



Center on Media
and Child Health

Internet Guide for Parents



Tips to help you navigate your teen's life online

Internet Guide for Parents



Center on Media
and Child Health

© Boston Children's Hospital 2019. All Rights Reserved.
For permissions, contact Center on Media and Child Health
CMCH BCH3186, 300 Longwood Avenue, Boston, MA 02115
cmch@childrens.harvard.edu or 617-355-5420
www.cmch.tv

THEIR LIFE ONLINE

Video games. Social media. TV. Videos. Music. Apps. Today's children are growing up in an environment filled with media and technology, and it can be hard to know how it is affecting their lives in positive and negative ways. Did you know:

- Teens aged 13-17 spend an average of almost 9 hours per day using screen media
- 88% of adolescents own a desktop or laptop computer, and 95% own a smartphone
- 45% of adolescents say they are online "almost constantly"
- 54% of adolescents say they spend too much time on their cell phone
- 65% of parents worry about their teen spending too much time in front of screens

How teens are affected by media is important to their overall health and development. This booklet will help you understand how media can positively and negatively affect how they think, act, learn, and grow. Use this information as a guide to help you choose media that are best for your child and teach them how to think mindfully about the media they consume.



MENTAL HEALTH & MEDIA

How teens feel about themselves and how their media use affect those feelings is important to their mental health and well-being.

What do I need to know about media and my teen's mental health?

- Teens often compare themselves to their friends and may become dissatisfied if they believe that the filtered and/or happy images they see on social media are how they *should* look and feel all the time.
- Fear of missing out (FOMO) can cause your teen to feel pressure to keep up with the latest online trends, or to post updates on social media that portray an image that may not reflect how they think and feel.
- When teens' media use becomes excessive or problematic they will withdraw from friends, family, and the activities they enjoy in order to spend more time with media. These behaviors can negatively affect their health, relationships, and school performance.
- When children use media mindfully and healthfully, such as to help maintain connections with loved ones, display their creativity, and to learn new things, their mental health benefits.

What can I do?

- Be mindful of who your teen follows online and what kinds of images they see. Talk to them about how people alter and filter photos, and only share their "best selves." Discuss how these images and posts do not tell the entire story of how a person lives or feels all the time.
- Talk to your teen about FOMO and help them focus on things that are happening outside of the screen.
- If you think your teen's media use is becoming a problem, talk them about it and discuss strategies to help them get back on track. If additional help is needed, reach out to your child's health care provider with your concerns and ask what you can do to help your child cut back on their media use.
- Guide your teen's media choices to apps, devices, and content that positively influences their life, and supports healthy relationships, their creativity, and who they are and want to become.

PHYSICAL HEALTH & MEDIA

Your teen's activity choices and the foods they eat are important to their physical health and well-being.

What do I need to know about media, physical health, and my teen?

- Advertising can influence what foods, drinks, and snacks your teen wants and these advertised foods are often full of sugar, salt, and fat.
- When teens eat while watching screen media, such as TV or online videos, they often eat more than they need because they are distracted from their body signals telling them that they are full.
- When teens are at home or indoors it is often easy for them to choose sedentary media activities such as watching videos or playing video games. These activities do not give teens the opportunity to burn energy, which can lead to weight gain and obesity.
- There is a lot of misinformation about physical health that your teen can find online. Pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites and “thinspiration” social media accounts can warp their understanding of beauty and encourage unhealthy behaviors.

What can I do?

- Help your teen avoid watching commercials when possible. Use ad-free video streaming services, watch recorded videos, or fast forward through commercials.
- Make eating meals and snacks screen-free by turning off devices.
- Make time for your teen to have 60 minutes of physical activity each day, whether they play a sport, go to the gym, or walk.
- Encourage your teen to use media to get their body moving, like dancing to upbeat music, using an activity tracker to count their steps, or playing an active video game that gets them off the couch and on their feet.
- Remind your teen that many of the photos they see online have been edited to portray an unrealistic body type. Be mindful of changes in their attitude about their own body image or if they engage in disordered eating behaviors. Talk to their healthcare provider if you have concerns.

SEX & MEDIA

Understanding how portrayals of sex in the media your teen sees, reads, and hears is important to their developing sexuality and understanding of sex.

What do I need to know about media, sex, and my teen?

- Media are the #1 source of information that children and teens turn to when it comes to sex. Unfortunately, media often do not represent sex, sexual behaviors, and risk factors accurately, which can lead teens to believe false information.
- Sexual media can be scary or confusing for tweens and teens, and they may feel pressure to become sexually active before they are ready.
- Media, such as movies, TV shows, music, video games, and pornography can lead teens to have unrealistic expectations when it comes to sex, gender roles, bodies (their own body and their partner's body), and romantic relationships.
- Unsafe and risky sex is often glamorized in media, which can lead teens to believe that these practices are normal and risk-free.

What can I do?

