

The Impact of Social Media on Children and Adolescents

The good and the bad of social media use among youth and teens

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Dr. Tom Milam
Chief Medical Officer
tom.milam@iristelehealth.com





Tom Milam, M.D., M.Div.

Chief Medical Officer,
President of Iris Medical Group

tom.milam@iristelehealth.com

Dr. Tom Milam currently serves as Chief Medical Officer at Iris Telehealth and President of Iris Medical Group.

A native of Virginia, he graduated Phi Beta Kappa with his BA summa cum laude from West Virginia University in Anthropology and went on to earn his Master of Divinity degree from Yale University, where he was a Yale Associates Scholar.

After graduating from Medical School at the University of Virginia, he completed his residency in Psychiatry at Duke University and the University of Virginia.

He has been a practicing psychiatrist for the last 25 years with over half of that time being spent developing and advancing telepsychiatry initiatives. He is also on faculty at the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine and Fralin Biomedical Research Institute where he serves as Associate Professor of Psychiatry & Behavioral Medicine.

The Impact of Social Media on Children and Adolescents

Connectivity and Community

Enables youth to maintain relationships, build new connections around shared interests, and find support, especially among marginalized groups.



Self-Expression and Identity

Offers space for creativity, personal expression, and the exploration of identity in safe and supportive ways.



Information and Education

Provides access to a wide range of knowledge and resources, helping youth learn, grow, and stay informed about the world.



Advocacy and Social Engagement

Gives young people a platform to engage with causes, raise awareness, and participate in civic and social issues.



Mental Health Concerns

Excessive use is associated with higher risks of depression, anxiety, and other forms of psychological distress.



Cyberbullying and Online Safety

Increases exposure to harassment, harmful interactions, and unsafe or inappropriate content.



Body Image Issues

Promotes unrealistic beauty standards and constant comparison, which can harm self-esteem and confidence.



Addiction and Time Management

Encourages compulsive use that disrupts sleep, concentration, and daily responsibilities.



Misinformation

Facilitates the rapid spread of false or misleading information that can shape beliefs and behaviors.

Media vs. Social Media: What's the Difference?

▶ Media

Media is content you can watch, read, consume

- News—television, magazine articles, newspapers, books
- Movies, series, TV shows, documentaries, live sports (online or on television)
- Basic video games

▶ Social Media

Social is content you socially interact with, directly or indirectly (watch and be watched)

- Newsfeed—scrolled through, listened to, viewed, commented on, and/or shared socially
- Videos & pics—self and others, chat with live streamers, comment on videos (likes), share with others with a click.
- Advanced gaming (XBox, PlayStation, real world)



Media : Social Media :: Window Shopping : Mall Shopping



Prevalence and Usage Patterns – Adolescents

Up to **95%**¹ of youth ages **13 – 17** use social media.
Over one-third¹ report using it “almost constantly.”

