Digital safety for youth

MPBHP Webinar

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Disclosures

None of the planners or speakers for this event have any financial relationships to disclose.

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Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

1. Describe common digital safety and technology related concerns affecting children and adolescents
2. Apply practical for addressing digital safety and healthy technology through discussions of real world examples
3. Identify American Academy of Pediatrics resources can support conversations with youth and families about digital safety and healthy technology use

AAP Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health

Fall of 2022, AAP was awarded $10 million over five years from the US Department of Health and Human Services(HHS), through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to establish a **National Center of Excellence on Social Media and Mental Wellness.**

The Center serves as a centralized, **trusted source** of evidence and support for children and teens, parents, educators, clinicians, and other professionals who help youth navigate social media.

A walk Down memory lane











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The Popular Narrative

The **current** narrative is focused on screen time measurements and risky-based messages

- Spread by news media
- Captures attention
- Leads to shame and guilt that is internalized by kids and families
  - Parents want to give up or tighten control
  - Teens blame themselves
- Shame and guilt do not lead to healthy behaviors or self-efficacy



If our goal is to center on youth and their health, we need to change our approaches

A New Narrative

Making words matter

- **We are child-centered: We emphasize children's innate resilience** and unique characteristics that are developmentally adaptive (eg, curiosity, attracted to novelty, seeking peer reactions) but don't always interact well with the adult-built environments around them.
- **We feel the urgency: We recognize that we need to act now** to help youth through the mental health crisis and prevent mental health problems in younger children but avoid reinforcing the dominant polarized discourse.
- **We get the complexity: We aim to create and amplify resources and interventions** that are multi-level, involve all stakeholders and relationships children have, addresses the psychological and sociological factors that shape media use.

Why Does this matter?

AAP Mental Health Reframe

Key Concept: Mental health is not just an illness to be treated.

Healthy Mental Development:

- Promotion of emotional, psychological, and social wellness across the lifespan
- Determined by complex interactions between biology, relationships, and environment
- Sometimes called “Resilience”
- Mental health is not a series of diagnoses and symptoms: it’s a developmental process that occurs over the lifespan.

Relational Health:

- Development and maintenance of safe, stable, nurturing relationships
- Important from infancy through young adulthood (and beyond!)
- Mental health of children and caregivers are inherently linked
- Family relationships promote resilience and positive mental outcomes for children and caregivers

Dr Goodwin's Framework for healthier screen habits

- **Quantity**:
  - How much screen time is allowable?
  - Are there certain times of day screens are allowed?
- **Quality**:
  - How are you using the devices - ie. doom scrolling, watching shows together, communicating with peers, creating content?
- **Location**:
  - Where do devices go in the home?
  - Are there screen free zones in the home/ car?

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What is Social Media?

Platforms and their designs have evolved over time



- Social media = platforms that allow interaction between users based on relationships or interests, including posting of user-generated content
- Platforms and designs are constantly changing
- More recent platforms and designs rely on algorithmic recommendations, short-form video, targeted ads
- YouTube and online multiplayer videogame platforms (eg, Roblox) offer social media-type experiences to younger users

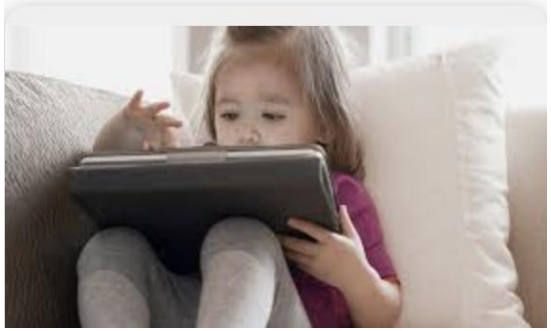
History of Social Media (It's Younger Than You Think) – BroadbandSearch
Free Vector | Social media icons vector set with facebook, instagram, twitter, tiktok, youtube logos (freepik.com)

Are all screens created equal?/Is all screen time bad?







