



youth service bureau

Is Social Media Ruining Our Children's Social Skills?

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I didn't get my first cell phone until high school, and I really only used it to call home after school or to call my friends on the weekends. I didn't know how to text, my phone didn't have Internet access or apps, and there certainly was no camera.

I didn't think cell phones impacted my life much, until I started witnessing how it was changing my friends' social lives. I remember one evening in particular: my friend invited a few people over to her house. We were all watching a movie, hanging out and chatting... but then I noticed that she was texting on her cell phone...during the entire movie. Here she was, sitting in a room full of her friends, and she (the one who invited us over!) wasn't even socializing with us!

This might have been a rare occurrence "back in the day," but unfortunately we see this all the time today. Friends go out to dinner together, but inevitably someone pulls out their cell phone to update their Facebook status, "check-in" at the restaurant, Instagram a picture of their food, reply to a text message they just received... sometimes it seems as though people are socializing with everyone but the person sitting right there with them.

Humans are hardwired for social connection. We need to socialize with others. However, it doesn't come naturally – kids especially need practice at developing skills that will make them socially competent adults. So the question is... **is social media ruining our children's social skills?** Or does all this connection through social media actually help our kids develop the skills they so desperately need?

There are clearly benefits of social media. After all, it contains the word "social," doesn't it? A search on Google for "benefits of social media for teens" turns up many results. One of the "benefits" suggested over and over again by professionals in various fields is that social media actually increases and supports the development of social skills. However, various researchers and psychologists have argued that social media is, in fact, having a detrimental effect on children's social skills.

What does social media really do to our social skills, and how can we make sure it doesn't ruin our children's social skills?

"Benefit" 1: Social media allows kids to "break the ice" and is a less risky approach to making friends, especially for shy kids.

Less risk is exactly the problem. Learning how to make friendships is an important part of growing up, but is essentially a risky thing. There is risk in having face-to-face conversations. It takes courage to

confront a friend and be honest about your feelings, or to deal with conflict. However, today's youth are turning to social media and texting more and more to deal with these difficult situations.

“Conversation takes practice...and a dependence on devices can make it that much harder for children who are already struggling socially,” claims a 2011 Huffington Post article. Social skills are, in fact, skills – **and skills take practice**. All kids need to develop these skills, but especially children who are really struggling socially. Face-to-face practice is essential.

What can parents do?

- Model appropriate social skills to your child
- Practice with them: offer talking points and conversation starters. Be sure to practice all the basics: eye contact, handshakes, speaking slowly and clearly, how to introduce yourself, and general conversation manners and politeness.
- Show your child how to listen attentively and how to respond appropriately.
- Provide opportunities for your child to practice with others: at the next family gathering, after school on the ride home with a friend, making small talk with the cashier at the store... again, practice helps shy kids break out of their shells a bit and gives more sociable kids a chance to hone their skills.

“Benefit” 2: Social media leads to deeper, more intimate relationships and can even improve mental and emotional health because kids are constantly connected to friends and family.

Social media can actually lead to *hyper-connectivity*. Kids are never really alone when it comes to social media, but learning to be alone is actually beneficial for development. When kids are always connected and expected to connect, it can be emotionally draining, which can lead to anxiety or even a fear of missing out if they aren't constantly connected. And when kids get ignored online, or disconnect from those they have been constantly connected to, it can lead to frustration, hurt feelings, and even depression.

One study found that, on average, the more time an individual spends on the Internet at home, the less time they spend with friends, family members, and participating in social activities. Some research suggests that greater use of the Internet can be associated with declines in communication with family members in the household, declines in the size of the social circle, and increases in depression and loneliness. But other research suggests that people who are depressed, lonely, or anxious are just more likely to use social media.

This is where the issue gets complicated: how social media impacts mental, emotional and social health more likely depends on HOW social media is being used. If your child's social media time is taking away from meaningful face-to-face time with friends and family, it's more likely to have negative impacts on health.

Additionally, health is likely to be negatively impacted if kids are passively engaging in social media (such as “lurking” or scanning other people's profiles) instead of actively engaging with the content.

What we for sure do know from research is that actively engaging with friends and family appears to boost mental, emotional, and social health – another reason why it is so important for our children to have face-to-face time with friends and family.

What can parents do?

