Pre-teen social media use and the impact on mental health and wellbeing

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> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this resource may contain images or names of people who have passed away.

Key messages

- The pre-teen years (age 9–12) are a time of rapid physical, social and neurodevelopmental change. Supporting this age group provides an opportunity to mitigate potential poor mental health outcomes in adolescence.

- Children in the pre-teen years are increasingly interacting on different social media platforms.

- Impacts of social media use on mental health and wellbeing may be overshadowed by other concerns/behaviours such as school refusal or social withdrawal. Therefore there is a need to explore social media use with parents and pre-teens.

- The pre-teen years present a 'window of opportunity' for parents to engage in discussions about social media and mental health and wellbeing with their children, to help pre-teens learn skills to engage safely on social media platforms.

Introduction

What is this resource about?

This resource is about raising awareness of social media use in pre-teens and the possible impacts this may have on their mental health and wellbeing. This paper will support practitioners to hold conversations with pre-teens and their parents about social media use. It provides information about pre-teen development and behaviours when engaging on social media platforms, and strategies practitioners can use when having discussions with pre-teens and their parents.

> While this paper draws on research and evidence, there are limitations to the recency of the information available due to the rapid development of social media platforms. It is also important to understand the possible impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on social media use.
>
> During 2020 and 2021 most states and territories in Australia experienced lockdowns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Practitioners have reported that use of social media in pre-teens played an important role in keeping children connected to their peers during these lockdowns. Online platforms were also utilised by schools to support children in their learning and engagement with peers. During this period there was an increased use of social media among pre-teens, with both positive and negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing (Rideout, Peebles, Mann, & Robb, 2022).
>
> In developing this resource, we consulted with practitioners who work with pre-teens to gain insights into current use and concerns for social media use in this age range.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is for any practitioner who works with children aged 9–12 years and/or their parents (this may include anyone in a parenting role such as grandparents, carers or extended family). This includes psychologists, social workers, case workers, general practitioners and allied health professionals.

Why is it important to focus on pre-teens' wellbeing?

– This is a critical time of development where children face many changes to social relationships, cognitive and physical development (Robinson, 2020).

– Pre-teens are increasing their use of social media compared to their younger years (Wade, Almendingen & Robinson 2022).

– Pre-teens have fewer skills than adolescents to keep themselves safe online (Office of the eSafety Commissioner, 2018).

– Parents need to be supported in their parenting of children in this age group (Wade et. al. 2022).

– Pre-teens face many changes (e.g. puberty, school transitions, peer relationships); they need support to navigate these changes while engaging on social media platforms.

– Social media use can have negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing for this age group (Rideout et al., 2022).

What we mean by social media

In this paper we refer to social media as any online platform where a pre-teen can interact with other people. This includes a range of platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Messenger, Fortnite, online games or video calls. We term these as 'social media platforms' due to their interactive nature, allowing pre-teens to talk, message, share and create content through their respective platforms (Vogels, Gelles-Watnick & Massarat, 2022).

This paper does not focus on specific social media platforms because of the speed with which platforms are developing and evolving, and the fluid nature of content-sharing across platforms (for instance, content on TikTok can easily be accessed via YouTube or Instagram).

Pre-teens and social media

The pre-teen years are a time of rapid change, including how children are engaging in and using social media. Typically, younger children (0–8 years) mainly engage with screens through consuming content (watching TV or YouTube) (Rideout, et al. 2022). Due to a range of factors such as higher technology and literacy skills, children in the pre-teen years are more independent online and can engage on a variety of different platforms in different ways. They might be creating, reacting to and/or sharing content and interacting with people (both known and unknown), and are often doing these things with little support or supervision from their parents (Rhodes, 2017).

While many apps have age restrictions (e.g. children must be 13 years or older to have an account), it appears that children under this age can either circumvent the age restriction or may be able to access content via other platforms without the same age restrictions (Jeffery, 2023). While there may be a tendency to focus on adolescents and social media, it is often during the pre-teen years that children first start engaging on social media in different ways, highlighting the importance of exploring social media use with children and their parents early on (Rideout et. al., 2022).

It is important to note that social media can provide many benefits for pre-teens. It provides a platform for pre-teens to connect with peers and broaden their social circle. It also provides different ways to engage with others, such as through online games.