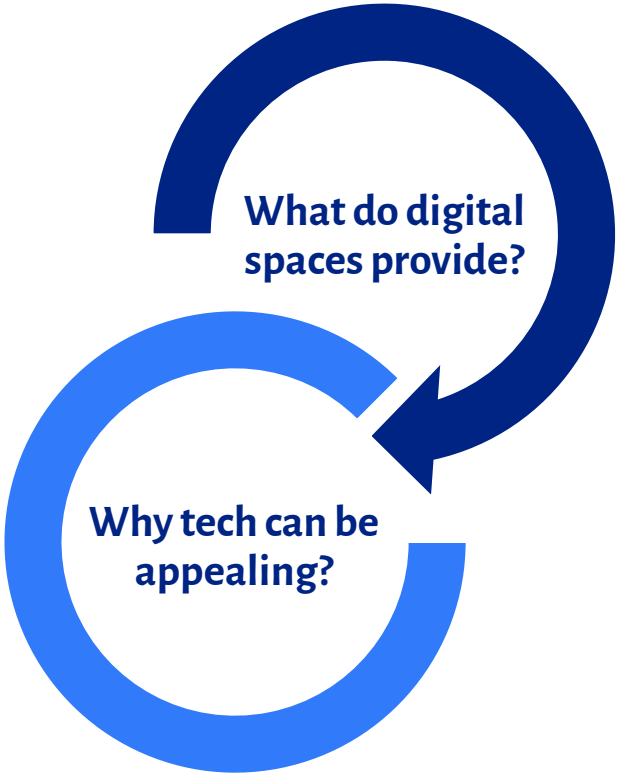






Why Teens Go Online

Needing autonomy Separating from caregivers
Sense of invincibility
Navigating insecurity
Novelty/risk-seeking
Attention-seeking
May feel safer – we live in a "zero tolerance society" fewer consequences when anonymous



Connection with friends
Exploring creativity
Finding emotional support
Learning new things
Seek information
Identity
Curiosity
Humor

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The 5 Cs Framework

Applying the Framework

The 5 Cs of Media Use

1

Who is this child/adolescent, what are their unique strengths and challenges? How does this shape their media use and how they react to it?

Child

2

What content is high-quality and worth our time? How does negative content affect our thoughts and emotions?

Content

3

How does this child/adolescent calm down strong emotions and settle down for sleep?

Calm

4

When we use media for too long, what does it get in the way of?

Crowding Out

5

Regularly talking about family's digital experiences, supporting critical thinking and problem solving.

Communication

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Applying 5 Cs to Early Childhood

- **Child:** Rapid developmental changes; learning through touch, movement, and interaction. Screens should supplement—not replace—hands-on play and caregiver connection.
- **Content:** Prioritize high-quality, slow-paced, educational content. Avoid fast-paced, overstimulating, or commercialized media.
- **Calm:** Screens shouldn't be the primary soothing tool. Use co-regulation: cuddling, naming feelings, sensory play.
- **Crowding Out:** Protect core routines: sleep, play, outdoor time, caregiver interaction. Keep screens out of meals and bedrooms.
- **Communication:** Co-view whenever possible; narrate, label, and connect media to real life. Model healthy habits—kids learn by watching you.







[The 5 Cs of Media Use]
[Early Childhood Development and Screen Time Toolkit]

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Applying 5 Cs for School – Aged Children

- **Child:** Growing independence, curiosity, and peer influence. Support transitions, impulse control, and consistent expectations.
- **Content:** Choose educational, creative, and age-appropriate content. Avoid violent, scary, or highly commercialized media; turn off auto-play.
- **Calm:** Teach coping skills beyond screens: breathing, movement, quiet play. Help kids notice when screens increase stress or dysregulation.
- **Crowding Out:** Balance screen time with homework, sleep, physical activity, and family time. Encourage offline hobbies and social connection.
- **Communication:** Talk about what they watch and play; ask questions to build digital literacy. Set clear expectations for device use, privacy, and respectful behavior.



