

Times have certainly changed since my teenage days, and quite frankly even in the few short years since our young adult children were teens. According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, over 60% of 13-17-year olds have at least one profile on social networking sites and many spend at least 2 hours a day on them. Seventy-five percent of teens own cell phones, 25% use their phones for social media, 54% for texting, and 24% for instant messaging. As a result, a great deal of this generation's social and emotional development occurs while they are on the Internet or cell phones.

Before you panic though, it's important to realize that social networking sites are a widely accepted part of the lives of many tweens and teenagers, and resorting to all or nothing measures, or putting our heads in the sand is not the appropriate response! Just as my parents thought it was excessive for us to have a second phone, and next a second television, that was color for goodness sake, we too must take a breath and accept that advances in technology, and shifts in cultural norms are inevitable, and need not be feared.

Social networking is an integral part of most of our lives now, and the key is to manage what, when, how, and why we are utilizing it. There are risks and benefits for all, and with proactive parenting we can help our children to enjoy the benefits and avoid the risks.

So let's look at a few of the risks and benefits:

BENEFITS:

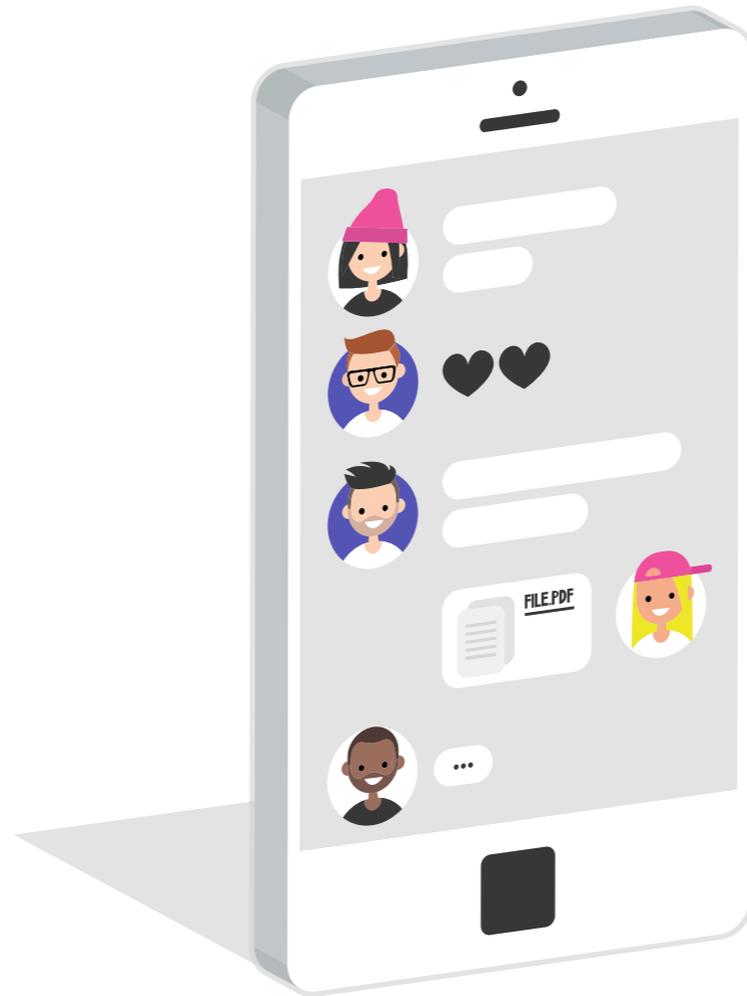
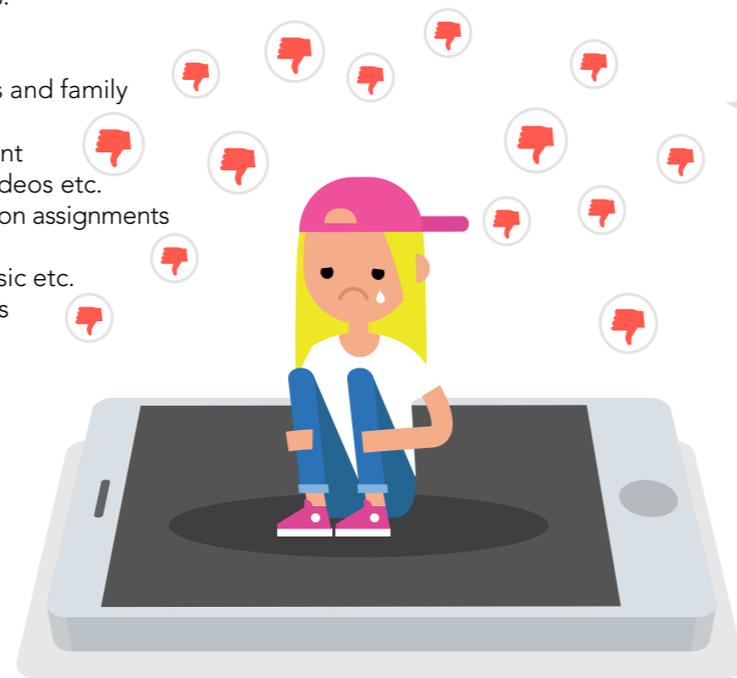
- Allows them to stay connected to friends and family
- Develop technical skills
- Opportunities for community engagement
- Growth of ideas from blogs, podcasts, videos etc.
- Connecting and collaborating with others on assignments
- Access to health information
- Sharing creative content i.e. artwork, music etc.
- Develop new friends with similar interests
- Development of individual identity