Due to the variety of social media platforms, pre-teens can engage with social media in different ways, and there is space for creativity through developing content and connecting with individuals or communities who share similar interests or experiences. While this paper focuses on supporting parents and pre-teens when social media use may have negative impacts, it is important to also support them to understand the benefits that social media can offer.

Development and social media use in the pre-teen years

Cognitive development

The pre-teen years are a time of rapid cognitive development. During this time children are learning to use logical thinking to make sense of complex situations, rather than the magical or concrete thinking of their younger years (McLean, 2017). While children are starting to learn to distinguish between reality and fiction there can be challenges in applying logical thinking to social media. Content on social media can often be portrayed as if it is real even when it is highly curated, making it hard for children to differentiate 'real content' or interactions from contrived or 'fake' material or people. Children are also more vulnerable to misinformation, with difficulty distinguishing between accurate information and information that is factually incorrect or 'fake news' (Penzer & Breig, 2021).

Pre-teens are also still developing skills around emotion regulation, impulse control and understanding risk and consequences. Developing these skills while engaging online can have its challenges, as actions on social media can have amplified consequences such as:

– global reactions to content

– peer shaming or isolation

– bullying or 'trolling'

– school involvement; and

– legal consequences.

As pre-teens are still developing their cognitive ability to assess risk and the long-term impacts of immediate interactions on social media, it can be more challenging for them to understand and modify their behaviour based on a potential longer-term risk or consequence. Pre-teens may struggle to keep in mind the digital footprint that they are creating for themselves and that their interactions on social media can follow them into adolescence and adulthood. There can be a permanency to their actions online and a lack of control over who can view or share information or content that could follow them for years to come.

Peer relationships

Pre-teens place more importance on social and peer relationships than they did in their younger years. There is an increased need for peer approval and to live up to the expectations of others (McLean, 2017). Social media platforms (including online games) can provide a pathway for children to connect with other people and reduce isolation by fostering relationships.

However, the need for peer approval can be exacerbated by being online, where certain platforms give peer validation through things like number of followers, 'likes', reposts or levels. It may mean that children are more vulnerable to feelings of low self-worth if they are not gaining peer approval or engaging in risky behaviour such as sharing sensitive information. They may also develop a distorted understanding of peer connections (e.g. feelings of connection or approval from people online when the feelings aren't reciprocated, or they may not even be engaging with a real person).

Bullying is common in the pre-teen years (Fujikawa et al., 2021) and social media platforms can add another avenue for children to engage in or experience bullying. Bullying through online platforms is associated with a range of negative mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation or attempts, and substance use (Elgar et al., 2014). While peer relationships can be a protective factor against the impacts of bullying, the increased importance of peer approval as well as more independent activity online can create environments where pre-teens are vulnerable to bullying.

Physical development

The pre-teen years are often a time of rapid physical changes. The onset of puberty now typically happens when children are between nine and 12 years old. These physical changes can result in a greater awareness of their own body, comparisons to others' bodies and the emergence of sexual identity and sexuality (Murphy & Robinson, 2019).

Social media can provide both positive and negative environments for children going through puberty. It can provide children with information and connections to others who may be experiencing similar changes (Jeffery, 2023). It can also put additional pressure on children to look a certain way and can lead to body image dissatisfaction, particularly in pre-teen girls (Booker, Kelly & Sacker, 2018).

Pre-teens and digital identity

Children aged 9–12 years have grown up in a 'digital age' and social media use can be normalised for children in this age group (Granic, Morita & Scholten, 2020). Many children will have grown up in households where parents have their own social media accounts and where the child themselves may have a 'digital footprint' through their parent's posts. This may mean that posting, reacting to or sharing content may be something a child has grown up with and is normalised as a way of interacting with other people (Office of the eSafety Commissioner, 2018).

During the pre-teen years children may start developing their own digital identity and sense of self where they interact with people online on different social media platforms. While parents may find it surprising that children are engaging in social media, for pre-teens it may feel like another step towards gaining independence, by creating and navigating a digital identity themselves rather than having an online presence mediated through their parents' social media accounts (Granic et al., 2020).