The 5 Cs of Media Use

Applying the 5 Cs with Tweens/Teens

- **Child**: An age kids are seeking more independence and control. They are connecting more to peers and worried social missteps online and offline. A time for parents to role model and be intentional about phone use.
- **Content**: Involve kids this age to help identify and review content that is worth their time. Online content on social media might be riskier with fewer parental controls. Encourage teens to control their settings and the content they view.
- **Calm**: What are non-tech ways to calm down? Avoid having devices in bedrooms.
- **Crowding Out**: Teach kids to use focus modes and do-not-disturb and have device free times to ensure they make time for important activities.
- **Communication**: Provide support and ask open ended questions about online challenges. Ask kids for feedback about your own media use and include them in the conversation about media rules.



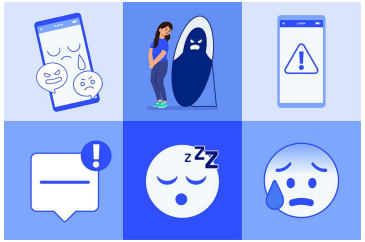
Navigating Social Media: A Teen Wellness Toolkit

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What are the Links Between Social Media and Mental Wellbeing?

- Earlier use of social media (under the age of 13) has greater risks:
  - Kids who started social media at age 10 or younger were more likely to be victims of online harassment and display unsympathetic online behaviors
  - For tweens already struggling with body image, early social media use made it worse
  - There were major impacts on sleep
  - Tended to be more involved in supportive or civically-active communities online compared to those who started later
- There is no perfect age for starting social media, but during stressful times in life, social media might amplify that stress
- Every child is different! One 13-year-old may be ready for a social media account, but another 16-year-old may not be





Are mobile phone ownership and age of acquisition associated with child adjustment? A 5-year prospective study among low-income Latinx children - Sun - 2023 - Child Development - Wiley Online Library

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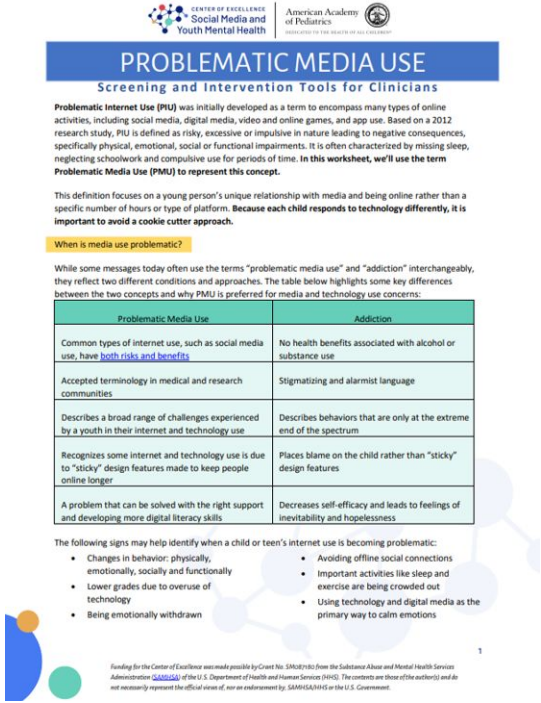
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Problematic Media Use

Problematic Media Use: What We Know

- PMU is defined as “risky, excessive or impulsive in nature leading to negative consequences, specifically physical, emotional, social or functional impairments.”
- The science behind PMU is still developing.
- here is not sufficient evidence to treat PMU as an addiction at this time.
- Check out the Problematic Media Use resources for more information on
  - Defines problematic media use (PMU)
  - Guidance for identifying
  - Screening tools
  - Prevention tips
  - Intervention strategies
  - Resources



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PROBLEMATIC MEDIA USE

Screening and Intervention Tools for Clinicians

Problematic Internet Use (PIU) was initially developed as a term to encompass many types of online activities, including social media, digital media, video and online games, and app use. Based on a 2012 research study, PIU is defined as risky, excessive or impulsive in nature leading to negative consequences, specifically physical, emotional, social or functional impairments. It is often characterized by missing sleep, neglecting schoolwork and compulsive use for periods of time. **In this worksheet, we'll use the term Problematic Media Use (PMU) to represent this concept.**

This definition focuses on a young person's unique relationship with media and being online rather than a specific number of hours or type of platform. **Because each child responds to technology differently, it is important to avoid a cookie cutter approach.**

When is media use problematic?