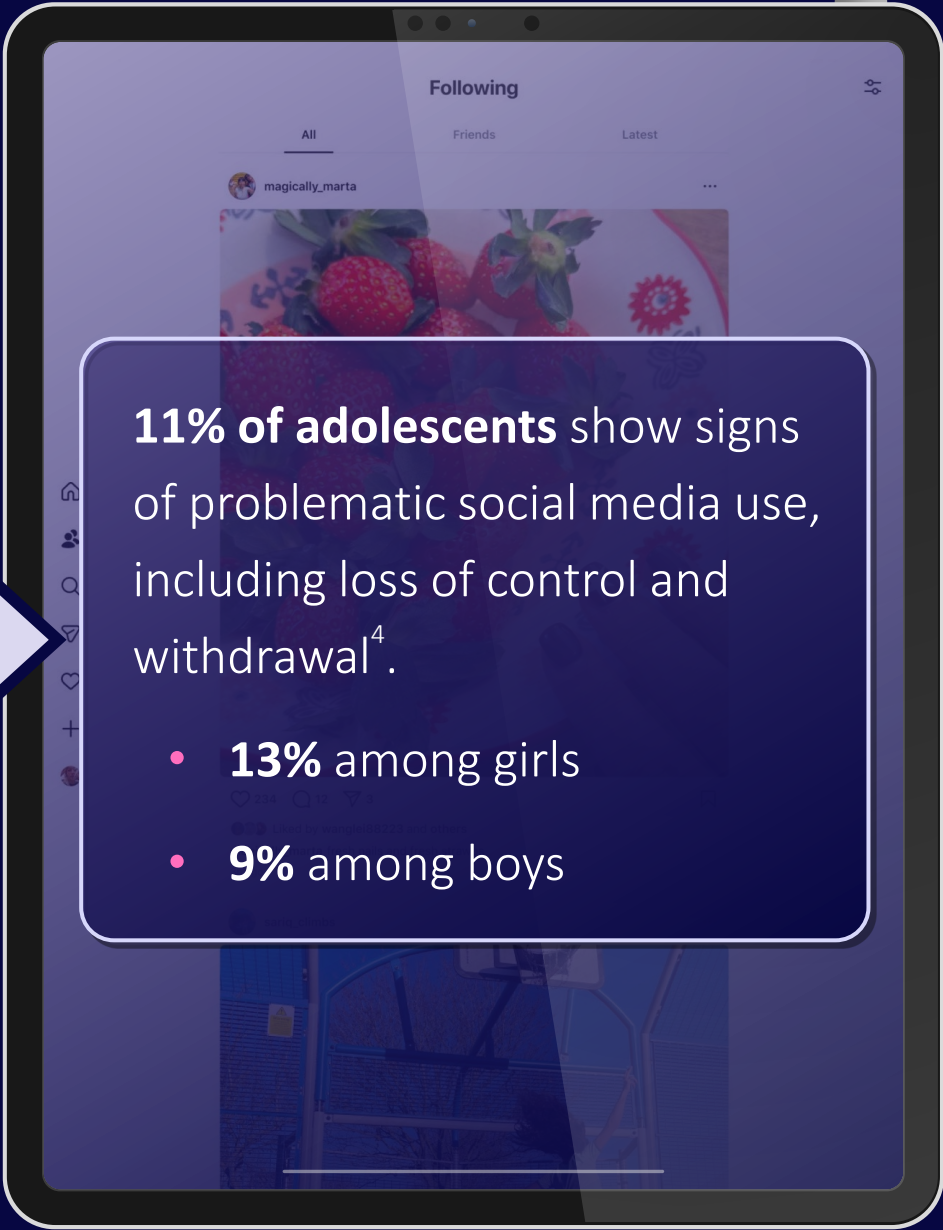
Among U.S. teens—

- **70%**² visit YouTube daily (*including 15% almost constantly*)
- **57%**² visit TikTok daily
- **50%**² Instagram
- **48%**² Snapchat
- **20%**² Facebook
- *What ever happened to watching TV?*



Screen Time and Risk

Spending **more than 3 hours/day** on social media **doubles the risk of mental health issues** like depression and anxiety³.



11% of adolescents show signs of problematic social media use, including loss of control and withdrawal⁴.

- **13%** among girls
- **9%** among boys

Mood Disorders and Screen Use



Among teens with the highest social media use—

**41% rated their mental health
as poor or very poor⁶**

vs.

23% among lower users

**40% of depressed and suicidal
youth reported problematic
social media use⁷**

marked by distress when not using it

Mental Health Trends and Causation

A UCSF study tracking nearly 12,000 tweens (ages 9 – 13) showed that increased daily social use (from 7 to 74 minutes) coincided with a **35% rise in depression symptoms⁵**.

→ **Cyberbullying and sleep disruption were key contributing factors.**

Cyberbullying and Suicide Risk

14.9%⁹ of teenagers have experienced online bullying

13.6%⁹ have seriously attempted suicide
linked to cyberbullying

This phenomenon is now common enough
it has generated a new term:

cyberbullicide

Body Image and Self-Esteem Impact: "Selfie Dysmorphia."



By age 13—

- **80% of girls manipulate their appearance** with face-editing filters⁸.
- **60% report feeling upset** that their real looks don't match their filtered selves — leading to anxiety and lower confidence⁸.

Roughly 46% of adolescents (ages 13 – 17) say social media makes them feel worse about their bodies³.

