

# #HealthyHabits: Navigating Social Media with Adolescents in Primary Pediatric Practice

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# Screens and Social Media

- Overview
- Developmental Context
- Mental Health Considerations
- Practical tools and guidance



# Social Media

**TikTok:** A short-form video app featuring dances, trends, challenges, and humor.

- **Why Teens Love It:** Highly engaging, creative, and algorithm-driven for endless entertainment.
- **Concerns:** Exposure to harmful trends, content, and addictive scrolling.

**Instagram:** A photo- & video-sharing platform with Stories, Reels (short videos), and private messaging.

- **Why Teens Love It:** A place to showcase their life, follow trends, and connect with friends.
- **Concerns:** Fosters comparison, FOMO, and unrealistic beauty standards.

**Snapchat:** A messaging app featuring disappearing photos, videos (Snaps), and Stories.

- **Why Teens Love It:** Fun filters, private chats, and ephemeral content that “feels” less permanent.
- **Concerns:** Risk of sexting, cyberbullying, and lack of parental oversight. Streaks and friend rankings. Tracks and shares location.

**YouTube:** A video platform for tutorials, vlogs, entertainment, and education.

- **Why Teens Love It:** A go-to for everything from gaming streams to makeup tutorials.
- **Concerns:** Exposure to inappropriate content despite parental controls.



# Social Media

**Discord:** A group-chat platform initially for gamers but now used for all interests (e.g., clubs, fandoms).

- **Why Teens Love It:** Easy way to connect with like-minded peers in a non-public space.
- **Concerns:** Unmoderated groups, exposure to inappropriate discussions, and online predators.

**BeReal:** App where users post unfiltered photos once a day at a random time.

- **Why Teens Love It:** Encourages authenticity over curated content.
- **Concerns:** Still creates pressure to share “on time” and risks oversharing.

**X (formerly Twitter):** A platform for sharing short posts, news, and opinions.

- **Why Teens Love It:** Great for following trends, memes, and public conversations.
- **Concerns:** Exposure to toxic discussions, misinformation, and minimal content controls.

**Facebook:** Once dominant, now mainly used by older generations. Teens typically avoid it.

- **Why Teens *Don't* Love It:** Considered outdated and irrelevant for their peer group.



# Social Media

About 50% of US kids have a smartphone by age 11

Algorithms are powerful

Average pickups = 100/day

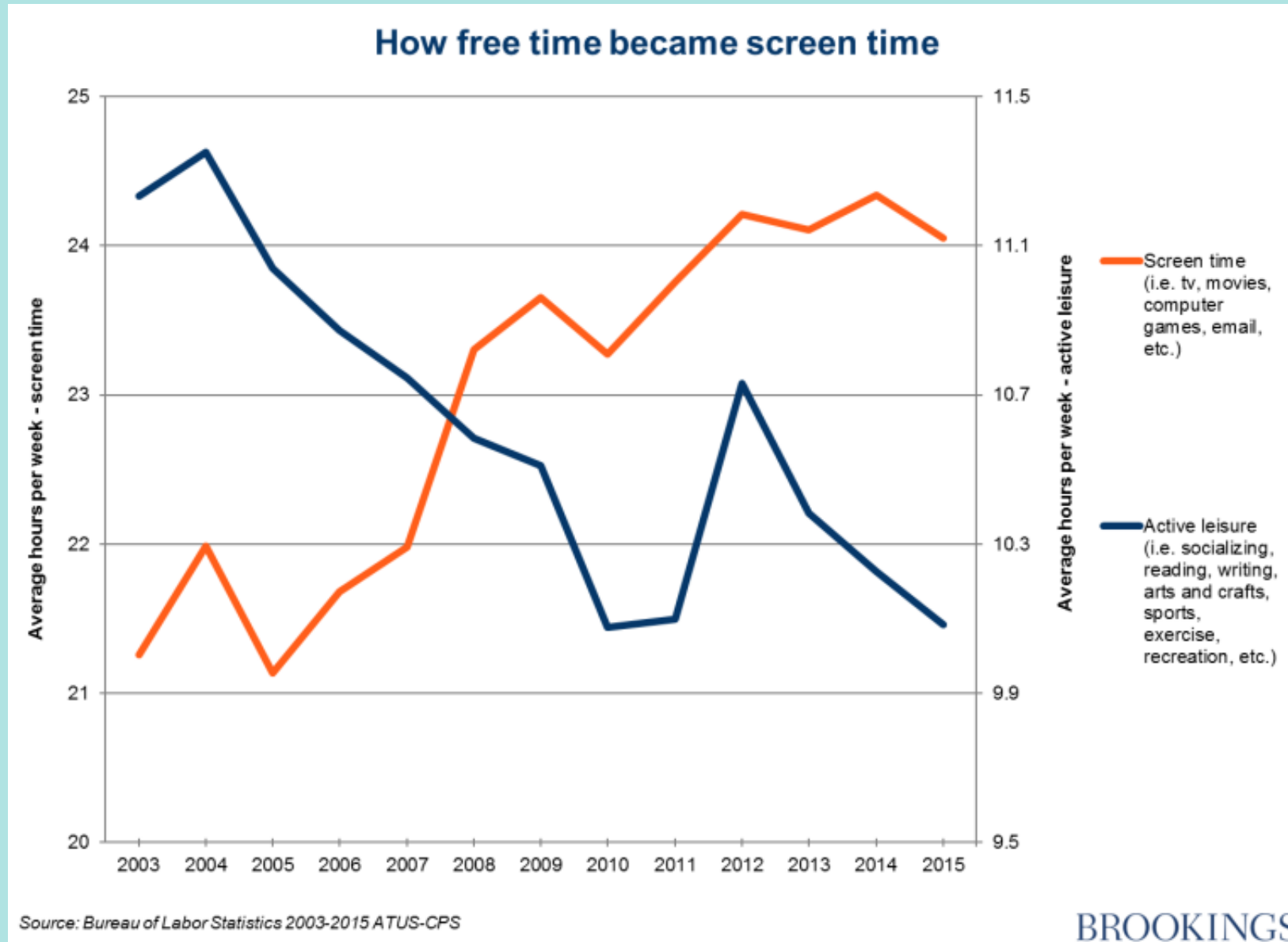
Average time on smart phone = 8.3 hours per day