While some messages today often use the terms “problematic media use” and “addiction” interchangeably, they reflect two different conditions and approaches. The table below highlights some key differences between the two concepts and why PMU is preferred for media and technology use concerns:

Problematic Media Use	Addiction
Common types of internet use, such as social media use, have both risks and benefits	No health benefits associated with alcohol or substance use
Accepted terminology in medical and research communities	Stigmatizing and alarmist language
Describes a broad range of challenges experienced by a youth in their internet and technology use	Describes behaviors that are only at the extreme end of the spectrum
Recognizes some internet and technology use is due to “sticky” design features made to keep people online longer	Places blame on the child rather than “sticky” design features
A problem that can be solved with the right support and developing more digital literacy skills	Decreases self-efficacy and leads to feelings of inevitability and hopelessness

The following signs may help identify when a child or teen's internet use is becoming problematic:

- Changes in behavior: physically, emotionally, socially and functionally
- Lower grades due to overuse of technology
- Being emotionally withdrawn
- Avoiding offline social connections
- Important activities like sleep and exercise are being crowded out
- Using technology and digital media as the primary way to calm emotions

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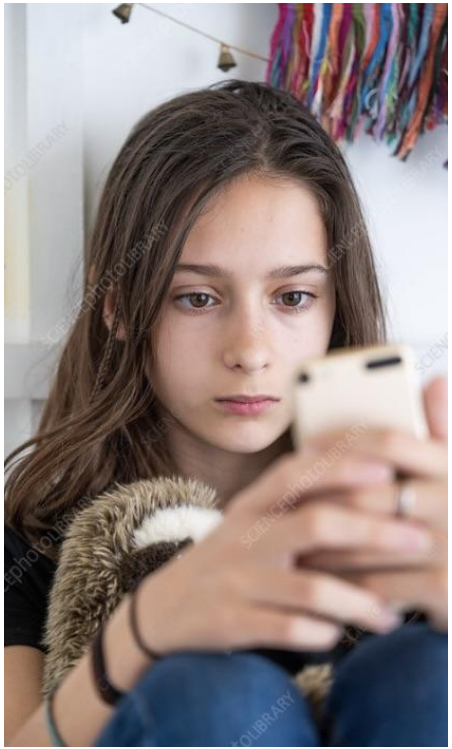
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Case 1: She needs her phone taken away

Ali is a 14-year-old with anxiety.

- Stays up until 1–2 AM messaging friends and watching videos.
- Increasing difficulty getting to school. Parent wants to remove phone indefinitely.

What concerns do you hear?



Consider:

- Which of the 5 Cs raise the most concern for Ali?
- Where might intervention help most?
- How would you engage Ali? And her parents?

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Case 2: Gaming is all he wants to do

Peter is a 12-year-old with ADHD.

Parent reports “eight hours of gaming” on weekends and explosive behavior when asked to stop.



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Case 3: Something happened online and she won't tell me

