

Teens' technology use and mental health: New report released

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With or without physical separation due to COVID-19, youth are using social media to connect and support each other, according to a report released today. Three leading researchers have just published Youth Connections for Wellbeing, an integrative review paper that illuminates how teens support each other through digital media during times of stress and isolation.

Leveraging their expertise across the fields of cultural anthropology, [developmental psychology](#), and clinical psychology, scholars Mimi Ito, Candice Odgers, and Stephen Schueller discuss the potential of [digital media](#) to support [youth](#) wellbeing.

The work underlying the paper was completed prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The physical isolation that has resulted from shelter-in-place orders has yielded a seismic shift, making it even more critical to understand and leverage technology in a way that benefits youth.

The position paper summarizes current knowledge

and redirects the conversation about adolescent [social media](#) use and wellbeing in three ways that are particularly relevant today:

- Refocusing the debate over the relationship between youth social [media](#) use and wellbeing to reflect existing evidence, varied youth perspectives and backgrounds.
- Identifying teen vulnerabilities and assets that may influence problematic and healthy social media engagement.
- Suggesting opportunities where youth [social engagement](#) might mitigate vulnerabilities and leverage assets.

In the position paper Ito, Odgers, and Schueller highlight the need to move beyond the simple question of whether more time spent using social media causes [mental health problems](#) in adolescents. Instead, people should consider the specific forms of social media engagement that amplify or mitigate mental health risks for different adolescents. The team integrates findings from existing large-scale reviews, the voices of youth who have grown up on social media, and a systematic review of digital mental health apps available for youth.

The team finds that adolescents' online risks often mirror offline vulnerabilities. They note that it is particularly important for messages, interventions, and strategies to be targeted and tailored to the most vulnerable youth and those underserved by traditional mental health services.

A number of relevant findings, opportunities, and benefits are outlined in the paper, including:

- Evaluating claims about whether [social media use](#) is leading to greater vulnerability for mental health problems for youth, including harassment and bullying, sleep disruption, and exposure to idealized images that may lead to envy.

- Identifying factors such as poverty, discrimination, instability, social marginalization, and other forms of stress as more significant influences on mental health than technology.
- Revealing that Black and trans youth have reported that online sources of empowerment are sources of support and strategies for coping with and discussing racism and prejudice.
- Offering evidence that extending parental support to online spaces can be more effective in supporting youth wellbeing than restricting technology access, which can create more tension between youth and parents.
- Recognizing that youth experience positive social support in many online settings, which may reduce their feelings of social isolation and social anxiety, increase their social skills, and augments their offline friendships.
- Sharing details on how online communication and affinity networks including fandoms, gaming communities, and creative communities can help marginalized young people benefit from unique friendships and forms of social support.
- Highlighting evidence that young people are actively seeking support for mental health information online and using online tools to elicit socio-emotional support. Most teens and tweens say social media helps support social-emotional wellbeing, boosting confidence, and alleviating anxiety, loneliness, and depression.
- Describing ways to provide online mental health support to youth, especially those who are difficult to reach through more traditional clinical supports.

For example, one student interviewed shared how they experienced a supportive community online, saying: "I think a lot of my mutuals on Instagram, they're very open to being emotionally vulnerable on Instagram, so they'll actually say, 'I'm not doing fine.' I like it because it's a very nice community, just spreading love whether it be through comments or someone will actually say through messages

like, 'Are you okay?'"

A freshman adjusting to life away from family shared how online connections made her feel close to them: "My mother just started using Messenger. I taught her how to use it. And so she texts me here and there. She's like, 'Good morning,' or, 'How are you doing?,' and then we FaceTime. Then my siblings, we use Instagram because that's where we're mostly at. We send each other videos and memes, and then we kind of comment just to make our day."

Given the rising rates of mental health concerns among young people in the U.S., Ito, Odgers, and Schueller encourage a sense of urgency in focusing research, investment, and public attention on how digital spaces and tools can be better designed and used to support youth's mental health.

More information:

connectedlearning.uci.edu/youth-connections-for-wellbeing/

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