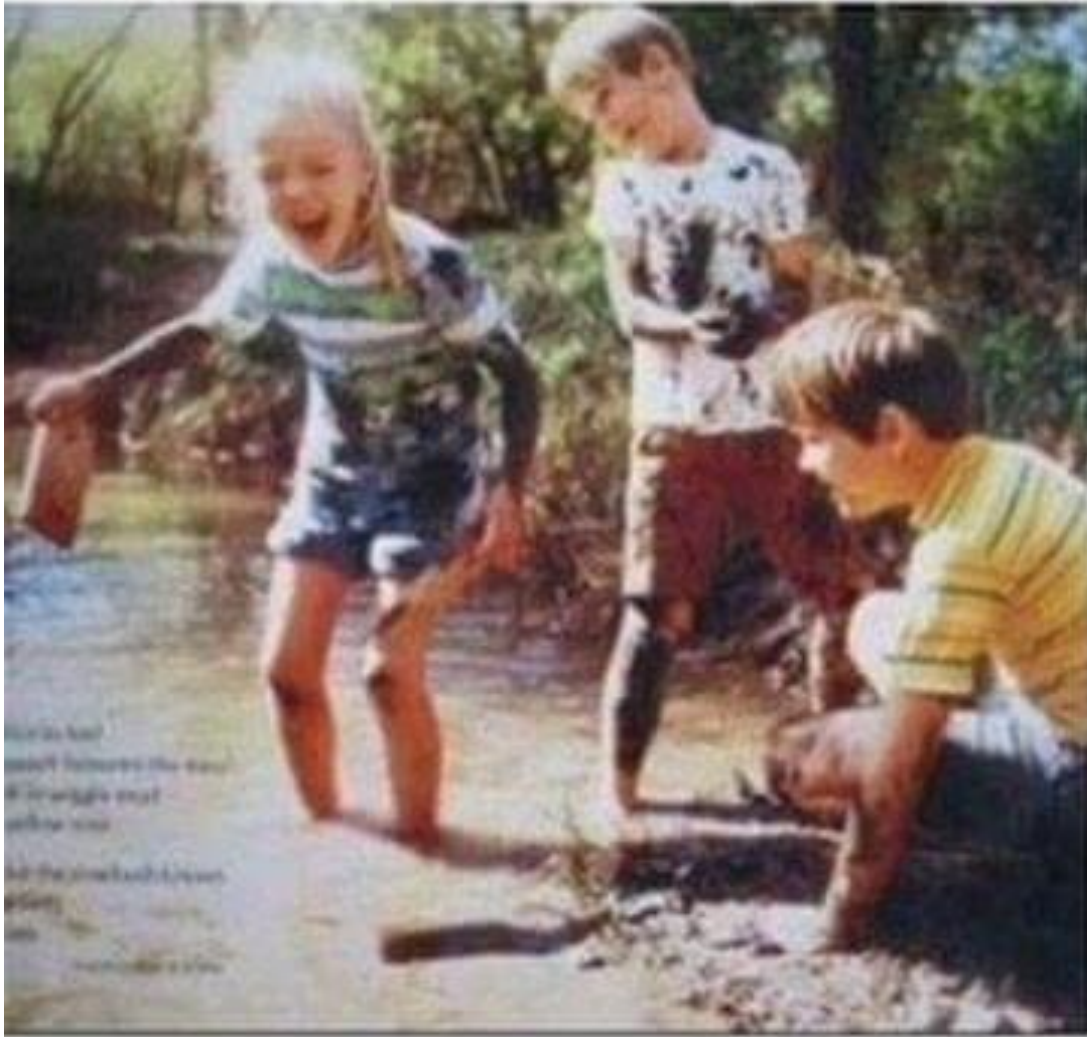


Lancet, The, 2024-10-12, Volume 404, Issue 10461, Pages 1375-1375



# Free Time Became Screen Time







# Free Time should be more than Screen Time

More time on screens = less time doing other healthy things

Social connection (IRL), time in nature, exercise, and family meals all improve well-being and mental health.

Only 52% of Gen Z report regular family meals --64% millennials, 70% Gen X, 84% Boomers