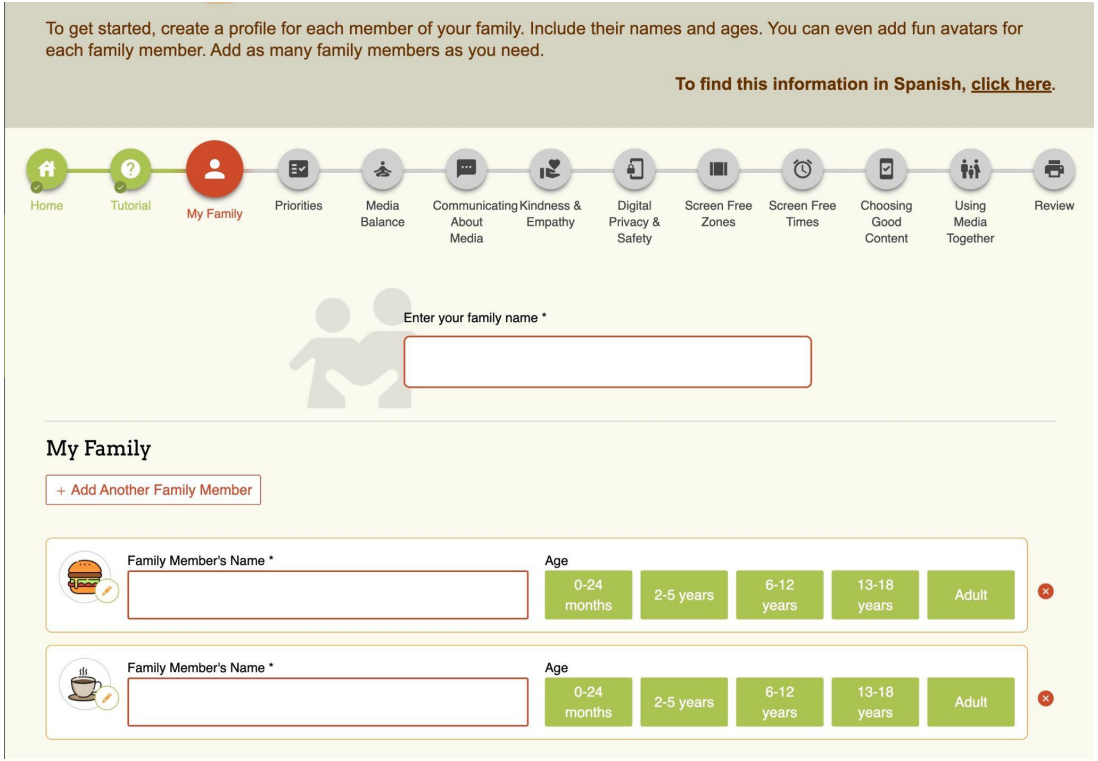
Sarah is a 15-year-old who suddenly deletes an account and becomes withdrawn.



Prevention Tips: What Can Clinicians Do?

- Consider the **5 Cs of Media Use**
- Suggest that the family develop a **Family Media Plan**
  - PMU may resemble normal family discourse, particularly when expectations around media use have not been set
- Suggest that families learn more about built-in parental controls and app settings together (check out the **Glossary of Digital Media Platforms**)
- Encourage families to talk about digital media on a regular basis using the **Conversation Starters for Families About Media**
- Encourage **parents to model responsible use**, spending more time with the child

Creating Your Family Media Plan



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School Phone Bans, What Do We Know?

It's Complicated

- Use of smartphones and social media in school can be a source of distraction to students
- Research on the impact of school phone policies is limited, with mixed findings
  - Small improvements in academic achievement tests in England
  - Less bullying and greater academic scores in Spain.
  - Teen girls from low-income families sought less mental health care in Norway
  - No associations between bans and academic development in Sweden
- When schools enact phone bans or policies, the responsibility falls on individual teachers to enforce the rules, resulting in variability even within schools
- Resource: Resource Guide for Pediatricians: School Phone Policies

High school teachers say phone distraction in class is a big problem in the US | Pew Research Center
Ill Communication: Technology, distraction & student performance – ScienceDirect
Banning mobile phones in schools: evidence from regional-level policies in Spain | Applied Economic Analysis | Emerald Publishing
Smartphone Bans, Student Outcomes and Mental Health by Sara Abrahamsson :: SSRN
The impact of banning mobile phones in Swedish secondary schools – ScienceDirect

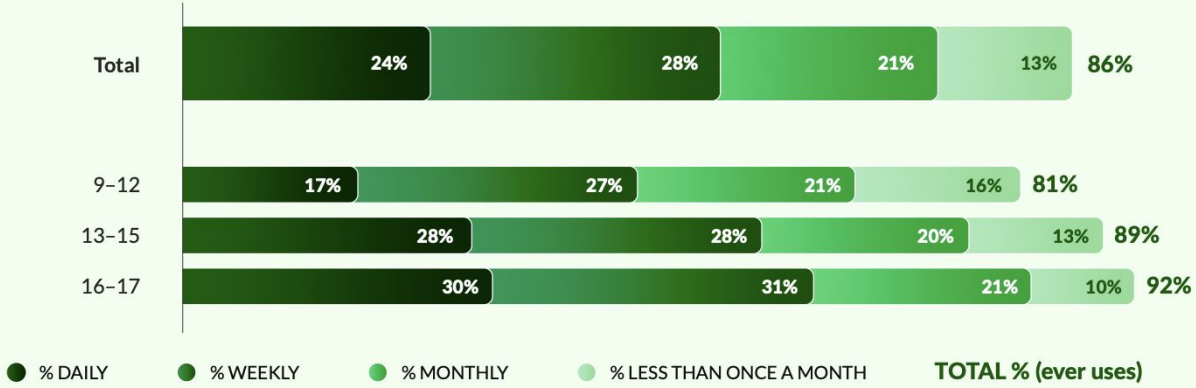
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What about AI?

