



Social Media & Youth: Perils, Powers, and Pathways to Resilience

A resource compendium to assist social media and mental health literacy

Social media literacy is necessary for equitable mental health and the mental health workforce can help their clients build these skills. As a first step, mental health providers should pursue their own social media literacy, the “the practical, cognitive, and affective competences required to access, analyze, evaluate, and create content on social media in a variety of contexts.”¹ When providers are themselves digitally literate, they are prepared to support youth, young adults, and caregivers to develop and maintain health relationships with social media. These skills can assist the mental health workforce in helping clients set appropriate boundaries, recognize mis- or disinformation, and protect themselves from the negative consequences of exposure to damaging content.

As the research summaries provided in this resource indicate, social media can be both a powerful tool for connection and support *and* a space that can cause or extenuate mental health inequities. This resource is a part of our Pacific Southwest MHTTC’s suite of programming² aimed to enhance the mental and school mental health workforce’s skills, knowledge, and awareness of how the positive and negative psychological impact of social media on youth and young adults.

We offer a list of resources, guidelines, and tips to support healthy use of social media. These free, publicly accessible links give mental health providers information about the risks and benefits of social media for adolescents and youth. The links are offered as resources to be distributed to providers’ clients, including youth and their family/caregivers.

Note: social media literacy and mental health is a large area of learning; there is a new development, movement, finding, recommendation all the time. We learn best when we learn in practice and together: if you are finding yourself overwhelmed by this subject, identify a person or organization with whom you can partner to support your social media and mental health literacy journey.

¹ Polanco-Levicán, K., & Salvo-Garrido, S. (2022). Understanding Social Media Literacy: A Systematic Review of the Concept and Its Competences. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 19(14), 8807. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19148807>

² [Social Media & Youth; Perils, Powers, and Pathways to Resilience, Pacific Southwest MHTTC, August 2023](#)



Guiding Questions for Your Social Media & Mental Health Literacy Journey

Before providers can help their clients build and sustain healthy relationships with social media, providers themselves need a baseline for assessing their own social media literacy. The following are suggested reflection questions to support your learning. As you work through these questions, you may identify gaps in your knowledge, skills, and abilities. This compendium helps mental health providers build digital competencies by providing streamlined, vetted, and up-to-date tools and resources that can enhance client supports.

Knowledge

- What aspects of social media literacy do you feel you need to develop? Where might you be a beginner, and how might you create a learning plan to foster your knowledge building (*e.g., you might not know about online harms specifically related to young people who identify as Asian Pacific Islander or LGBTQIA+ and want to identify how to expand your awareness of specific issues*)
- What have you observed about your clients' use of social media? Who is using it? How is it being used?
- What impacts have you noticed about social media use (positive and negative)?
- What are current and incoming trends that you need to stay up to date with in order to better provide support services?
- If you are an agency, division, or organizational leader, how might you commit to investing in your team's social media literacy?
- Which populations are understudied and under-supported (*e.g., Asian American youth's mental health due to media impact; Black girls' experience with digital trauma*)?

Skills

- How would you assess your skill level in supporting young people's social media literacy? (*E.g., the skills to help a young adult apply critical thinking to their use of social media, their personal data sharing, their understanding of algorithmic transparency*)
- If you identify areas of growth, how can you bridge the gap between where you are and where your clients need you to be?
- If you are a provider who primarily works with parents and caregivers, how can you enhance your skills to help them navigate conversations, boundaries, and social media use agreements in their household? How might you support their awareness of signs and symptoms of a young person in danger?
- How can you as a provider use the connecting tools of social media to enhance young adults' senses of belonging, safety, identify affirmation, and connection?

Abilities

- How can you grow your ability to navigate experiences of cyberbullying?
- What do you need to become more aware of and then more able to prevent and intervene when clients have unhealthy social media experiences (*e.g., algorithmic racism, revenge porn, negative body image, child sexual exploitation*)?
- How can you strengthen your therapeutic approaches to encourage safety with young adult clients to share their experiences on social media?

Want more? This [social media literacy self-assessment](#) and [this digital literacy self assessment](#) can be used for your own practice, or with the young adults, parents and caregivers with whom you work.





