

Social Media and Youth

Problematic Interactive Media Use (PIMU)



Balance is key. In a world of constant connection, sometimes we need to disconnect to reconnect.

~Unknown

Social Media: A Powerful Tool

The internet is an ever-present part of young people’s lives, and social media has changed how we all interact with the world around us. Research has shown that social media can have positive effects on the social and intellectual development in young people by providing them opportunities to discover new information, to communicate with family and friends (no matter where they are), to connect with others who share their interests, and to engage with issues and have their voices heard.

Many teens also report that social media helps them get support when needed. In fact, according to a Pew Research Center survey of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 conducted in 2022, 80% of teens reported that social media makes them feel more connected to what is going on in their friends' lives. Despite this, numerous studies have shown that there is a strong link between high usage of social media and an increased risk for depression, anxiety, loneliness, as well as damage to self-confidence and self-esteem for some teens.

For many parents, social media is uncharted territory and they question whether or not their child should be using it. Even experts are just beginning to understand the impact social media has on children. The amount of time spent on social media and the content being viewed are two important factors. Being aware of both the drawbacks of social media as well as the positive aspects is essential. This newsletter will address internet and video game addiction, called problematic interactive media use, how parents can recognize and address this problem, as well as what can be done to prevent it from occurring.



PREVENTION SERVICES

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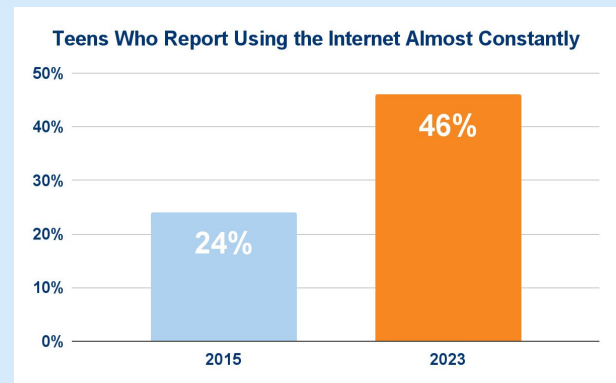
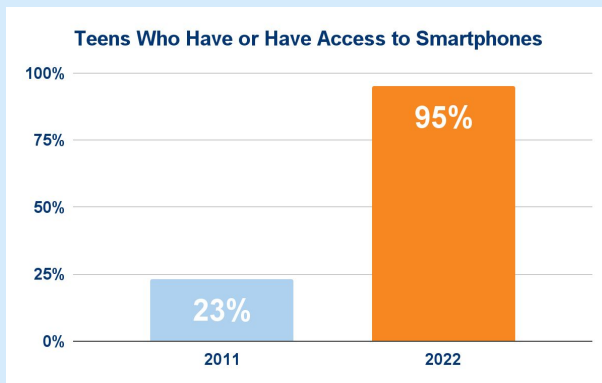
*** To access active links to this newsletter, please view it on our Prevention web page.***

Problematic Interactive Media Use

According to Common Sense Media, teens spend an average of seven hours and 22 minutes on screens every day, and that does not include computer time for schoolwork or homework. When typical media use becomes excessive and causes issues with school, sleep, social life, or physical and mental health, it may be a sign of an underlying problem.

Problematic Interactive Media Use (PIMU) is the overuse of any media, often referred to as “Internet Addiction”, “Internet Gaming Disorder”, “Media Addiction”, and other such terms. Media includes surfing the Internet, social networking, mobile apps, video games, music, TV, and movies. Problematic Interactive Media Use is characterized by a progressive inability to control, regulate, or limit the behavior, despite the adverse effects it has on the individual and their well-being. PIMU shares similarities with obsessive-compulsive disorders.

Because children are being introduced to technology at a young age so they can learn how to develop the skills needed to navigate the digital world, it seems inevitable that some could have problems limiting their usage. According to Pew Research, 97% of teens use the internet daily, and 51% of those teens admit that they are on social media too much.



Risk Factors for Problematic Interactive Media Use

Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to PIMU because the brain regions that are involved in resisting temptation and reward, (the prefrontal cortex), are not nearly as developed in children and teenagers as in adults, therefore they are much less able to control their impulses. Also, the adolescent brain is especially attuned to social connections, and social media is a great opportunity for them to connect with other people.

Males seem to experience higher rates of PIMU compared to females, and it tends to increase throughout early adolescence, peaking around age 15 to 16. Lower income youth and those in single-parent households also experience higher rates of PIMU.

Besides the obvious fixation with screen-based media, symptoms of PIMU include a decline in personal hygiene, decreased school performance, and social withdrawal. Family conflicts may also increase. If you believe your child may have an issue with the overuse of technology, please contact their primary care provider.

Teen Brains and “Likes”

The same brain circuits that are activated by eating chocolate and winning money are activated when teenagers see large numbers of “likes” on their own photos or the photos of peers on social media, according to a UCLA study in which adolescents underwent MRIs while viewing photos on Instagram. Researchers found that when teens believed their photos had gotten more “likes”, they showed greater activation in the brain’s reward circuitry. So for teens, getting “likes” feels good, even at the neural level.