The new frontier

FIGURE 1:

Rates of AI use among 9- to 17-year-olds, by age



Q: How often, if ever, do you use or interact with any type of AI?
Base: Kids age 9 to 17 (*N*=1,204).

The Common Sense Media Census: AI Use by Tweens and Teens, 2026 |

Questions?



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Questions? Comments?

Let's keep the conversation going!

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Resources

WWW.AAP.ORG/SOCIALMEDIA

What are the Links Between Phone Ownership and Mental Wellbeing?

- The optimal age of mobile device ownership is variable and likely depends on many individual and psychosocial characteristics
- Earlier age of device ownership for girls is correlated with worse behavioral adjustment, but this association is null for boys among an Irish cohort
- Another study finds no association between age of device ownership and well-being among a Latinx cohort



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Early mobile phone ownership: influencing the wellbeing of girls and boys in Ireland?: Journal of Children and Media: Vol 14 , No 4 - Get Access

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A developmental lens: What is the right age to give my child a phone?

What are some signs of phone readiness? What about Ipads?

Check out the AAP Phone Ready Quiz for a list, which includes:

- Is your child responsible about things like homework?
- Do they say sorry if they hurt a friend's feelings?
- How well do they follow other tech rules?
- Are you as a parent/guardian ready to help support them?
- How will you handle things if your child develops problematic screen use?

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Question & Answer Portal

- **Interactive Q&A Portal**: a two-way communication channel that allows clinicians, educators, parents/families, youth, and others to submit questions about social media and mental well-being
- Our Center team, including our Co-Medical Directors, review all questions and develop prompt evidence-based responses that will be emailed to users
- **Searchable by age, audience, and topic,** and includes all previously asked questions and responses made to date
- Questions so far range in topic from school policies on digital devices to how to support young children's behavior related to digital media to how to support teens expressing body image



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5 Cs of Media Use Resource Hub

This page provides additional resources that break down the 5 Cs into smaller pieces to help families take manageable steps to improve their relationships with digital media. You will find:

- **Downloadable** supplemental posters
- A form to request **pre-printed glossy posters**
- Curated **video clips** designed for different age groups





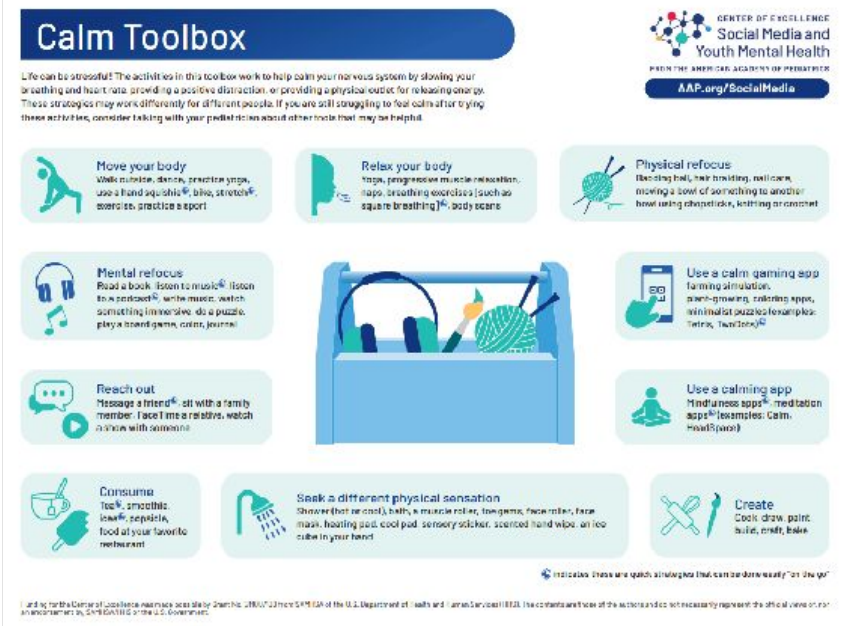


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The Calm Toolbox: Healthy Ways to Cope With Stress