Although pre-teens can be quite independent online, they often have fewer skills than older children to keep themselves safe when engaging on social media. Pre-teens typically engage in fewer protective behaviours such as un-tagging photos, deleting comments, increasing their privacy settings, blocking people or reporting unwanted content, which leaves them more vulnerable to negative interactions or potentially risky situations (Office of the eSafety Commissioner, 2018).

Social media and mental health and wellbeing

The relationship between social media use and mental health and wellbeing is nuanced and complex; there can be a range of factors such as family and peer relationships, gender, lifestyle and physical health which can impact both (Granic et. al., 2020). However, given the cognitive developmental stages of pre-teens and their vulnerability to mental health concerns (Robinson, 2020), practitioners are advised to explore social media use when considering the mental health and wellbeing of children in this age range.

High social media use can be linked to behaviours associated with poor mental health and wellbeing (Fardouly, Magson, Rapee, Johnco & Oar., 2020) so it is important to be aware of certain factors that could indicate poor mental health or wellbeing and explore social media use in the context of these concerns. You may find our paper on exploring child mental health concerns with parents helpful.

Following are some factors that could indicate that a child is experiencing poor mental health or wellbeing (Black Dog Institute, 2022; The Royal Children's Hospital, 2017):

- changes to sleep
- decreased movement/physical activity
- body image concerns
- bullying (either engaging in bullying behaviours or experiencing bullying)
- social isolation/withdrawal from face-to-face activities

- increased family conflict
- school refusal
- limited interests offline
- somatic symptoms such as stomach aches or headaches.

Social media may not be the single cause of these factors, but it could be contributing to the stress or negative feelings a child may be experiencing. Children may be changing their behaviour (reduced physical activity) or not getting enough sleep because of an increased use of social media, which in turn can have negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing.

While social media may exacerbate some mental health concerns it may also serve as a coping mechanism; some children may use it to connect with online communities or to access information about mental health or support on platforms such as Kids Helpline.

Practice strategies

There may be different times when you will have discussions about social media use and mental health and wellbeing for pre-teens. These conversations may occur when:

- a parent or pre-teen raises a concern about social media use
- a parent or pre-teen has another concern (e.g., bullying) and you explore social media use as part of understanding their concern; or
- you raise the topic of social media as part of a preventative strategy to help strengthen communication between parents and pre-teens.

When a parent raises a concern about their pre-teen's social media use

Parents may raise concerns directly to you about their child's social media use. This section explores how you can support them to discuss their concern with their child in a way that minimises conflict but also keeps the child safe, and reduces impacts on mental health and wellbeing.

While parents' concerns about social media may be linked to the amount of time children are spending on devices, privacy or engaging with strangers, you can help them understand the range of impacts both positive and negative that social media may have.

When a parent raises a concern to you about social media use it is important to:

– Establish a shared understanding of the concern.
  Example: 'Can you tell me what your worries are about your child using this app?'

– Understand why the parent is concerned.
  Example: 'Why is this a concern for you?'

– Ask about what the parent has already tried with their pre-teen.
  Example: 'What have previous conversations with your child about social media looked like? What worked well and what didn't work so well?'

– Invite the parent to reflect on their own social media use and how they might approach modifying behaviours around social media as a whole family.
  Example: 'How would you like social media use to look for the whole family? What are things that everyone might need to adapt?'

– If needed, help build the parent's understanding of social media platforms, what their child may be gaining from these interactions and how the child can engage on these platforms.
  Example: 'What would be helpful to learn more about social media?'

– Support the parent to plan how they can raise this topic with their child in a way that is curious and non-judgemental, understanding what they are liking about engaging on that social media platform.
  Example: 'How would you like to talk to your child about this? What are some ways we could be curious about why they are liking this so much and what they are getting out of it?'

– Explore ways the parent/s could approach changes to social media use as a family agreement rather than just expecting the child to change their behaviour.
  Example: 'How might you approach this as a change you would like to see for the whole family?'

– If possible, reframe the concern as an opportunity to build skills, support the child with developing a balance between social media and other activities, and work on skills around their emotional health (see next section).
  Example: 'What do you see as opportunities to build skills and support your child with finding a balance and increasing their wellbeing?'