Organizations & Agencies Leading Social Media Literacy Learning

The following are selected organizations, companies, and centers whose work can support your social media literacy.

- [Common Sense Education](#) and their initiative specifically for students, [Digital Citizenship](#) provides resources for educators and school mental health professionals to support students to understand digital citizenship.
- [Center for Digital Thriving at Harvard Graduate School of Education](#) works with young people to develop evidence-based, youth-driven resources for use in schools, homes, peer-to-peer relationships, and clinical settings.
- [Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#) a partnership with the American Academy of Pediatrics offers both resources and a “social media and youth” Q&A portal that answers user questions about digital literacy and social media health.
- Children and Screens
- [Log Off Movement](#) is a youth-led organization dedicated to creating an online community that supports healthy digital spaces for youth.
- [Youth, Media & Wellbeing Research Lab Wellesley College](#) conducts research on how young people from historically marginalized populations create online identities.
- [Cornell Social Media Lab](#) studies the impact of communication technology on well-being and develops interventions that promote pro-social behavior.
- [SelfSea](#) (powered by Peer Health Exchange) is a platform for community, identity, and health made by, with, and for young people. Selfsea is a peer-to-peer platform with mental health resources, support, and stories from young people who have been there.

Social Media & Youth Mental Health, Studies, & Articles

[Understanding Social Media Literacy: A Systematic Review of the Concept and Its Competences](#), PubMedCentral (2022)

This study analyzes definitions and concepts of social media literacy. Its findings show that the concept of social media literacy is based on media literacy, which is linked to the development of cognitive competencies, where critical thinking, socio-emotional, and technical competences are fundamental.

★ **We recommend exploring this piece first as it provides foundational definitions and concepts** such as *social media literacy*, the “prevention of risks such as mental and physical health problems, as well as other types of consequences that can arise from interactions between people, for example cyberbullying, information spreading, and other difficulties.”

Key quote: “It is important to note that the use of social media is not negative in itself as it can increase social capital, foster friendships, and reduce feelings of loneliness; however, it depends on the user’s characteristics and how the different platforms are used. As a result, teaching and learning competences for the use of these internet platforms are particularly relevant since they include social and ethical aspects and technical skills, as well as competences that can assess information that aids in better decision-making.”





[Putting Forward a New Narrative for Adolescent Media: The American Academy of Pediatrics Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#) **American Academy of Pediatrics Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health (2023).**

This article acknowledges the concern about media use on youth mental health and yet invites us to understand the use of digital media as a developmentally appropriate activity that allows adolescents to pursue critical developmental tasks such as identity exploration, peer connection, and independence.

Key quote: “Good decisions that work for diverse families are not made from a place of shame or oversimplification. We as adolescent health experts have the opportunity to promote the narrative of adolescents as unique individuals who bring their own strengths and vulnerabilities to designing and shaping their own digital media experiences.”

[Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence](#), **American Psychological Association (2023)**

Psychological scientists examine potential beneficial and harmful effects of social media use on adolescents’ social, educational, psychological, and neurological development. Officials and policymakers have documented the importance of this issue and are actively seeking science-informed input. The recommendations in this report are based on the scientific evidence to date.

Key quote: “Adolescents’ experiences online are affected by both 1) how they shape their own social media experiences (e.g., they choose whom to like and follow); and 2) both visible and unknown features built into social media platforms.”

[Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#) , **U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory (2023)**

This public statement issued by the U.S. Surgeon General calls attention to the growing concerns about the effects of social media on youth mental health. It covers the current evidence on the positive and negative impacts of social media on children and adolescents, and some of the primary mental health and well-being concerns.

Key quote: “There is broad agreement among the scientific community that social media has the potential to both benefit and harm children and adolescents. Brain development is a critical factor to consider when assessing the risk for harm.”

[The Rise of Social Media Therapy](#) **Verywell Mind (2021)**

This medically fact checked article reviews the complicated question: “what can people gain from the rise of mental health influencers, and what should they be wary of?”

Key quote: “though mental health influencers can provide a jumping-off point for exploring different conditions, they are not a source for diagnosis or treatment.”