- Set up expectations for cell phone, Internet, and social media use as well as consequences for violating those consequences. Then, follow through as a family.
 - Establish technology-free times or zones, such as during dinner or in the bedroom.
 - Make sure to follow these rules as the parent – if you aren't following your own rules, your kids won't follow them either. This teaches your kids that there is a time and place for technology, but that there is a need to balance it with “real-world” interaction. Giving them the opportunity to power down and just be alone for a little bit during the day can help ease anxiety.
 - If your child seems upset about getting disconnected from someone (such as not getting a response to a text message right away), have a conversation with your child about how he or she is feeling, and offer an alternative activity to keep their mind off the lack of connection. Do something together to show your child that they are not alone or unloved despite being “ignored” on social media.
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“Benefit” 3: Social media gives kids the time to think about a response, instead of having to reply right away. This helps them think through their words before hitting “send” and sending something they might regret.

It's very important for kids AND adults to think before they post. However, face-to-face conversations don't work like this. When someone asks us a question, they expect a response right away. Kids won't always have the opportunity to leave the conversation and come back when they have the perfect response. During an interview, for example, your teen will be expected to think on his feet and respond appropriately. Not being prepared for these kinds of face-to-face interactions can lead to anxiety in children.

This also doesn't help prepare kids for dealing with conflict face-to-face. Kids *might* say something that doesn't come out quite right, and they need to learn how to manage that situation.

In addition, social media interactions eliminate nonverbal cues that we rely on so heavily during face-to-face interactions (some research suggests that up to 93% of communication is nonverbal)! Body language, tone of voice, facial expressions, and eye contact are just some of the nonverbal cues we use to engage in conversation. When those are missing it can lead to miscommunication. Kids don't have the opportunity to practice picking up on these cues when they are using social media to communicate.

What can parents do?

- Again, practice is key. Providing kids with opportunities for face-to-face interaction and communication is a necessity.
 - Ask your child questions that make them think and require more than just a “yes or no” answer.
 - Help them to identify nonverbal cues while having conversations (“Your tone of voice says that you're fine, but I can tell that your eyes look worried. Is something bothering you?”).
 - Remind kids to THINK before they post. You can find an activity to practice this on our website [here](#).
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“Benefit” 4: Social media gives kids more opportunities to communicate and practice social skills.

Social media provides the opportunity to develop some social skills, but not all. Those face-to-face skills lack when kids spend the majority of their time communicating through devices. It’s all about finding a balance between the two!

Social media also limits the ability for kids to navigate *spontaneous* social interactions. Instead of chatting with someone on the bus, they pull out their cell phone to avoid the conversation. Putting headphones on usually means, “I don’t want to talk.” Kids don’t always have the experience to know how to initiate conversations, maintain a conversation, and make “small talk.” Kids can also become dependent on their phone or iPod to entertain them, which can diminish their self-regulation skills.

What can parents do?

- Model what it looks like to engage in spontaneous conversation. While at the grocery store, chat with the cashier and include your child in the conversation. While riding the bus, don’t pull out your phone or book – instead, sit and watch the scenery go by. Simply showing your child what it looks like to not have to rely on technology to get through the day can be powerful.
- Encourage face-to-face communication as much as you can, to help balance the time spent communicating online.

“Benefit” 5: Social media builds confidence in teens by encouraging them to connect with others.

Social media may actually have the exact opposite effect. We know that peer acceptance is very important to adolescents. Although teens may be connecting with others in new ways, this also brings new opportunities for teens to feel either accepted or unaccepted by peers. “Adolescence and the early twenties in particular are the years in which you are acutely aware of the contrasts between who you appear to be and who you think you are,” says Dr. Donna Wick, a clinical and developmental psychologist. An Instagram picture that only gets a few “likes” may make a child feel unaccepted by peers; a rude comment on Facebook can lower a child’s self-esteem dramatically. Kids start defining themselves by the responses of others instead of their own self-worth. Their confidence and self-esteem can suffer.

What can parents do?

- Always tell your child how much you love them.
- Praise children for accomplishments.
- For girls especially, refrain from complimenting them on how they look; instead, focus on their talents and inner strengths.
- Be open and available for conversations with your child. Let them know you are there for them when they need to talk.
- Discuss how their online interactions are making them feel and invite open conversation.

We encourage you to help your child develop the social skills they need to be socially competent in today's society. For more information and resources, check out the references below!

Resources

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