# Loneliness in a connected world

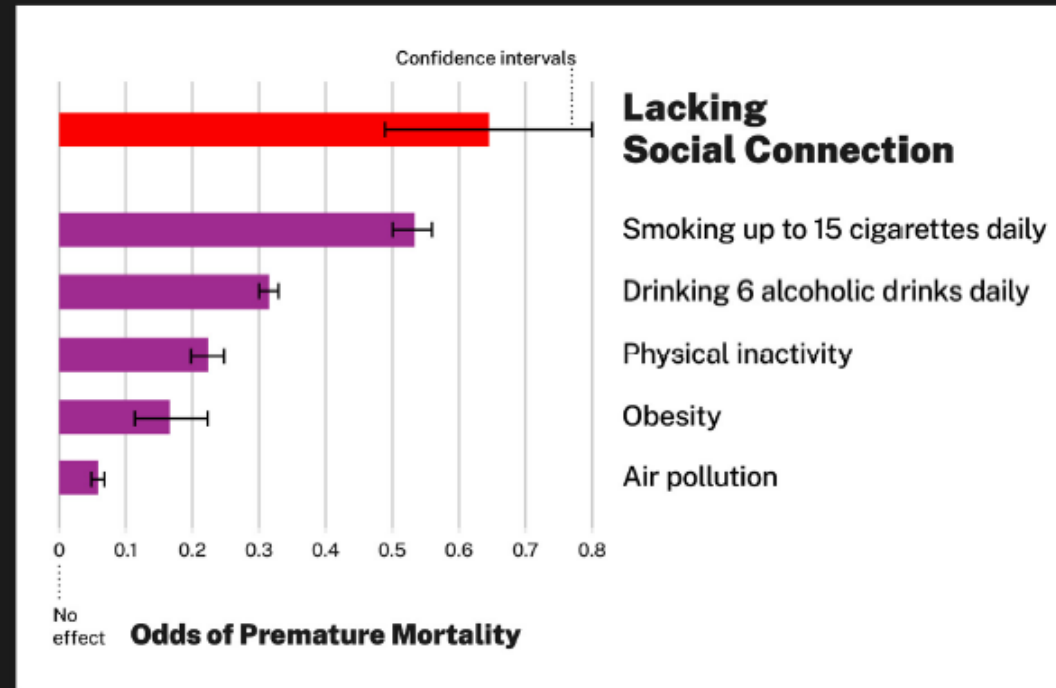
More young people report feeling lonely today than in previous decades

Social Media fosters connections for some but make others feel more isolated

Many young people are still developmentally behind on social skills and struggle to form connections online or in real life.



# Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.