Tools for Educators, Youth Advocates, Parents and Caregivers

Question & Answer Live Library

[Social Media and Youth Mental Health Q&A Portal](#), **American Academy of Pediatrics**

This link is an online portal for parents, educators, and clinicians to post questions about social media and youth mental health and receive personalized answers based on an evidence review performed by the team of experts with the AAP's Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health. All answers are added to the library of answers to help others with similar questions. The portal addresses a youth age range of early to late adolescence and early adulthood, specifically young people between 10-24 years of age.

Simple overview

HelpGuide offers a clear and concise overview of the benefits and cautionary nuances in [Social Media and Mental Health](#)

Resource Guide

[Dear Parents; a digital well-being resource from teens to parents](#), **Screentime Network**

A digital 10-page well-being resource guide from teens to give parents more understanding, empathy, and skills around their children's screen use.

Tip Sheet Library

[Tips for Parents](#), **Children and Screens Institute of Digital Media and Child Development**

An international non-profit organization's compendium of young children to teenager's tips for parents to understand and address compelling questions regarding media's impact on child development through dialogue, public information, and objective research.

Research-based Tip Sheet

[Family Tip Sheet - Building Healthy Digital Habits](#), **American Academy of Pediatrics**

This 1-pager offers research-based tips from pediatricians aimed at helping young children build healthy digital habits.

Catalogue

[Parents & Professionals List of Social Media Harms for Minors](#), **Screen Time Network at Fairplay**

This document lists the multitudes of online harms affecting children and teens and discusses contributing factors, risks, and effects, as well as suggested solutions. "Online harms" is defined as harmful business models and content (both physical and mental) found on social media platforms. The online harms listed are related to minors under the age of 18, but many times are also harmful to adults.

Guide for youth

[How much is too much social media use](#), **American Psychological Association**

APA's chief science officer provides several recommendations on how to help teens develop social media literacy skills before they begin using social media and receive ongoing reminders to help reinforce these skills.





Digital/Social Media Literacy Resources (for adults and youth)

[Social Media Helpful Tips](#), **NAMI**

This one-pager is a helpful handout written for youth and young adults to help them engage safely with social media and protect their mental health.

[Impact of Social Media on Youth and How to Manage Social Media Recommendations in Primary Care](#), **Mid-America MHTTC**

This presentation provides information on strategies to help parents and youth understand safety precautions and reduce negative implications of social media use.

[Media Literacy Resources](#), **California Department of Education**

This collection of resources was compiled in conjunction with the California School Library Association and KQED. It includes K-12 online content, media literacy, curricula, resources, lessons and more.

[Media Literacy and Critical Thinking Online \(dhs.gov\)](#), **U.S. Department of Homeland Security**

A 2-page flyer that briefs on the three types of online content (misinformation, mal-information, and disinformation) that includes key steps for digital media literacy and resources.

[Trusted Web: 14 Tools That Promote Media Literacy to Fight Fake News](#), **Trusted Web**

Provides information and links to free online courses, educational videos, activities, quizzes, and games for young children through young adults. Including [Checkology | The News Literacy Project](#) for all ages, Google's [Be Internet Awesome - A Program to Teach Kids Online Safety](#) and more.

[Categories and Sample Questions for Media Decoding](#), **Project Look Sharp**

Single page brief on *Developing Habits of Inquiry and Reflection* with categories including "Authorship & Purposes," "Credibility," "Follow Up," and more. Visit [Project Look Sharp](#) for additional resources.

[Digital Citizenship Curriculum | Common Sense Education](#), **Common Sense Education**

Free Interactive lessons and activities with an included [curriculum](#) for grades K-12. Curriculum includes media balance & well-being, privacy & security, cyberbullying and more.

[MediaWise Education Resources - Poynter](#), **The Stanford History Education Group**

Website with free educational videos and courses for youth to seniors including, [Navigating Digital Information](#), [Campus Correspondents TikTok Videos](#), [How to Spot Misinformation Online - Poynter](#) and more!

[Screentime Genie](#)

This is a web-based tool designed to improve users' relationships with their screen time. Screentime Genie uses principles of behavior design to match users with customized sets of solutions that are contextually relevant to the platforms they use, proportionate to the time they have available to invest, and the most effective based on available research.

