Children and adolescents regularly use the internet, cell phones, and video games to gather information and communicate with each other. This ability to interact with others is the unique feature of social media, which provides powerful new ways for teens to create and navigate their social environments. Teens’ use of social media occurs simultaneously with their developing identity, emerging sexuality, physical development, and moral consciousness. Social media is ever-present in the lives of children and adolescents and impacts the behavioral and mental health of children and adolescents, and as such it is important for parents and caregivers to be aware of the risks and benefits. Better understanding how and why adolescents interact with social media, as well as the associated risks and benefits, can help parents and caregivers engage in productive conversation and create strategies for responsible use.

**Risks of Social Media**

- **Risks to mental health.** Many teens who are regular media users report that they have many friends, get along well with their parents, and are happy at school. However, peer rejection and a lack of close friends are among the strongest predictors of depression and negative self-views. Teens who are the heaviest media users report being less content and are more likely to report that they get into trouble a lot, are often sad or unhappy, and are often bored. Young women and girls tend to be at a higher risk for negative emotional and psychological consequences of social media interaction.

- **Cyberbullying.** Use of social media also creates an opportunity for emotional distress from receiving threatening, harassing, or humiliating communication from another teen, or cyberbullying. LGBT teens are the most likely to fall victim to this sort of bullying, followed by females. Individuals who are victims of cyberbullying are more likely to then perpetrate cyberbullying themselves. Cyberbullying is unfortunately quite common, can occur to any young person online, and can cause profound psychosocial outcomes including depression, anxiety, severe isolation, and, tragically, suicide.

- **Text/Picture Messaging.** While most teens use messaging responsibly, it is still an extremely powerful and private communication tool that can be used irresponsibly. With texting, teens cannot see the reaction of the person receiving the message, so their actions can be separated from the consequences. Any personal information, photos, or videos that are exchanged via text can quickly be provided to an audience other than the intended. It is important that teens know these messages can be even more lasting than a conversation or event in person. Sexting in particular is a concern for parents and teens, and 20% of teens have received or sent sexually explicit images or messages. Some teens who have engaged in sexting have been threatened or charged with felony child pornography charges, although some states have started characterizing such behaviors as juvenile-law misdemeanors.

**Benefits of Social Media**

- **Socialization and communication.** Most teens use online networks to extend the friendships they already have from other areas of their life. Social networking sites provide a way for teens to experience connectedness and opportunities to learn from each other. Online exchanges can help foster a child’s individual identity and social skills create relationships between individuals of different social and cultural backgrounds.

- **Support.** Social media can provide a supportive environment to explore romance, friendship, and social status. Social networking sites can allow teens to find support online that they may lack in traditional relationships, especially for teens who are often marginalized, such as lesbian, gay, bi, and transgendered (LGBT) teens; those who are living with an illness or disability; or those who may feel physically unattractive or socially reticent.
• **Accessing health information.** Teens also use online searches to gain answers to many of their health concerns easily and anonymously. Adolescents use social media to gather information about health topics that are hard to discuss with others, such as drug use and sexual health. The mobile technologies that teens use daily, namely cell phones, instant messaging, and text messaging, have already produced multiple improvements in their health care, such as increased medication adherence, better disease understanding, and fewer missed appointments.

• **Greater sense of comfort.** Because children and adolescents usually have a mobile device or cell phone with them at all times, parents and children alike can feel a greater sense of comfort in independence.

### Social Media and Privacy

When Internet users visit various websites, they can leave behind evidence of which sites they have visited. This collective, ongoing record of one’s web activity is called the digital footprint. Most studies show that teens do care about privacy and engage in privacy-protecting behaviors, such as adjusting their profiles to private from public access, refusing to provide identifying information, and avoiding certain websites. However, most youth do not read websites’ privacy policies or may be unaware that their information is at risk of disclosure to third parties like advertisers. Though concerned about talking to people they don’t know online, teens appear to be less worried about posting information about themselves.

### Recommendations for Parents

Parents and caregivers need to educate themselves about social media and the ways their teens may use it, as well as the common risks, to help them understand and navigate the technologies. Parents should be aware that 13 years is the minimum age for most social media sites because the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), enacted by Congress, prohibits websites from collecting information on children younger than 13 years without parental permission.

Family discussions about internet presence and social media can result in less risky online behaviors — many teens who say their parents have talked to them often about social media reported greater concerns about online safety and sharing of personal information and photos and more limited sharing of information/pictures via the internet, lower incidence of public online profiles, and lower incidence of talking to or meeting people they only know from online. Conversations reinforcing the idea that “what goes online, stays online” are important between parents and children. For parents and caregivers, discussing media content with their teens can be an effective strategy to reduce the amount of personal information disclosed — more so than prohibiting access, as teens often perceive monitoring as a violation of their privacy. Teens are more receptive to user-empowered strategies where they become the agent of their own protection or even some form of industry protections than policing by parents or caregivers.

### Additional Resources for Parents

Following are some resources for further research and information:

- HealthyChildren.org
- CommonSenseMedia.org
- Safekids.org