Ideas & tools you can try when you feel overwhelmed



Life can feel overwhelming for teens and having a few "go-to" calming strategies can really help.

These strategies may work differently for different people.
If you are still struggling to feel calm after trying these activities, consider talking with your pediatrician about other tools that may be helpful.

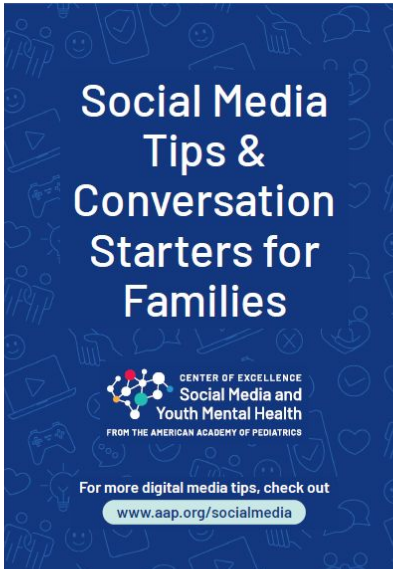
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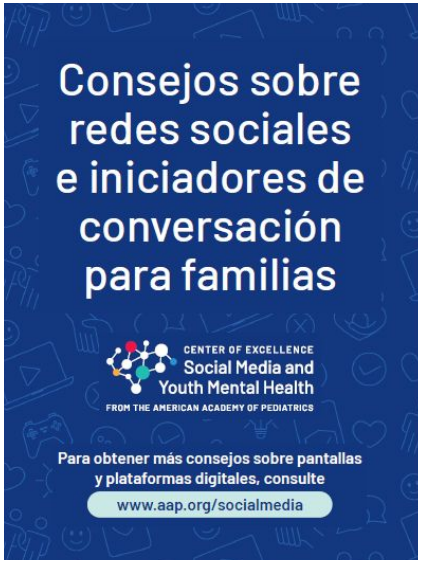
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Social Media Tips & Conversation Starters for Families

Cards available to download and print in English and Spanish







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Conversation Starters for Families About Media

Building Healthy Relationships with Media: Essential Skills for Children 10 and Younger

- Suggested activities and printable activity cards offer fun ways for families to develop healthy media habits from a young age
- They focus on ways to build balance, critical thinking, self-regulation, and safety skills
- Activities like Pop-up Ad Whac-A-Mole and Scam Finder engage young minds and create digital literacy skills
- Can be used in tandem with the conversation starters for families with children of all ages



Building Healthy Relationships with Media: Essential Skills for Children 10 and Younger

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Early Childhood Development and Screen Time Toolkit

aap.org/EarlyChildhoodScreenTime

The Early Childhood Development and Screen Time Toolkit was developed for use by early childhood educators, childcare providers, early interventionists, home visitors, pediatricians, or other professionals who support families with young children and includes **training resources** for **professionals** and **parents**

How to Use This Toolkit

We recommend that early childhood professionals start by exploring the Training Resources and then consider how the Parent-Facing Resources, available in English and Spanish below, could be integrated into your current work with families. We invite you to use whichever tips sheets, social media messages, infographics or posters would complement the important work you already do!

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Provider Resource: Social Media Case Scenarios

Guidance for conversations with youth & families

View our tips and recommendations for facilitating conversations with youth based on the details provided in various case scenario

Real-World Clinical Scenarios

- Case-based examples from pediatric practices
- Sample provider–youth conversation prompts
- Practical tips for navigating sensitive topics



Explore the full resource: aap.org/socialmedia → Case Scenarios

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