



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 era¹. 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 media², which is defined as digital tools or technologies that allow its users to interact with others socially³. 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 behaviors³. Following the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, young people are spending more time online than ever before⁴. 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 communities⁵.

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 context⁶. 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 literacy⁷; 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 media⁸, 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

¹ Jarman, H. K., Marques, M. D., McLean, S. A., Slater, A., & Paxton, S. J. (2021). Social media, body satisfaction and well-being among adolescents: A mediation model of appearance-ideal internalization and comparison. *Body Image, 36*, 139-148.

² Anderson, M., & Jiang, J. (2018). Teens, social media & technology 2018. *Pew Research Center, 31*(2018), 1673-1689.

³ Nesi, J. (2020). The impact of social media on youth mental health: challenges and opportunities. *North Carolina Medical Journal, 81*(2), 116-121.

⁴ Auxier, B., & Anderson, M. (2021). Social media use in 2021. *Pew Research Center*.

⁵ Hamilton, J.L., Nesi, J., & Choukas-Bradley, S. (In Press). Re-examining adolescent social media use and socioemotional well-being through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic: A theoretical review and directions for future research. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

⁶ Probst, D. (2017). Social media literacy as an IEP intervention for social and emotional learning. *Journal of Media Literacy Education, 9*(2), 45-57.

⁷ Tsortanidou, X., Daradoumis, T., & Barberá-Gregori, E. (2020). Convergence among imagination, social-emotional learning and media literacy: an integrative literature review. *Early Child Development and Care, 1-14*.

⁸ Moreno, M. A., & Uhls, Y. T. (2019). Applying an affordances approach and a developmental lens to approach adolescent social media use. *Digital Health, 5*, 1-6.

positive effect on teens' mental health⁹. 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 ideals¹⁰. 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 support¹¹. 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 access¹². 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 person¹³. 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 families¹⁴; 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

⁹ Hamilton, J. L., Coulter, R. A., & Radovic, A. (2020). *Mental health benefits and opportunities*. In M. A. Moreno & A. J. Hoopes (Eds.), *Technology and Adolescent Health: In Schools and Beyond* (pp. 305-345). Elsevier.

¹⁰ Hamilton, J. L., Nesi, J., & Choukas-Bradley, S. (2020, April 29). Teens and social media during the COVID-19 pandemic: Staying socially connected while physically distant. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/5stx4>

¹¹ Ybarra, M. L., Mitchell, K. J., Palmer, N. A., & Reisner, S. L. (2015). Online social support as a buffer against online and offline peer and sexual victimization among US LGBT and non-LGBT youth. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *39*, 123-136.

¹² Nesi, J., Choukas-Bradley, S., & Prinstein, M. J. (2018a). Transformation of adolescent peer relations in the social media context: Part 1—A theoretical framework and application to dyadic peer relationships. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, *21*(3), 267-294.

¹³ Hamilton, J. L., Coulter, R. A., & Radovic, A. (2020). *Mental health benefits and opportunities*. In M. A. Moreno & A. J. Hoopes (Eds.), *Technology and Adolescent Health: In Schools and Beyond* (pp. 305-345). Elsevier.

¹⁴ AAP Council on Communications and Media. (2016). Media use in school-aged children and adolescents. *Pediatrics*, *138*(5), e20162592.