

Social media ‘sweet spot’ for Aussie teens



Adelaide University, Australia

YouTube, TikTok and Snapchat – they’re just a few of the banned social media sites for Australian teenagers under 16. But while the push to protect young people from too much screen time continues, a major Adelaide University study shows that a balanced approach to social media might not be so bad.

In new research published in *JAMA Pediatrics*, researchers identified a ‘sweet spot’ for teenagers’ use of social media, with moderate use (up to 12.5 hours/week) linked to more positive wellbeing.

While the findings may sound like good news for teenagers, researchers warn that there are caveats, with both excessive social media use and not using social media both associated with poorer wellbeing.

Lead author Dr Ben Singh from Adelaide University says social media’s relationship with teen wellbeing is complex, varies by age and sex, and should not be viewed in black-and-white terms.

“Public debate often frames social media as being harmful to teenagers’ wellbeing, but our findings suggest the reality is far more nuanced,” Dr Singh said.

“For girls, we found that moderate use of social media was linked to better wellbeing in their middle teenage years (grades 7-9; ages 12-15) and onwards.

“It was the opposite for boys with those not using social media as they grew older at risk of poorer wellbeing.

“In the younger years, not using social media had little impact on wellbeing, because children’s offline interactions can sufficiently meet their social needs.

“But by middle adolescence, social media becomes a key setting for peer connections, identity expression and belonging, making engagement in this space more important.

“Overall, the strongest outcomes were among teenagers who used social media in moderation. These teens were far more likely to report positive wellbeing than those who had too much or too little social media engagement.

“It’s a real Goldilocks scenario – not too little and not too much social media is best for teenagers’ wellbeing.”

The study analysed data from more than 100,000 Australian children and teenagers in grades 4-12 across a three-year period (2019-2022) examining how time spent on social media relates to happiness, life satisfaction, emotional regulation and other key indicators of wellbeing.

While the research showed that social media is neither inherently harmful nor inherently beneficial for teenagers, it also reinforced concerns about high levels of use.

Teenagers who reported the greatest social media use after school were consistently more likely to experience low wellbeing, including higher levels of sadness, worry and difficulty managing emotions.

What the data points to is moderation, not extremes, as the healthiest pattern overall.

Helping teenagers find a healthy middle ground may be more effective than a blanket ban or total avoidance.”

Dr Ben Singh, Lead Author, Adelaide University

Source:

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