Source: Holt-Lunstad J, Robles TF, Sbarra DA. Advancing Social Connection as a Public Health Priority in the United States. *American Psychology*. 2017;72(6):517-530. doi:10.1037/amp0000103. This graph is a visual approximation.



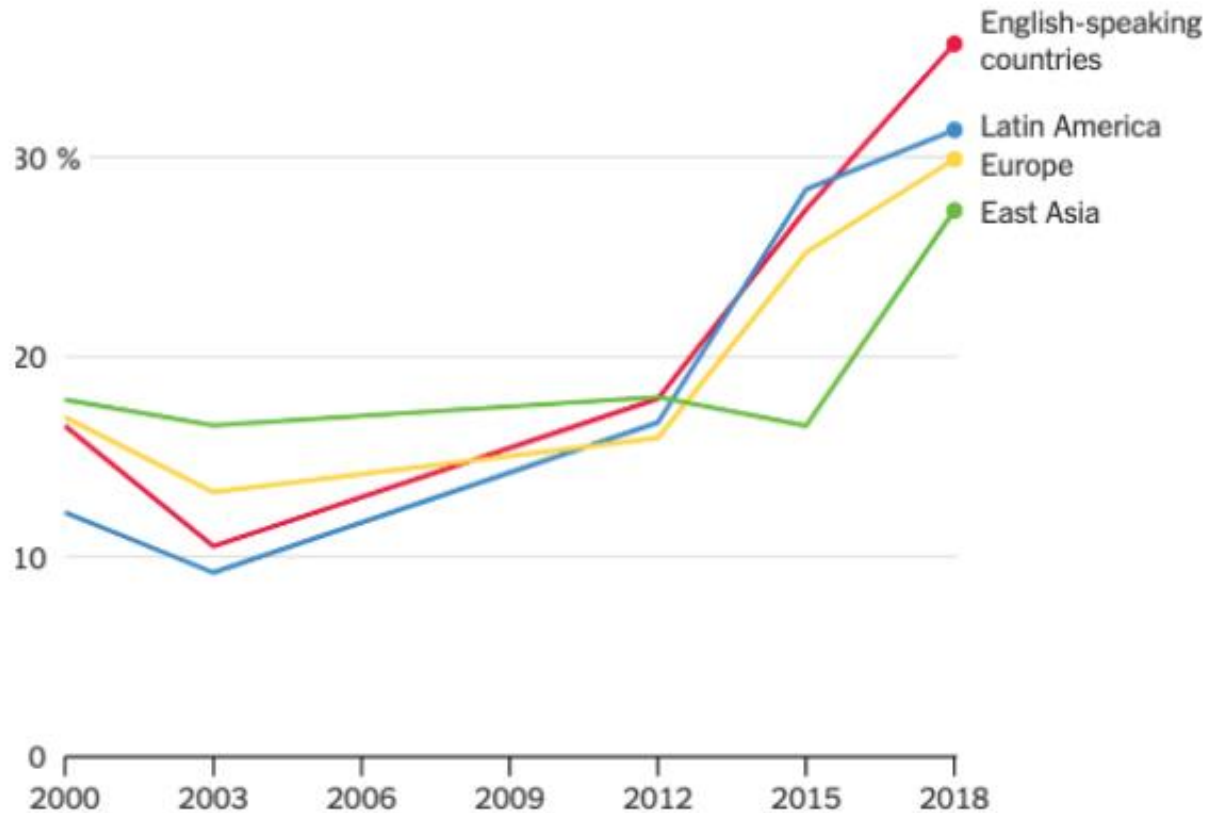
Office of the  
U.S. Surgeon General

Source: Holt-Lunstad J, Robles TF, Sbarra DA. Advancing Social Connection as a Public Health Priority in the United States. *American Psychology*. 2017; 72(6):517-530.



## Lonely at School

The share of students reporting high levels of loneliness at school has increased sharply since the early 2010s.



By The New York Times | Note: English-speaking countries include Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States. Source: "Worldwide increases in adolescent loneliness" by Jean M. Twenge, Jonathan Haidt, et al.

# Screen Time: The Answer

I WISH!

There is no one-size-fits all “unicorn” answer. What I can share are general principles and concrete strategies.