- Provide them with factual information about safe sex, such as pamphlets from a doctor, school nurse, or trustworthy website.
- Know what your teen is watching and listening to, and talk to them about what they see and hear when it comes to sex. Ask if they ever feel pressured to share provocative photos or sexts, and remind them that engaging in this behavior can have negative consequences.
- Teach your kids to compare the sexual material they see and hear to what they know to be true about sex in real life. This will help them better recognize when information is untrue or unrealistic.
- Keep the lines of communication open, so that your teen knows that they can come to you with any questions or concerns about puberty, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), contraception, or sexual assault.

SLEEP & MEDIA

How much sleep and the quality of sleep teens get each night is important to their overall health and development, now and into the future.

What do I need to know about media, sleep, and my teen?

- Using screens before bed can excite teens, making it more difficult for them to fall asleep.
- The “blue light” from screens can disrupt a teen’s circadian rhythm, which is the body’s internal clock that regulates when we feel sleepy and awake.
- When teens sleep near screen media, such as a smartphone on their nightstand, or a TV in their bedroom, noises and notifications from these devices can disrupt their sleep.
- Not getting enough sleep can lead to many different health problems, such as difficulties learning, paying attention, and managing moods, and can contribute to unhealthy eating, weight gain and becoming sick.

What can I do?

- Help create a bedtime routine for teens that includes stopping the use of screen media at least one hour before bed.
- Charge phones, laptops, and tablets overnight somewhere other than your teen’s bedroom.
- If your teen uses their smartphone to wake-up in the mornings, give them a regular alarm clock to use.
- Monitor how your teen is feeling, behaving, and doing in school. When they are acting particularly moody, doing poorly in school, or feeling sick, help them adjust their schedules and media use so that they are able to spend more time sleeping.

SOCIAL SKILLS & MEDIA

How teens relate to others is important for their social development and mental health.

What do I need to know about media, social skills, relationships, and my teen?

- Media violence can make teens less sensitive to seeing and hearing about violent acts, and less likely to speak up or seek help when they happen in the real world.
- Some TV shows, movies, and other media with positive messages can teach teens to be kind, cooperative, understanding, and helpful, whereas violent media can encourage aggression and fear of others.
- Relying too heavily on technology for social interactions may result in teens missing out on face-to-face communication and opportunities to build meaningful relationships with friends and family
- Cyberbullying can affect teens and their family and friends in a variety of negative ways, including relationship problems, trouble sleeping, depression, and less school success.

What can I do?

- Limit your teen's exposure to media violence by viewing the media ahead of time, or reading reviews and watching trailers.
- Encourage your teen to choose media that show positive ways of solving problems and have messages about listening, expressing feelings, working together, and being kind.
- Help your teen find time to get together with their friends and family in-person, and maintain these positive relationships through social media, texting, or gaming.
- Discuss cyberbullying and ways to prevent it with your child. This can help them avoid becoming a cyberbully or a victim of cyberbullying. If your teen is involved in cyberbullying work together to try and find a solution. In extreme cases, it may be necessary for you to report a cyberbullying situation to school officials and/or the police.

SUBSTANCE USE & MEDIA

How teens think about and understand drinking, doing drugs, smoking, and vaping is important to developing healthy attitudes and behaviors related to substance use.

What do I need to know about media, substance use, and my teen?

- Alcohol, smoking, and drug use are often glamorized in the media, which can lead teens to believe that substance use is common and even normal.
- Movies and TV shows usually do not show the consequences of substance use, which can lead to teens believing that these activities are risk-free.
- Alcohol, tobacco, and vape advertisers can make their products look appealing to tweens and teens, especially when marketers use celebrity endorsement and attractive models.
- Teens who are exposed to media showing substance use may be more likely to use drugs, alcohol, or tobacco themselves.

What can I do?

- Provide your teens with the facts about drug use, drinking, and smoking, including pamphlets, movies, TV specials and websites recommended by a doctor, teacher or school nurse.
- Know what your teens are reading, watching, or hearing about drugs, alcohol, and vaping, and talk to them about the physical, social, and legal consequences of substance use.
- Teach teens to think critically about media portrayals of drinking, smoking, and drug use. This way, they will be better able to recognize when information is untrue or unrealistic.
- Keep the lines of communication open, so that your teen knows they can come to you with any questions or concerns about substance use.

TIME MANAGEMENT & MEDIA

How teens think about and understand their time is important to developing healthy routines and time management skills.

What do I need to know about media, time management, and my teen?

- Media can be a healthy part of a teen's life when balanced with other activities, like sleep, family meal time, social time with friends, outdoor activities, reading books, and doing homework.
- Multitasking with media, such as a teen texting while doing homework, can take away from their ability to focus and complete their work due to distractions.
- Teens who use media excessively can develop problems with weight, sleep, anger management, and poor school performance. Some of these problems can last into adulthood if not addressed.

What can I do?

- Create a Family Media Plan, which can help your teen and your family find a balance between offline and online activities:
 - www.healthychildren.org/english/media
- Be a time management role model. Make sure to have media-free times in your day, and show your teen that they don't need to be online at all times.
- Turn off all devices, such as smartphones and gaming consoles, beginning an hour before bedtime and keep them off during the night.
- If you think your teen is using media too much, or becomes aggressive when you try to set limits on their media use, talk to their health care provider about your concerns, and ask for guidance on helping them cut back on their media use.



Center on Media and Child Health

