



How does social media affect teens?

Social media issues permeate every aspect of a young person's life these days, whether it's revealing TMI (Too Much Info) about their boyfriend or girlfriend on Snapchat, having public spats with their BFF (Best Friend Forever) on Twitter or inadvertently inviting gatecrashers by posting party details on Facebook.

But what does social media make your child think about themselves? And how does it make them feel? Like many parents, you might be seeking help and advice in understanding this relatively new force in all our lives.

It's important to familiarise yourself with how social media works and its influence on your child – so you can support them to use it in a healthy and positive way.

We talked to teenage girls to find out what they love and hate about social networking.

Teenage girls, social media and popularity

“When you post on a social network, you've got to try not to get hung up on the 'Likes'. Of course you notice, but you have to remember that's not all it's about. The thing is to really enjoy posting, and to make sure your post reflects you and your world.”

Louise, 14*

How social media can knock teenagers' self-esteem

“You think, 'I'll just have a quick look!' – and you're there for ages. You look at everyone else's posts and you think: 'They're so pretty. Their life is so cool.' It can make you think everyone is having a better time than you. It can make you feel not good about yourself, because you think: 'What's wrong with me? Why aren't I having that sort of time?' And what



you have to remember is: people post their best moments. No life is high point after high point. Who posts their fat pictures, or their bad hair days? Yep, that's right – no-one."

Hannah, 15*

Social media offers an edited version of reality

"I kept seeing all these cool parties on social media websites, and I was thinking: 'Wow, they're just so much fun. Why are all the parties I go to so dull?' And then I realised: I am AT those parties. They're dull because they're full of people just looking at their phones and taking pictures."

Olivia, 16*

Social media influences young people's sense of self(ies)

"People create a false self, a fake self. They post all these selfies and they've Photoshopped them and messed around with them. One day I was doing that, I was Photoshopping an image and, when I'd finished, I hardly recognised myself. I thought: 'That's not me.' I realised that it was ridiculous – I really do want to be me. So it makes a nonsense of it all."

Shannon, 14*

"Social media is so compelling at this stage, because it answers both their need for friendship and their need for brain stimulation."

Dr Tara Cousineau



Problems with social media – don't feed the trolls

“People say things they would never say to your face. It seems to give them the ‘right’ to be rude and thoughtless, and it’s really gross. When people insult you up there, they don’t have to see how you react – it’s horrible. I realised that if you let that sort of feedback rule your life, you’re letting people who are too weedy to even own up to their feelings affect your whole self-esteem. I thought: ‘No thanks!’”

Madeline, 14*

Social media can change girls’ definition of what’s acceptable

“Certain girls get lots of Likes, and if you’re not that kind of girl, you won’t get the Likes. There’s a very narrow definition of what’s OK. People who don’t fit in have to try very hard: they have to try things like wearing their skirt too high, or unbuttoning their shirt too low, or caking on the make-up or the fake tan. To get positive feedback and extra mentions, most girls sex themselves up. It’s a sad reflection of our age I guess.”

India, 16*

Teenage girls are hardwired to like social media

There’s conflicting evidence about the effects of social media on teenage girls. Research indicates it can both help and harm their feelings of self-worth and acceptance.

According to clinical psychologist and mother of two teenage daughters, Dr Tara Cousineau, parents need to understand that young people are wired for socialisation.

What makes social networking so compelling for young people in general, and teenage girls in particular, is a fusion of two features of female adolescence. One is a deep-seated instinct to reach out beyond their family, to broaden their social circle and make new friends. And the other is an innate drive for activities that sharpen and stretch their mind.

“Social media is so compelling at this stage, because it answers both their need for friendship and their need for brain stimulation,” explains Dr Cousineau. “It’s not that girls are trying to be difficult or stubborn over this; it’s that they can’t keep away from it – it’s attention-grabbing, and understanding that is fundamental to helping your daughter.”



Setting your child up for social media success

How do you help your child use social media successfully? You want them to find their true self and not become obsessed with comparing themselves to others or perfecting their profile image. You want them to have a strong sense of self-worth based on their talents, personal qualities and tangible friendships.

There's no shortcut to self-esteem. It comes from strong relationships and achieving goals – so it's something your child will build on bit by bit. The best thing you can do to help is model a strong sense of self-worth in your own life (real and virtual). When opportunities arise, talk about true friends and self-respect. If you're struggling with your own self-esteem, get help – in addressing your issues, you'll be helping your child too.

Action checklist Limiting the influence of social media

Encourage family digital downtime

Research from The British Psychological Society found that constantly checking our phone for social network updates can increase stress. We all need times when we're switched off from social media and can focus on real, in-the-moment relationships. Try mealtimes, after a certain time in the evening, or Saturdays when you're playing a game or watching TV together, for example

Keep bedrooms social media-free

Suggest to your whole family that they switch off phones, computers and tablets for a while before going to bed and don't keep them by their bedsides. In the morning, encourage everyone to get up and dressed BEFORE switching on their smartphone and checking social networks

Agree rules of social engagement

Encourage your child and other family members to agree some social media rules for your household. Put the rules in writing and review them every six months or so

Next Steps

- Social media can have many positive effects on young people's lives, but we need to teach them to use it wisely, in a balanced and healthy way. Have a conversation with your child about their use of social media, and if you sense negative feelings or behaviour, take action
- Start by talking about how we all behave with social media. It's easy to become 'addicted' to checking for updates and adding comments. If this is becoming a problem for them, ask them to suggest changes they could make
- Talk to your child about the reality of people's lives in comparison with what's posted online. Explore the difference between 'edited highlights' and what really happens
- Think about replacement activities that will engage and interest your child in the real world while you're being 'social network-free'
- Read our article: [Why is social media important to young people? on what parents of teenage girls need to be aware of with social media](#)
- Teach them media literacy