

# How to Engage Adolescents in Healthy Social Media Use

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## **Mack Jantsch, LMFT**

*Therapist • Laureate Eating Disorders – Adolescent Program*

*Mackenzie “Mack” Jantsch graduated from Oklahoma State University with a Master’s of Science specialization in Marriage and Family Therapy. Mack is a Licensed Marital and Family Therapist, LMFT, and an approved LMFT supervisor for the state of Oklahoma. Mack worked at Youth Services of Tulsa for 6 years as a family counselor and the family counseling coordinator before joining the adolescent team at Laureate’s Eating Disorder Program. Mack is certified in Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral therapy. She is trained in assessing and managing suicide risk, a neurodevelopmental model for working with families with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders or other neuro-behavioral conditions, and integrated treatment of complex trauma for adolescents. Her most recent presentation was discussing how to engage adolescents in healthy social media use. Mack has a passion for using family systems, trauma-informed care, and experiential techniques to help families navigate how to handle stress and the challenges of raising an adolescent in today’s world.*

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## **TO POST OR NOT TO POST?**

Social media use has been a growing concern within the mental health field as communities start to question how these platforms could impact the mental health and social development of adolescents. As a family therapist, I cannot count on how many times I have been asked if an adolescent’s current mental health concerns are due to their social media use. This question is valid, and this article is meant to aid parents in navigating healthy social media use for their adolescents.

There are countless social media platforms that adolescents use, with the current most common apps used by adolescents being TikTok and Snapchat. (Sorry parents but, Facebook is totally lame nowadays!) Other social media sites to mention are Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit. Popularity and creation of social media sites are ever changing. What is being used right now with adolescents may not be the most popular app next month. All of these sites have similar algorithms and the ability to interact and share content among users.

## **WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS**

There is extensive research on the impact of social media use on adolescents’ body image, self-esteem, social activism, sleep health, mental health issues, relationship health, bullying, and drug use. The overarching question is: “Is social media good or

bad for adolescents’ mental health?” The answer is: neither. Research in each of these categories can show risk factors or negative components to social media use and protective factors or positive components to social media use. Within eating disorder treatment – “pro-ANA” and “thinspiration” hashtags could be a glorification of eating disorders, while in contrast there is widening popularity for eating disorder recovery, pro-recovery, or #TW hashtags.

Another study showed that social media use impacted adolescent body dissatisfaction based on type of platform, age, and country; but, body dissatisfaction was weaker among adolescents who reported a more positive mother-child relationship. This “neither/or” concept of whether social media is bad or good for adolescents is also shown with other possible co-occurring mental health. Adolescents with diagnosed depression expressed negative consequences when oversharing, stress posting, or viewing triggering content, but they reported improved mood when social media use was evaluated as part of their mental health treatment and shifted to more positive use. Further, when controlling for cyberbullying victimization and sleep disturbance, the association between social media use and suicide attempts decreases. Using social media as a humorous coping skill during the COVID-19 pandemic increased happiness in anxious adolescents. Lastly, although social media use may expose adolescents to

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increased witnessed trauma-related content, it has also increased adolescent social activism and aided adolescents from marginalized populations. Social media can have both positive and negative influences on adolescents' lives, and we need to look at the whole picture. While social media can be a place for adolescents to find a unique community of people with shared experiences and be an expressive creative outlet, it can also come with challenges. As parents, instead of shielding your children from the challenges in the world today, you want to teach them how to navigate those challenges in a healthy way.

## WHO IS AT RISK?

Some risk factors for an unhealthy adolescent relationship with social media are: permissive or authoritarian parenting, mental health issues, negative self-esteem and/or body image issues, lack of family acceptance, experiences of cyberbullying or bullying, sleep issues, and history of trauma experiences. There is a "Goldielocks" balance within monitoring social media use as parents. Too little or too much monitoring can lead to inappropriate or deceitful use. If you completely take away social media use, I promise your adolescent will find a way to access it. Some protective factors for having a healthy relationship with social media are: involved parenting, positive child-parent relationship, parents that use social media in a healthy way (modeling), structured schedule, and overall healthy relationships with others.

## HOW TO TALK WITH YOUR TEEN

As a therapist, some of the questions I ask within assessment of social media use are:

1. How many hours a day?
2. Which sites/apps?
3. How many accounts on each site?
4. What are the different accounts for?
5. Are you using privacy settings?
6. Who is accepted as a "friend," or who are you talking to?
7. How much do parents monitor?
8. What do you post?
9. What do you look at?

10. What's on your "For You Page?" (FYP)
11. What side of Tiktok are you on today? (What type of content are you seeing?)
12. What do you like about it?
13. When do you get on most?
14. How does it impact you when you see eating disorder related posts?