Evolving Perceptions and Balanced Use

- **45% of teens** say they spend too much time on social media (up from **27% in 2023**)
- Only **14% say social media negatively affects them** personally (but **48% say it harms their peers**)¹⁰



Mission Australia research found that
1 – 3 hours/day
is associated with better mental health compared to high or low use

Moderation seems to be key — moderate users reported they...



felt more in control of their lives



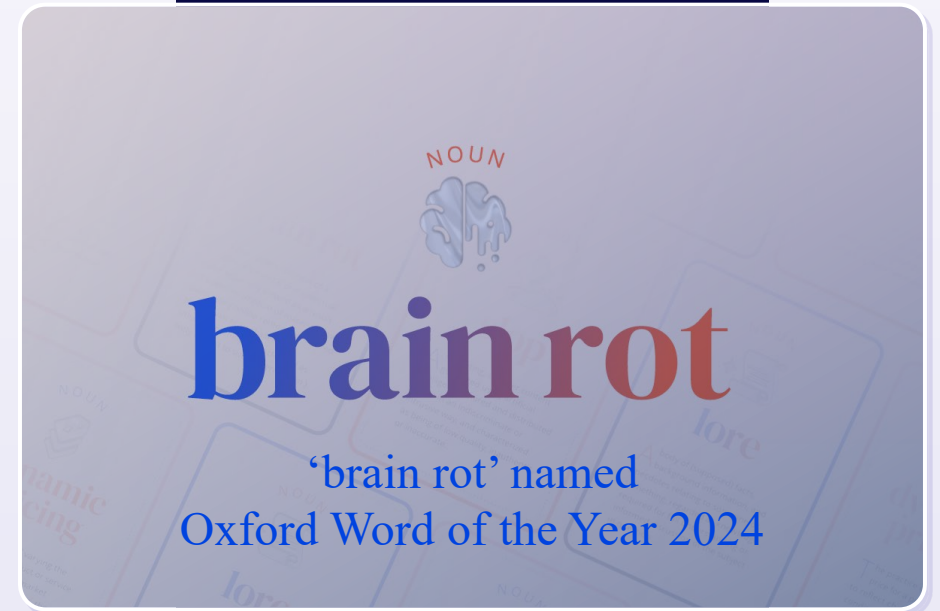
were likely to seek help from their parents



had less difficulty socializing

The Phenomenon of "Brain Rot": Is It Real?

- Named the **Oxford Word of the Year** in 2024
- Due to long-term, overconsumption of and excessive exposure to low-quality online media — especially social media — leading to:
 - **Cognitive Impairment (Memory, Planning, Decision Making)**
 - **Mental Exhaustion**
 - **Emotional Desensitization**
 - **Negative Self-Concept**
 - **Doomscrolling, Zombie Scrolling, Social Media Addiction**