The Relationship Between Social Media and Sleep

Studies across the world in over 120,000 youth ages 6 to 18 who engage in any sort of social media have repeatedly shown worsened quality and decreased quantity of sleep. For starters, looking at social media requires being awake. Also, the light emitted from the devices is enough to decrease levels of melatonin, the hormone needed to signal the onset of sleep. And the content itself is also disruptive, because the brain and body are highly stimulated by high paced video games or other fast-paced imagery. Not even melatonin supplements can overcome the highly stimulating power of internet content and light.

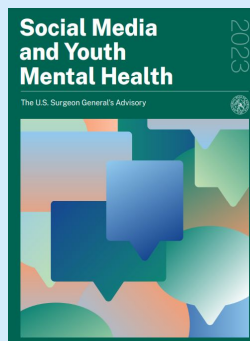
Multiple professional medical and scientific organizations have recommended that teens sleep eight to 10 hours per night. But only 1 in 5 high schoolers come close to that. Some suggestions on how to help make sure your child gets enough sleep are:

- Prioritize sleep for the entire household
- Model good screen time habits
- Make sure kids are using "night mode" on their devices to block the blue light after sunset.
- Shut down devices at least 30 minutes before bedtime, with the exception of homework
- Make sure your kids turn off their notifications at night.

Being aware of the amount of sleep your child gets and what the recommended amount is can be helpful. This is the link for the [*American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations on sleep time.*](#)



U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a new [*Surgeon General's Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health*](#) in May 2023. He issued a statement warning of the dangers of social media and encouraging caregivers, teachers, and policymakers to create a safer online environment.



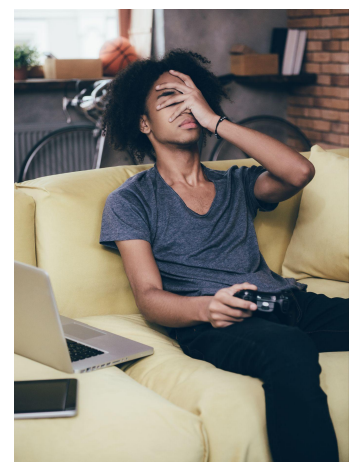
Dr. Michael Rich, the director of the Digital Wellness Lab at Boston Children's Hospital, and his team coined the term, 'Problematic Internet Media Use' and discourages the use of the word 'addiction' because "the internet, if used effectively and with limits, is not merely useful but also essential to everyday life." This term has become more common in recent years.

Identifying the Problem

Our world is characterized by increasing technology use which has become embedded in every aspect of our lives. However, some young people cross from normal use to problematic use, which has a negative impact on school, work, family, and social life. Three main factors that indicate PIMU are:

- **Obsession:** constantly checking or wanting to check social media or be online
- **Neglect:** ignoring activities that you used to enjoy, letting grades slip, withdrawal from social activities
- **Lack of control:** unable to stop online activity or experiencing withdrawal when you do, losing track of the amount of time you are spending online

There is good news. Research studies using MRI found that, although the brains of teens who had PIMU had impairment in the brain's decision-making, processing, and rewards centers, the damage was undone after a digital fast. Two weeks unplugged reversed the brain abnormalities.




What Parents Can Do

Dr. Amy Sass, MD, who specializes in adolescent medicine, suggests parents ask themselves two questions when evaluating their child's media-readiness. First, are you comfortable exposing your child to a particular movie, song, game, or website without constantly monitoring or overseeing them? If not, then your child is not ready. Second, are you comfortable answering your child's questions about sex, violence, abuse, self-destructive behavior, or materialism that this media exposure might bring up? If not, then you are not ready. When you can answer "yes" to both of these questions, your child is the "right age" to regulate a relationship with the content in question.

Suggestions you can give your child to help them create a healthy balance of their time online are:

- Stop following accounts that leave you feeling unhappy.
- Be sure to spend time with friends and family and to get enough sleep.
- Use social media to feel more connected to the people you care about.
- Get inspired by creating art, cooking new food, or learning more about a favorite topic
- Take breaks and set screen-free times to eat, sleep, and go outside and set time limits to help encourage a healthy balance of time online and offline.
- Find out what works for you. Reach out to a trusted adults if you need support figuring that out.

Remind your child that social media can never replace real, in-person contact with others; this contact triggers the hormones that alleviate stress and make you feel happier, healthier, and more positive. The key for you as a parent is to set appropriate boundaries around screen time, to understand what your kids are doing online, and to feel confident that your child is engaging in the right developmental tasks — online or off. Create a safe space for communication, allowing your child to come to you should questions or concerns arise.




Family Digital Wellness Guide

The Digital Wellness Lab at Boston Children's Hospital and Harvard Medical School is a non-profit research institution seeking to understand and promote positive and healthy digital media experiences for young people, from birth through young adulthood. Their [Family Digital Wellness Guide](#) is designed to empower families to navigate their way through today's increasingly online world.

Teens who are regularly exposed to images of alcohol and drugs on social media are:

- **Three times more likely to consume alcohol**
- **Four times more likely to use marijuana**



National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse XVI

Other Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) [Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#)


Boston Children's [Digital Wellness Lab](#)

Common Sense Media's [Parenting, Media, and Everything in Between](#)

Child Mind Institute's [Screen Time and Technology](#)

The Pediatric Mental Health Institute's [Understanding Problematic Internet Use](#)

United Kingdom's [Internet Matters](#)



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