RISKS:

- Cyber-bullying, clique forming, sexting
- Over-sharing with words or photos
- Vulnerability to predatory adults
- Risk of identity theft, digital footprint
- Inappropriate ads
- Internet addiction
- Sleep deprivation
- Decreased physical activity
- Internet addiction
- Facebook depression and anxiety

"Facebook depression and Anxiety" is a new term, and a new focus of attention for us as Psychotherapists. As part of normal social and emotional development, teenagers desire to fit in, to be liked, and to avoid standing out in any negative way. Focusing less on family, and more on peer approval and connection, is a natural part of identity development and a move toward launching into the world as young adults.

While teenagers have historically been vulnerable to feeling left out, this age of social networking has definitely exacerbated that vulnerability. When they check their social media apps or phones, it is all too obvious if they are in or out of the loop. Even in cases where they haven't missed out, they may tell themselves that they are not as popular, as cool, as pretty, as smart etc. Tweens and teens have a limited capacity for self-regulation



and are therefore much more susceptible to peer pressure, self-blame, and self-criticism, which can all too easily lead to symptoms of anxiety and depression. Keep the channel of communication with your child open, check in with them about how social networking is impacting their emotions, and assess for any possibility of bullying or inappropriate sharing.

As parents, it is so important to recognize and accept that our children's online lives are now an extension of their offline lives. While there are risks that we must attend to, there are also benefits, which we, as the adults, can help them to enjoy in a safe way. The following are some suggestions for you as the parent:

PARENT TOOLS:

- Be savvy. Educate yourself about the social media world and safety measures
- Be open with them about your concerns, hear their thoughts, and guide them
- Maintain control by restricting access to their page
- Be clear about the rules in your house regarding these sites
- Be open about the monitoring you will be doing on their sites and phone
- Communicate what the time limits will be on social media and phones
- Emphasize the importance of time with family, school, and physical activity
- Be clear about the consequences should they not follow the guidelines
- Make certain they meet the minimum age on specific websites
- Try to supervise actively rather than with monitoring software
- Emphasize that they MUST let you know if they plan to see anyone they met online
- *Make time to connect with your children, have family nights, and let them know they matter more than your social networking!*

Also, LET THEM KNOW THAT WHAT GOES ONLINE STAYS ONLINE!! Future employers, Colleges, or friends, may access their posts!

And for some final thoughts... remember that we must model the behavior we want our children and young adults to emulate. Make it a priority to balance your life. Is your family, work, physical/mental/emotional/spiritual health, being attended to? Are you falling prey to the online Pseudo-perfect lives that are being presented to you? Are you avoiding feelings, intimacy, or connection in your life, by compulsively using social media! Internet addiction is a real thing, and as with any other substance or behavior needs to be monitored. If you fear that it has become a problem in your life, or the life of your child, please reach out for help. www.crchealth.com www.netaddiction.com

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