These are assessment questions you can also ask your adolescent in a curious and non-judgmental way. When you want to mitigate risk for your adolescent's social media use, keep a few factors in mind. Try to avoid using "shouldn't" or "should," "stop this," or "finger-wagging" language in general. You can try to use perspective-taking language. For example, "What would you do if your friend was doing this?" It is helpful to give adolescents tidbits of control. Again, you are guiding them in how to have a healthy relationship with social media use and to be critical adult thinkers. This could look like you having a conversation with your adolescent about what they believe is an appropriate level of monitoring. Some adolescents may say "I don't want you to monitor at all. Stay out of my life!" In all my years of working with adolescents, this has happened only a few times. Most adolescents want a healthy, open, supportive relationship with their parents. Adolescents usually want some guidance on how to navigate this world.

Here are a few other ideas for starting the conversation about social media risk management with your adolescent.

- Discuss the pros and cons of social media. What do they think a healthy relationship with social media is?
  - Discuss privacy settings and what is posted. Explain to them the possible danger of posting identifiable information, like wearing a school sweatshirt.
  - What content is being watched or read? Can we shift this to more positive use? For example, there was a TikTok trend last year that stated "what I eat in a day" and showed various meals and snacks a video creator ate throughout the day. As you can image, a young person watching this video could question if there were eating too much or too little or whether they need to eat more "clean" like that certain creator with the "idealistic" body type.
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## PATIENCE AND POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

These concepts can be cognitively difficult to navigate for a developing adolescent brain. There were many eating disorder professionals or people in eating disorder recovery that attempted to combat this trend by creating a variety of ways to eat throughout the day. Without your guidance, your child could take what they saw from that video and start implementing disordered eating habits. You can have a conversation with them about their thoughts regarding certain trends, how it makes them think about themselves, or use it as an educational experience to communicate about healthy eating habits for their genetic makeup. It is important to monitor social media use of adolescents in a way that aids safety and positive parent-child relationships. The above topics can start the conversation. If you feel uncomfortable or unprepared to have these conversations with your adolescent, reach out to an adolescent therapist or your child's existing mental health professionals to ask how to navigate these conversations.

## HOW TO BE INVOLVED

Beyond conversation, be involved with monitoring. Some ideas that I use within the therapy setting are parent education about social media that is led by the child, parent involvement in social media with the adolescent, and showing parents relatable TikToks youth might see. I commonly tell parents to download TikTok, or other social media sites, and do their own investigation on current trends. You may not be on the exact same "side" of Tiktok as your adolescent, but you could gain a better understanding of trends and have discussions about popular music. I wouldn't have enough time in this article to explain the different privacy and reporting settings on each of these apps, but you would be able to learn if you used them yourself. Many apps have attempted to implement more eating disorder-informed settings. On Instagram, you can now report posts that encourage or promote eating disorders or a post that makes fun of or attacks people suffering from an eating disorder. When your adolescent bring ups topics/dances/sounds from social media trends that you don't understand, have them show you and be empathically curious about those trends. An even more fun way to engage your adolescent is to be IN the TikToks - make it a quality time activity. Be goofy, play jokes, and have fun with them about silly dance trends. I have gained respect for a few famous actors, basketball players, or chefs that I have seen regularly on their children's TikToks videos.

More specifically for eating disorders, aid your adolescent in removing accounts that are eating disorder focused, diet-culture related, or any account that makes them feel like their body is not good enough. Some travel or food influencers may appear body positive or recovery-focused, but they may endorse diet products on their stories. As stated above, ask your adolescent how they feel when they see diet culture appear in their feeds. Furthermore, educate them how diet culture can be veiled or within hidden messaging. For recovery-focused accounts, ask for recommendations from your treatment team, or do your own investigation. Help your adolescent find recovery-focused accounts they can follow.

## About Laureate

*Founded in 1989 by The William K. Warren Foundation, Laureate Psychiatric Clinic and Hospital in Tulsa, OK, provides a full spectrum of psychiatric services as well as research and education for the general public and professional community. At Laureate, we want our patients not only to recover and function, but also experience a fulfilling life within their family, business and community.*

*Laureate is a private, not-for-profit, freestanding psychiatric facility. The campus is set on 47 acres of rolling hills in a series of related buildings forming a retreat-like atmosphere. Its beautifully landscaped surroundings include wooded courtyards, walking trails, a waterfall and a small lake. Everything on campus, from the outpatient clinic to patient rooms, is designed with patients' needs in mind.*

*Laureate is dedicated to providing only the latest diagnostic services and medical technologies. The treatment concepts, the programs, the buildings and the campus itself are an outgrowth of the constant re-examination of how behavioral healthcare should be delivered.*

*For questions, or to schedule an appointment with a mental health professional, please call the Laureate Outpatient Clinic, Monday - Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at 918-491-3700.*

*For eating disorders admissions questions, contact the Eating Disorders Program admission office at 1-800-322-5173.*