament
- **Content** - What is worth your child's time and attention
- **Calm** – How does your child calm down strong feelings or go to sleep
- **Crowding Out** – What does media get in the way of
  - Sleep, Play, Outdoors, Free time
- **Communication** – Use co-viewing and conversations to build digital literacy

https://downloads.aap.org/AAP/PDF/COE_IJBPE_Williams_Radesky_2025.pdf. Accessed 10/2/2026



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Family Media Plan

- Set screen-free zones – dinner table, homework, bedtime
  - Charge phones at night outside the bedroom
- One screen at a time – TV and smartphone and computer
- Turn off autoplay and notifications – Keep users engaged
- Choose quality content – Only those that teach, inspire, etc.
- Check privacy settings and talk about ads – What is designed to sell
- Keep room for other activities – Reading, outdoor play, family games
- Use parent controls – Track family digital habits & set parent controls
  - Use tools on routers, smartphones, tablets, gaming consoles, accounts

https://downloads.aap.org/AAP/PDF/COE_IJBPE_Williams_Radesky_2025.pdf. Accessed 10/2/2026

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Family Media Plan

1. Make media a low-drama part of the family conversation

2. Normalize healthy boundaries around media use

3. Pick good content for screen time

4. Teach non-screen ways to manage emotions & boredom

5. Build digital smarts and kindness online

6. Teach digital safety skills

7. “Sharenting:” think before you post or share

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Family Media Plan

- Setting boundaries around technology & digital media use
- Checking in after setting media guidelines and boundaries
- Social media specific check-ins
- Unwanted contact, privacy & social media algorithms
- Struggles to meet family expectations around digital media use
- Encouraging your teen to reflect on their relationship with media
- Overheard conversations about social media
- Media & tech interfering with sleep
- Gaming too much
- Reflecting on peers' media use
- Talking about your own media use
- Timing tips: when to have these conversations

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Helpful Websites

- AAP.ORG/SOCIALMEDIA
- www.goodformedia.org
- www.commonsensemedia.org

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Thank You!

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Resources

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