SEL Helps Valued Outcomes to Happen: A Series of Examples…

Adolescent Social Media Use: Understanding SEL in the Digital Age

Today’s adolescents are among the first to grow up in a digital era. In fact, nearly all adolescents between the ages of 13-17 (approximately 95%) have smartphones in the United States. Most teens also use some form of social media, which is defined as digital tools or technologies that allow its users to interact with others socially. Some social media can be beneficial towards youth development – allowing for identity exploration and connection with peers and other social networks. However, excessive and unregulated use of social media has been found to have adverse socio-emotional impacts, including negative outcomes such as lower self-esteem, anxiety, depression, body dissatisfaction, substance use, and more frequent involvement with other risky behaviors. Following the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, young people are spending more time online than ever before. Pandemic-related stressors (e.g., health anxiety, financial insecurity, illness, or death of loved ones) may worsen social media’s negative effects for some youth. This may be especially true for youth in families of lower socioeconomic status, who are more negatively affected by the pandemic via greater financial stress and higher likelihood of COVID-related sickness and fatalities in their communities.

One of the many benefits of social-emotional learning (SEL) is its potential to help youth navigate digital literacy, an essential skill in the 21st century. For example, SEL has been used to facilitate social media literacy for students with developmental disabilities – to teach them about social awareness and relationship skills in an online context. Responsible decision making – another core SEL competency – is also essential for teens to successfully navigate the increasingly complex digital environment and decide what is factual and what is not, and how to evaluate the consequences of taking any social media-suggested actions (for example, whether to post something or purchase something). Recent research has shown a convergence between SEL and media literacy; and we therefore advocate for individuals working with youth – including SEL practitioners, educators, and policy-makers – to gain familiarity in the complexities of social media to better promote youth mental health and socio-emotional well-being.

The ability to connect with others, express oneself, and communicate feelings are among the core functions of social media, and therefore, when used responsibly, social media can benefit students’ social and emotional well-being. When used intentionally to facilitate direct, offline social interactions with friends, social media can have a

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positive effect on teens’ mental health. This is particularly true at times when youth are isolated for reasons beyond their control. Students can also cultivate their values and express themselves online while connecting with others who share similar values or ideals. This may be especially important for students with minoritized identities, such as students who are LGBTQIA+, who may not have easy access to role models or peers with these identities offline or in their natural environment. Online forums and connections can provide these teens with much-needed informational and social-emotional resources to explore their identities and offer additional social support. Further, youth can become engaged in and connected with a global community by getting involved in online activism or participating in online “challenges" that support charitable causes (e.g., ALS water bucket challenge). Overall, just as youth who have been exposed to high-level SEL implementation are provided tools to assist with healthy digital media usage – such as self-regulation and responsible decision making – social media can also be used as a tool to promote SEL skills, such as self-awareness and exploration of identity, social and emotional awareness, and relationship skills.

At the same time, some aspects of social media may negatively impact youth mental health and well-being. Social media has unique features that can have risks for teens when left unregulated, including its permanence on the Internet, publicness of its content, and its constant availability for teens to access. Not all those who are friendly on social media should be treated as friends, but it is not always easy to tell when this is and is not the case. When youth have negative peer interactions on social media, it can cause more prolonged negative emotions than negative peer interactions in person. Teenagers also compare themselves to others online and can feel pressure to alter their appearance to match what is socially desirable. Some online communities can promote harmful coping practices and behaviors, such as those involving harmful eating (e.g., tips on how to restrict food intake or purge to lose weight) or self-harm (e.g., cutting, burning, etc.). Additionally, because of the salience of digital media in the lives of many children and adolescents, understanding the intricacies of social media – including its benefits and risks– is essential to promote youth social-emotional well-being. In light of this, the American Academy of Pediatrics has outlined best practice guidelines for youth and their families; these guidelines can be accessed on their website: https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/138/5/e20162592/60321/Media-Use-in-School-Aged-Children-and-Adolescents.

In summary, it is important for parents and educators to work with young people to build SEL skills, and to better understand how and when social media can be beneficial and harmful for each unique child, to help them better navigate the complex and evolving digital media landscape—something that is not going away in the foreseeable future.

This information sheet was provided by SEL4NJ, the Social-Emotional Learning Alliance of NJ, a voluntary, grassroots organization working with schools and communities to promote social-emotional and character development and supportive, engaging, inclusive, equitable classroom and school environments for learning. Prepared by May Yuan, Melissa Dreier and Simone Boyd, Ph.D. students in the Rutgers Clinical Psychology program; Jessica Hamilton, co-director of the Scientific Advisory Board for MentalHealthio.org, a youth-driven mental health organization, and director of the Hamilton Lab; and Maurice Elias, SEL4NJ Trustee and Director, Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab. You can reach us at info@sel4nj.org and join at www.SEL4NJ.org