When a pre-teen raises a concern about social media

There may be times when a child raises a concern about social media with you. If the child is using social media without their parents' knowledge (i.e. because their parents have banned it), the child is less likely to go to their parent if they are experiencing something negative on a social media platform (Jeffery, 2023). If a child raises a concern about social media with you, it is important to:

– Affirm the child's decision to talk to someone about their concern.
  Example: 'I can see this is making you sad, but you did the right thing telling someone about it.'

– Seek to understand why this is a concern for them and how it may be impacting them.
  Example: 'Can you tell me what happened? What did you think or feel when it happened? What changes did you notice in your body (i.e. breathing fast, sweaty hands) when that was happening?'

– Ask if the child has raised this concern with other people.
  Example: 'Have you talked about this with anyone else? What did they say when you told them?'

– Where possible, discuss how you can both share this information with their parent (if they haven't already done so).
  Example: 'I think it's important for your parents to know what's happening. What would help you feel comfortable talking to them about this? What can I do to help?'

– Ask the child what they think they need to be able to engage safely on social media platforms.
  Example: 'Using social media means we have to work on skills to keep us safe and to make sure we don't have bad experiences. What would help you feel safe and happy when using these platforms? What are some things you could learn more about?'

When you explore social media use in the context of another concern

You may explore a pre-teen's social media use even if it is not the presenting concern or an issue raised by parents initially. Just as you might discuss school, social interactions and family dynamics when learning about a concern, social media needs to be part of those discussions. Some ways to explore this may be to:

– Explore with the parent and/or pre-teen what the child's social media use looks like.
Example: 'Can you tell me about what you/your child likes to do online?'

– Ask if they notice any connections between social media and the presenting concern.
Example: 'What have you noticed about your child's mood when they are spending a lot of time online?'

– Explore whether social media is providing any benefits.
Example: 'What benefits do you think your child is getting from connecting with people over that platform?'

Discussing social media use as part of a preventative strategy

It's a good idea to start conversations about social media use early in the pre-teen years (Jeffery, 2023), before the child is independently engaging on social media platforms or there are concerns about social media use. This time can be a 'window of opportunity' for parents to build positive communication and expectations around social media use, and allow for joint learning and shared interest across parents and children.

If social media use isn't happening yet or isn't a concern for the parent, you can use this as an opportunity to:

– explore areas of social media the parent would like to learn more about

– share resources and information with parents about social media use in the pre-teen years

– ask parents to consider how they would like social media use to look for the whole family

– ask children what they want to use social media for – what they think will be beneficial or enjoyable for them

– have parents consider what skills and behaviours they could model to their child about their own social media use (e.g. taking breaks, talking about how they feel after an interaction on social media)

– plan for how parents can support children with developing skills and behaviours to minimise negative impacts of social media (see next section)

– talk to parents about how they can support pre-teens if they view inappropriate content (intentionally or unintentionally), so that pre-teens feel safe talking to their parents about what they have seen and how they feel about it

– revisit conversations about social media use frequently to see if there have been changes in the child's use of social media or if the parent has any concerns.
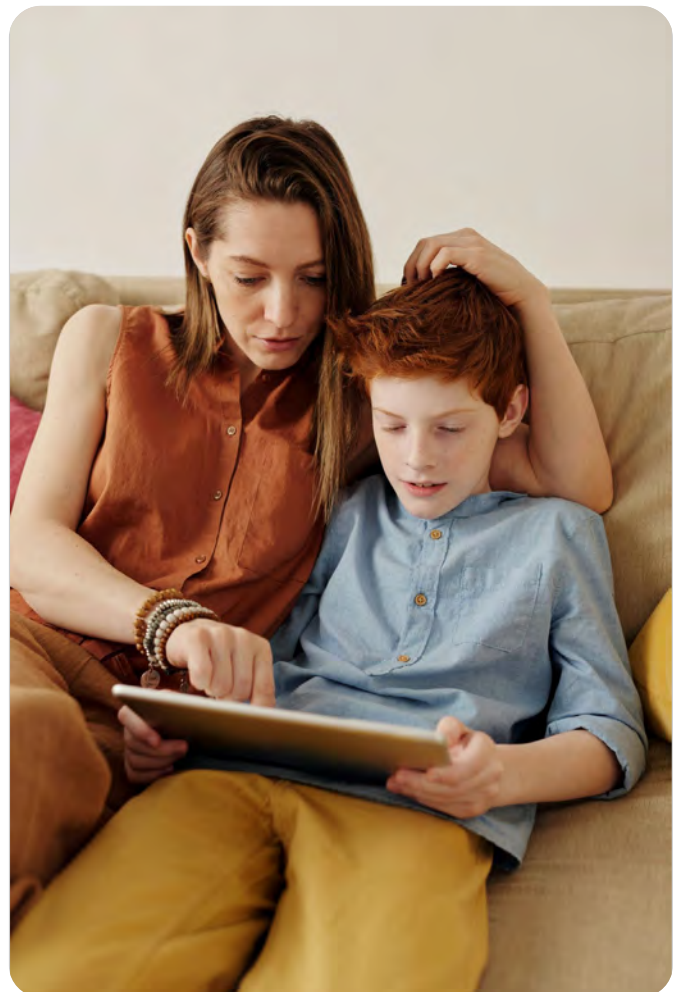
Building skills to support social media use