# Development Tasks -Tweens & Teens

- ✓ Identity
- ✓ Intimacy
- ✓ Independence
- ✓ Impulse Control



# Social Media - Developmental Concerns

Attention and academic performance

Reduced physical activity

Sleep disruptions

Social Comparison and FOMO during identity development

*Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 33, 2503–2526 (2024)



## Called someone and they didn't pick up

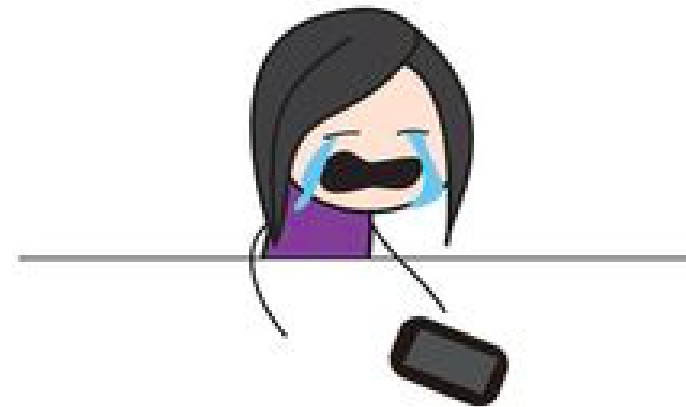
BEFORE

Oh, must not be home.  
I'll try again later.



AFTER

WHY ARE THEY  
IGNORING ME?!???!?!?  
THEY HATE ME!!!!!!





# Social Media - Concerns

- Privacy Concerns
- Harmful Content  
Misinformation  
Pornography
- Cyber Bullying



# Difficult Conversations

- Cyber-Bullying
- Pornography



# Communicating with the 4 Cs

- . Calm
- . Curious
- . Compassionate
- . Concerned



# Must-Have Conversations: Cyber-bullying

- It's insidious – adults don't always see/hear
- What it is
  - Posting comments, pictures, videos, rumors, nude photos, lies, fake social media accounts, encouraging self-harm or suicide, hateful messages, harassment
- Why it happens
  - "It's not a big deal"
  - They think they won't get caught
  - Peers encourage it
  - They feel badly about themselves



# Must-Have Conversations: Cyber-bullying

## What to do

- Block the person
- Tell a trusted adult and/or Report to Website/App
- Keep a record – don't delete
- Avoid participation – don't forward
- Be an upstander – Revenge is not the answer



# Must-Have Conversations: Pornography

~80% of boys and ~40% girls viewed by age 14

➤ More than half of these kids see it accidentally

- 1/5 youths experience unwanted online exposure to sexually explicit material
  - 1/4 youths report these experiences as extremely distressing
- It is normal and healthy for teens (of all genders!) to be interested in and curious about sex.
  - We still want them to avoid pornography - especially online

Prevalence of Unwanted Online Sexual Exposure, Madigan et al. Journal of Adolescent Health Vol 63, Issue 2



# Must-Have Conversations: Pornography

How do we talk about it?

- Leave shame out of it
- Most people of complex reactions to this content
- What questions do they have?
- Not what loving relationships look like
- Not what normal sexual behavior looks like
- Involve exploitation and degradation
- Visiting sites containing pornography can lead to unwanted or dangerous attention
- Younger → put screen down, tell adult, we won't get mad
- Older → can be addictive, interfere with relationships, we won't get mad.





# Social Media and Mental Health

Correlational studies consistently show a link between heavy social media use and mood disorders.

Girls ages 11-13 are most vulnerable

Facebook's own internal research concluded that "Teens blame Instagram for increases in the rate of anxiety and depression."



# Social Media and Mental Health



# Social Media and Mental Health

Pro-self injury, pro-anorexia content

Mixed messages or promote unhealthy behavior

“Thinspiration” searched 13 million times annually

80% TikTok users said app hindered eating disorder recovery



# Social Media: problematic use

11% of teens report pathological use and symptoms of addiction

1/3 of girls age 11-15 report feeling “addicted” to social media

Teens who spend five or more hours a day online are nearly twice as likely to have suicidal thoughts as those who spend less than an hour.



# Why do teens spend so much time on social media?

	Cocaine and other illicit substances	Gambling/Gaming	Social Media
Mood Changes	+	+	+
Escape from Reality, Social Aid	+	+	+
Variable Ratio Reinforcement	+	+	+
Immediate Gratification	+	+	+



# Social Media - Some Positives

- Opportunities for Connection
- Community Building
- Finding information and advice from experts
- Access to Mental Health resources and support



# Social Media – Key Questions

- Do they turn to social media when sad or stressed? Do they feel better or worse afterwards? Do they have other coping strategies?
- Are they getting enough sleep? Exercise?
- Do they always feel pressed for time? Are they aware of how much time they spend on social media?