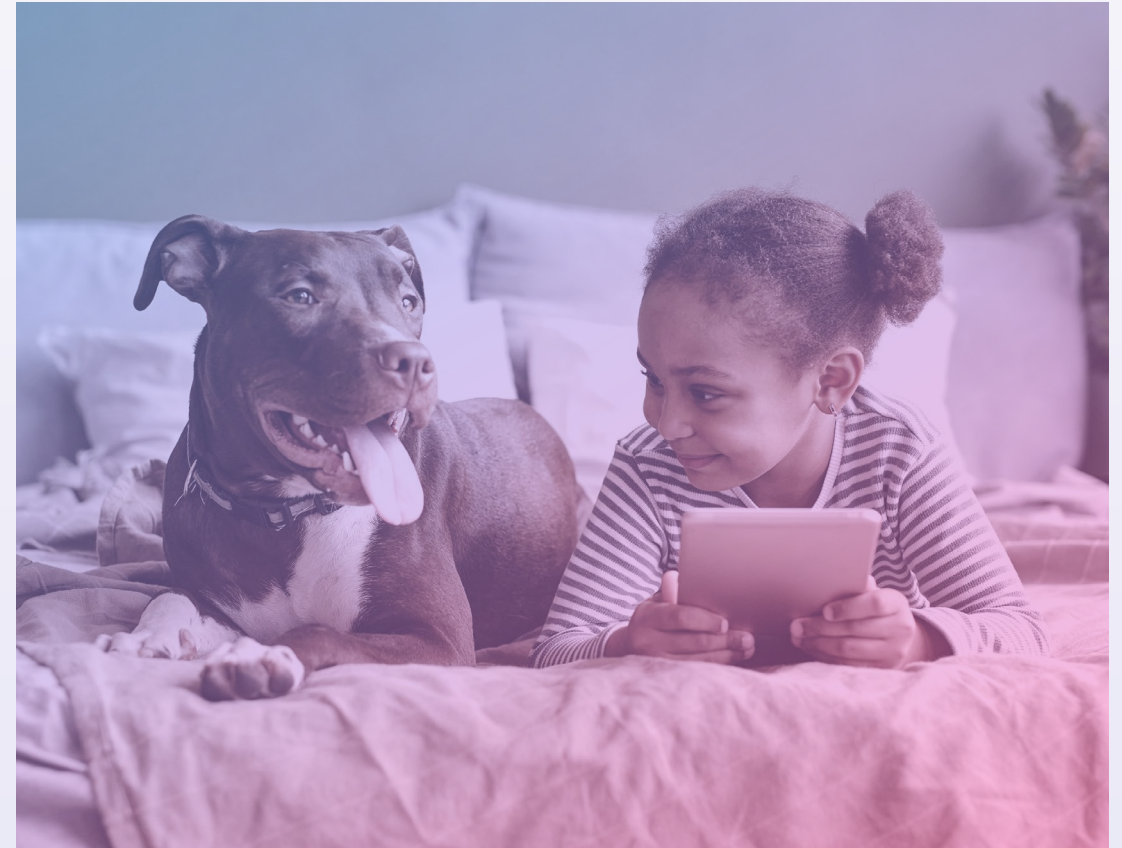
Positive Opportunities



- Approximately **75%**¹⁰ of teens feel more **connected** due to social media
- **63%**¹⁰ credit it with providing a **creative outlet**
- Teens report social media enhances their **communication skills** and provides access to important **educational tools and people**¹¹

Positive Opportunities

- ♥ Enhancing Communication Skills
- ♥ Educational Opportunities
- ♥ Career and Networking Benefits
- ♥ Self-Expression and Creativity
- ♥ Supportive Communities
- ♥ Social Activism and Awareness
- ♥ Cultural and Global Exposure



Strategies and Takeaways

Key recommendations for families and providers



Limit social media

Kids and adolescents (and adults) should limit their social media use to under 3 hours/day to reduce risk of anxiety, depression.



Promote moderate use

Don't completely remove social media from kids' lives — maintain 1 – 3 hour/day to support mental well-being and social balance.



Introduce phone-free bedtimes

Keep phones out of reach when in bed to address sleep issues and reduce depression risk.



Watch for risky indicators

Monitor kids and teens for symptoms of cyberbullying, self-esteem issues, addictive behavior, anxiety, and social isolation — all of which can be causes or symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation.



Foster positive engagement

Encourage creative, prosocial use and maintain offline connections.

Specific Notes for Younger Children

Developing brains are especially vulnerable to exposure. Early habits can shape — or disrupt — healthy development.



0 – 4 years

- No entertainment media under about 18 months — if it is used, ensure the content is educational.



2 – 5 years

- Try to limit screens to roughly one hour each day and focus on high-quality content.
- Share time consuming entertainment media with children—watch with them.
- Prioritize free-play and hands-on interactions — cut down on passive screen time.



5 – 11 years

- View age-appropriate, value-aligned media and social media content together and discuss: Ask questions to help kids think critically.
- Set clear limits, both on time spent with screens, and locations where screens are used.
- Create media-free zones, like mealtimes and bedrooms.
- Avoid using screens as reward/punishment. If kids see screens as a reward, they'll develop unhealthy views around use.

“Ultimately, what we are seeking to achieve for our children is a **solid foundation for life in the digital age**, something social media companies and young people alike are beginning to acknowledge and act upon around the world.

Digital literacy in the context of child development and well-being, informed by the right knowledge at the right time along with the right health and other support services, are critical.

By **empowering adolescents to make informed decisions** about their online activities, balancing their online and offline worlds, we ultimately help **safeguard and improve their overall well-being**.

This is crucial for ensuring a **healthier, more balanced digital future** for all communities, societies and countries.”

Dr. Hans Henri P. Kluge
WHO Regional Director for Europe

Questions?



tom.milam@iristelehealth.com



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