

# Social Media and Mental Health



What impact does social media have on young people's mental health, and how can parents safeguard against harm?

We know that children and young people spend a lot of time online. The mental health impact of technology use, especially social media use, is a growing concern for parents and carers.

There does appear to be a connection between social media use and mental health. This shouldn't be surprising – any activity that people spend a lot of time engaging in is going to affect them one way or another, whether it's sport, school or social media. There's evidence that suggests certain kinds of social media use can lead to poor mental health outcomes, like anxiety and depression.

But it would be misleading to say that the use of social media always negatively impacts mental health. In fact, it often plays a protective role, supporting young people's social connection, creativity and sense of community.

In short, social media is a double-edged sword. As parents and carers, we should aim to mitigate the risks while still allowing children to enjoy the rewards.

## What is the link between social media and mental health?

Rising community concern about social media's impact on the mental health of children and young people has led to the Australian Government placing an age limit of 16 on some of the most popular social media platforms. This is due to come into effect late in 2025.

However, the evidence so far suggests that whether those impacts are negative or positive might have more to do with how young people are using social media.

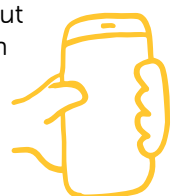
## The social media age limit

- Inevitably, some young people will try to find ways around the social media age limit. It is important parents don't help their children set up social media accounts with fake ages. If a platform thinks your children are much older than they really are, this may well increase the children's risk of being offered age-inappropriate content.
- Most social media platforms are currently intended to be limited to ages 13 and over. However, this age limit was based in historical data laws from overseas – it does not mean platforms are necessarily appropriate or safe for any particular age group.

## Active versus passive social media use

Young people can use social media to engage with peers and friends that they also interact with offline. [At least one study suggests](#) that this kind of active social engagement can enhance young people's mental wellbeing by nurturing social connection.

On the other hand, the same study indicates that young people who use social media passively, scrolling through other people's content without engaging, may have higher levels of depression and anxiety.





People tend to show their best side on social media, especially high-profile influencers, and young people might feel inadequate – not attractive, wealthy, interesting or popular enough.

It's worth noting that this research shows association, not causation. In other words, we don't know if spending a lot of time scrolling on social media contributes to poor mental health, or if young people who are already experiencing poor mental health are more likely to engage in this kind of passive social media use. But the fact that there is a link suggests it's wise to preference active use as opposed to passive consumption.

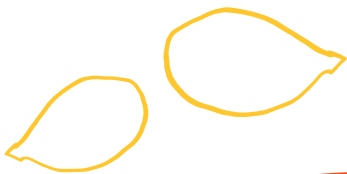
## What can parents do?

The most positive thing we can do as parents and carers is to maintain open communication with our children, both about their use of technology and about their mental health.

While that sounds simple, putting it into practice can be challenging for a variety of reasons. As many parents will know, not all young people are eager to have these conversations. It can also be hard to know what is ordinary, age-appropriate behaviour and what is a warning sign that your child's mood is suffering. Despite the challenges, it's important to persevere and have regular, honest discussions about these topics.

Think about the tone you use and the kinds of questions you ask; you don't want to make your child feel as if they're being interrogated. Rather, take an interest in what they're doing and find out what gives them joy. Keep your ears open for things that make them sad or anxious. If you hear something that is worrying to you as a parent, be careful not to overreact – compassion and curiosity are key.

We've included some conversation cards to complement this article to get you started.



There are also some signs that you can keep an eye out for that your child's use of social media and technology in general is not healthy. For instance, if they become upset or angry when they have to spend time away from their device, or if they are engaging with content that is disturbing or not appropriate for their age, you may have cause for concern. We've written about this in our resource on becoming a screen smart family, [which you can find here](#).

If you are concerned about your child's mental health, you shouldn't hesitate to seek outside support – and we mean that literally; there's no reason to wait. Help is available, starting with your family GP.

If you're worried about online bullying, another valuable resource is the [Dolly's Dream](#) support line, a 24-hour phone line where qualified counsellors are ready to respond to parents, carers, and young people.

Other resources include Kids Helpline, an online phone and counselling service that operates Australia-wide, and Parentline, which has phone lines available for each state and territory.

## Key takeaways:

1. There is a link between social media and mental health, but it's neither all good nor all bad
2. Passive social media use is associated with poorer mental health, while active engagement may be positive
3. It's important to have regular, honest discussions with your children about social media and mental health – the earlier you start, the better!
4. Practice compassion and curiosity in your conversations, and don't overreact
5. Be alert for signs that your child's social media use is affecting them negatively
6. If you're concerned about your child's mental health, seek outside help.