



## WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA? HOW IS IT AFFECTING ADOLESCENT'S MENTAL HEALTH?

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With the advent of 20<sup>th</sup> century, several social networking sites also came in forefront. Any website that allows social interaction is considered a social media site, including social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, My Space; gaming sites and virtual worlds such as Club Penguin, Second Life and the Sims; video sites such as You Tube; and blogs.<sup>[1]</sup> Using social media web sites is one of the commonest activities of children and adolescents these days and have become a major means of communication among children, adolescents and adults. Therefore, parents need to understand the implications of using social media and the impact these social media can have in life of their children. Public health experts are in a unique position to help families understand these sites and to encourage healthy use and urge parents to monitor for potential problems like cyber bullying, 'Facebook depression', sexting and exposure to inappropriate content. Through this article, we are trying make an attempt to explain the negative and positive implications of social media on today's adolescent's mental health, role of parents and public health in combating these issues among adolescents. Depression, anxiety, inferiority or superiority complex are some of the common mental health problems that can arise due to over use of social media sites.

Engaging in various forms of social media is a routine activity that research has shown to benefit children and adolescents by enhancing communication, social connection and even technical skills.<sup>[2]</sup> During last five years, the number of pre adolescents and adolescents using such sites has increased dramatically. According to a recent poll, 22% of teenagers log on to their favorite social media site more than 10 times a day and more than half of adolescents log on to a social media site more than once a day.<sup>[3]</sup> Seventy-five percent of teenagers now own cell phones, and 25% use them for social media, 54% use them for texting, and 24% use them for instant messaging.<sup>[4]</sup> Thus, a large part of this generation's social and emotional development is occurring while on the internet and on cell phones. Increased social media use has also increased harmful offline behaviors like bullying, clique forming, and sexual experimentation that have introduced problems such as cyber bullying, privacy issues and sexting. Other problems that demand attention include internet addiction and concurrent sleep deprivation.<sup>[1]</sup>

Often parents find it difficult to keep pace with their children's ever changing internet landscape. In addition, parents often lack a basic understanding that kids' online lives are an extension of their offline lives.

### **Dangers associated with social media**

Social media has become a huge threat not only to the mental health of adolescents but also to their academic

performances, social and interpersonal relationships. Major risks fall into the following categories: cyber bullying, sexting, facebook depression, privacy concerns and the digital footprints and outside influences of third party advertising groups.

Cyber bullying is deliberately using digital media to communicate false, embarrassing or hostile information about another person. It is the most common risk for all adolescents. It can cause profound psychological outcomes like depression, anxiety, severe isolation and tragically suicide.<sup>[5]</sup>

Sexting can be defined as "sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images via cell phones, computer, or other digital device."<sup>[6]</sup> Many of these images become distributed rapidly via cell phones or the internet. This phenomenon does occur among the adolescent population; a recent survey revealed that 20% of adolescents have sent or posted nude or seminude photographs or videos of themselves.<sup>[7]</sup>

Researchers have proposed a new phenomenon called "Facebook depression," defined as depression that develops when adolescents spend a great deal of time on social media sites, such as Facebook and then begin to exhibit classic symptoms of depression.<sup>[8-13]</sup> The intensity of the online world is thought to be a factor that may trigger depression in some adolescents. As with offline

depression, adolescents who suffer from Facebook depression are at risk for social isolation and sometimes turn to risky internet sites and blogs for “help” that may promote substance abuse, unsafe sexual practices, or aggressive or self-destructive behaviors.<sup>[1]</sup>

The main risks to adolescents today are risks of improper use of technology, lack of privacy, sharing too much information, or posting false information about themselves or others.<sup>[14]</sup> When internet users visit various web sites, 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.” One of the biggest threats to young people on social media sites is to their digital footprint and future reputations. Adolescents who lack an awareness of privacy issues often post inappropriate messages, pictures and videos without understanding that “what goes online stays online.”<sup>[15]</sup>

### Merits of using social media

Social media offers adolescents deeper benefits like socialization and communication, enhancing learning opportunities, sharing of knowledge and experiences and many more: fostering of one’s individual identity and unique social skills; creation of blogs, podcasts, videos and gaming sites; enhancement of individual and collective creativity and create opportunities for community engagement through raising money for charity and volunteering for local events.

### How can adolescents be helped???

Public health experts hold a unique position to educate families about both the complexities of the digital world and the challenging social and health issues that online adolescents experience by encouraging families to face the core issues of bullying, popularity and status, depression and social anxiety, risk-taking and sexual development. They can advise parents to talk to their children about their online use and the specific issues that today’s kids face, advising parents to reduce generation and technology gap by becoming better educated about the many technologies their youngsters are using and this way they will be able to supervise online activities of their adolescents through active participation and communication.<sup>[1]</sup> Public health experts with websites or blogs may wish to create section with resources for parents and children and may suggest a list of or links to social media sites appropriate for the different age groups. In this way, public health experts can support the efforts of parents to engage and educate youth to be responsible, sensible and respectful digital citizens.

Teachers and professors have a major role to play in guiding their students about the implications of social networking sites. In schools and colleges, special workshops and seminars can be organized to understand the adolescent’s views on social sites, problems they frequently encounter, finding solutions to their problems

with their active participation and guiding them about ways to cope with the stress and other related issues. Psychologists or psychiatrists or counselors should be made available in the institutions for counseling sessions.

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