# Screen Time Strategies for parents

- Have a sense of how kids are using screens.
- Empower teens to critically analyze what they see.
- Teach responsible use. Set a good example.
  - Turn off screens during family meals and outings
  - Minimize using screens as pacifiers or babysitters.
  - Wind down from screens at night 1-2 hrs before bed
  - Keep phones/computers out of bedroom



# What about Privacy and Privilege?

- Collaborative, clear, realistic expectations
- Shows, Video Games, and Social Media are a Privilege not a Right
- Social Media is not private: Have passwords, log-ins, check privacy settings
- Minimum age for most platforms is 13y/o

Research suggests a combination of open discussion/coaching and limits on social media use leads to the best outcomes for youth.



# AAP: Family Media Plan

- Choose from list of media priorities
  - Kindness, Communication, Digital privacy, Screen Free times/zones, choosing good content
- Practical tips to make the plan work
- Save, print, share the plan



# Communication – Tips for Parents

- Communication is key
- Wait to talk if:
  - you're dysregulated
  - if you're having trouble wanting to be collaborative
- Watch for grilling, accusing, judging, shaming
- Get curious
  - we want teens to reflect, to feel their **own ambivalence**



# When to Worry

- When screens become the “only” coping strategy
  - The only way to relax
  - The only way to feel better, manage hard feelings
  - The only way to socialize
  - The only way to pursue interests
- When screens interfere with sleep, homework, relationships, health



# What To Do

- Some helpful general principles
  - Set clear, realistic expectations, screen-free time/zones, out of bedrooms, model responsible use
- Communication
  - Be calm and curious, no shaming
  - Share your concerns about impact on mental health, developing brain
  - Encourage teens to think about how social media affects them and if it interferes with their mental health or long term goals.
- Don't worry alone









Mass General Brigham  
Newton-Wellesley Hospital

# NEVER WORRY ALONE.

A stylized illustration of a woman with blonde hair, wearing a blue dress, kneeling and hugging a young girl with brown hair, wearing a blue dress. The woman is smiling, and the girl has a sad expression.

**Help is available.**

Scan for supports and mental health resources  
curated by The Resilience Project, a NWH  
community health initiative.



# Resources

## Podcasts/Blogs

- **Flusterclux**, Fix Anxiety with Lynn Lyons
- **Untangling 10-20**, Lisa D'amour, *Emotional Lives of Teenagers*
- *Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds* <https://www.mghclaycenter.org/>

## On Tech

- Surgeon General's Advisory <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf>
- Max Stoessel, Social Awakening
- Devorah Heitner, *Growing up in Public, Coming of Age in a Digital World*
- Common Sense Media
- AAP Center of Excellence on Social Media



# Resources

Network of Care Massachusetts [Find Services and Resources \(networkofcare.org\)](https://networkofcare.org)

Project Interface *Therapy Referral Service*: <https://interface.williamjames.edu/>

Psychology Today: [www.psychologytoday.com](https://www.psychologytoday.com)

[Massachusetts Behavioral Health Access \(MABHA\) \(mabhaccess.com\)](https://mabhaccess.com)



# Parenting Workshops at NWH

NWHResilienceProject@partners.org

## Raising Resilient Kids

- 7-week workshop, Offered three times a year (Fall, Winter, Spring)
- Support for parents of kids ages 5-12
- Topics include child development, emotion regulation, challenging behaviors, positive connections

## Raising Resilient Teens

- 7-week workshop, Offered three times a year (Fall, Winter, Spring)
- Support for parents of teens ages 13-18
- Topics include adolescent brain, development, difficult conversations, positive connections, problem solving, and teen stress.

*“This workshop was transformative for my family.”*

*“Powerful and Practical.”*

*“I only wish I had taken this course sooner!”*



# Resources

**Hey Sam** is a dedicated peer-to-peer texting service for young people up to 24 years old. [Text: 439-726](tel:439-726) | Hours: 9AM-12AM (Midnight) ET

- Designed for and staffed by young people
- Free and confidential
- Nonjudgmental

**988** – National Crisis Hotline: Mobile Crisis evaluations, peer hotline, outpatient treatment referrals and resources.

