

Social Media



Background

Social media plays a significant role in the lives of young people. National studies show up to 95 percent of those 13–17 actively use these platforms and more than a third report using social media “almost constantly.”⁴⁰

Benefits and Harms

Social media has the potential to support youth mental health, but it also can be harmful. On one hand, it can be a powerful tool for connection and social support among peers.⁴¹ This is especially the case for marginalized youth who might not interact with peers with similar identities in their everyday lives, such as youth within the LGBTQ+ community and/or some youth of color. It can also be used to stay connected to friends and family who live far away. On the other hand, it can be harmful to youth mental health because of cyberbullying, peer pressure to engage in risky behaviors, potential negative impacts on self-esteem, and excessive use driven by platform algorithms designed to maximize user engagement.⁴²

Problematic Use

Some research suggests that overstimulation from frequent and problematic social media use may result in similar changes in the brain to that of addiction.⁴³ In addition, problematic social media use can reduce face-to-face interactions, which are important for social connection. It has also been linked to sleep problems, attention challenges, and feelings of exclusion among teens.⁴⁴ More time spent on social media has been connected to higher rates of depression and behavioral problems.^{45, 46}

Modeling Healthy Use

Young people we spoke to emphasized the need for parents and caregivers to model healthy social media use. They noted that adults are often critical of youth social media and phone use while being very connected to their phones themselves.

Social Media and COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, youth used social media and online technology to connect with each other because of the physical distancing restrictions, remote schooling, and cancellation of activities. Although it was a needed source of connection for youth during this incredibly challenging time, it had negative consequences as well. One member of the Beat the Odds youth group spoke about the impact of COVID-19 on their development and identity, saying that

because of the pandemic, young people were not given the opportunity to “find themselves” and instead resorted to social media. This led to confusion about one’s own identity.

“...All we see are screens. I love going outside and stuff like that, but I feel like I was cheated off of that because now everybody’s on their phones. Nobody wants to go outside. Nobody wants to talk. Then I start doing that, and now I don’t want to go outside, now I don’t want to talk, but that’s not who I am....”

-youth, Beat the Odds youth mental health group

As we continue to recover from the pandemic and its impacts on our young people and society as a whole, we need to work together to support strategies for healthy social media usage that can be adopted by young people and parents/caregivers. Simultaneously, we need to work on legislation that puts protections in place to support safer usage of social media.

Federal Legislation to Protect Youth

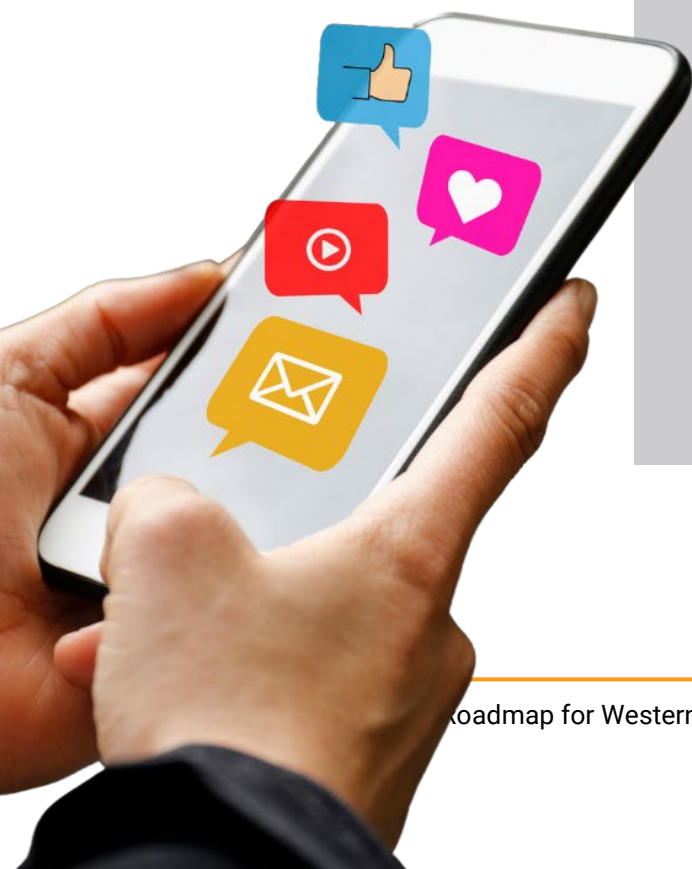
Currently, there are minimal regulations or incentives for social media companies to protect children. There are two bipartisan bills before Congress that together would create a “duty of care” to require tech companies to prevent harm to minors and to expand privacy protections for minors. These bills, the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) and the Children and Teens’ Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA 2.0), have approval from the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee, but the U.S. House has yet to take up either of them.

Local Efforts

- **Education:** There are some educational efforts taking place to help parents/caregivers and youth understand both the harms of social media as well as strategies and tools to support safe and healthy social media and tech usage.⁴⁷ For example, the Hampden County District Attorney’s office provides education about the harms of social media to youth. Also, the Communities that Care Coalition educates the Franklin County community through videos of parents, educators, and other key stakeholders discussing strategies to promote healthy social media usage. However, more is needed to reach parents and youth across our region.
- **School Cell Phone Policies:** Some local schools have taken steps to limit cell phone access during school time. We learned through our interviews that part of the challenge with these types of policies is addressing concerns about youth and parents/caregivers not having a way to directly reach each other should an emergency arise.

Recommendations

- Implement additional school and community-level education for students and parents/caregivers about the harms of social media and strategies for healthier usage.
 - Create safe spaces where youth can talk about their experiences and challenges with social media.
 - Support ways for students to connect with each other in person (see section about [Social Connection](#)).
- Keep equity in mind!
 - Remember the benefits of social media, which allows some youth to access social support they would not otherwise have in their everyday lives.
 - Make sure that schools that institute policies limiting cell phone use do not lead to unfair punishment, especially for Black and Latine students.
- Policy advocacy
 - Collaborate on federal legislation, for example, COPPA 2.0, KOSA.



“When we’ve talked to youth directly, they will acknowledge that it certainly can be detrimental to their well-being because of all of the social comparison that happens. And then they can also talk about how it’s something that really matters to them, especially students who have marginalized identities.”

-staff member, Hampshire County Youth Prevention Coalition



CTC's P.E.E.R. Ambassador Program

The Communities That Care Coalition of Franklin County and the North Quabbin (CTC) launched their "[P.E.E.R. Ambassador Program](#)" (where PEER stands for Parent Engagement, Enrichment, and Resources) in 2020. Its purpose is to (a) help connect parents to existing resources and tools, including parent education and support programs, (b) help spread parenting norms that promote healthy youth development, and (c) foster greater levels of participant leadership, engagement, and ownership in the Communities That Care Coalition and in the community. The program is particularly committed to promoting youth mental health through family connectedness and linking families to community mental health resources. They also share information to help parents address social media use and to reduce harms from screen time.

The program is a collaboration between a handful of different family-serving organizations in the area. PEER ambassadors are selected by their "Host Agency" to provide outreach to other parents and to give input into community programs. New PEER ambassadors participate in a self-paced, online training program and continue their learning through webinars, trainings, and classes on topics of particular interest. They receive a monthly stipend for their time. The program is funded by the Massachusetts Bureau of Substance Addiction Services.