While parents and children all have different strengths and skills, the following strategies may help you identify areas to support parents so that they can develop/maintain positive communication with their pre-teen about social media use. The key areas that you may wish to explore with parents are:

– **Skills** – what are some important things for a child to learn to keep them safe online.

- **Balance** – how parents can help children balance social media use with other interests and activities that are not online.

- **Emotional health** – the parent's role in supporting their children to recognise and understand their emotions while engaging on social media and strategies to help reduce any potential negative impacts.

These areas are explored in more detail below. There is also a resource section at the end of this paper which provides links to resources that may be helpful to share with parents.

Supporting skill development

Due to the rapid development of social media platforms, there is often a need for parents and children to build skills in managing an online presence. Pre-teens typically have fewer skills for navigating online communities than older children, so it is important that parents are supported to help children learn a range of skills to minimise negative experiences online. Depending on the child's age, strengths and the types of platforms they are using, there will be different skills to focus on. Some examples of skills may include:

- managing privacy settings

- recognising scams, fake accounts or bots

- understanding protective functions of the social media platforms such as blocking or reporting

- identifying 'fake news' or factually incorrect information and where to check information for accuracy

- supporting children to understand how content is created and the reality behind certain images or influencers

- learning about how different apps work – what makes them appealing.

There are different ways parents can support skill development for social media use. This may be through:

- **joint learning** – both parent and child learning about a platform's functionality together by exploring the app or reviewing information and talking about what that means

- **having regular time set aside to manage or maintain social media settings** – for example, both parent and child updating and checking privacy settings on their social media platforms once a month

- **modelling skills** – parents finding incidental teaching moments in their own social media use such as showing how they identified a scam or fact checked something they saw

- **considering optimal time for learning** – learning about different functions when the child is calm and able to learn, rather than when they are in a stressed or heightened state.

Balancing social media with other interests

You may wish to help parents with strategies and ideas to help their child balance social media use with other interests, activities or hobbies (Common Sense Media, 2022). While each family will have their own ideas about what that balance may look like, here are some examples of what parents may want to explore with their pre-teen:

- Explore with children what other activities they like to engage in away from screens.

- Seek to understand what may prevent children from engaging in these activities.

- Help children to identify their habits or times when they want to use social media platforms or default to using social media.

There are many different strategies a parent could use to support their child to balance social media use and other activities. For example:

- Have a family agreement around technology use and what that means for everyone in the family.

- Agree on times of day/time periods that can be spent on social media. Set parameters to help support this – for example, reminders to disconnect, putting devices out of reach for certain activities such as dinner time.

- Have clear outlines of how social media is used in the household.

- Support, encourage or participate in activities that are not online.

- Explore the child's interests online and see if there are parallels to what they are doing online to something they could do away from screens. For example, replicating a game off screen, using a video tutorial to create something, using social media to find out about local places/activities.

Emotional health and wellbeing

Social media platforms can be a source of enjoyment and connection for children but can equally evoke feelings of frustration, low self-worth, anxiety, or sadness. An important role parents play for pre-teens using social media is to help them recognise different

emotions they may feel (both positive and negative) and help them manage these emotions in productive or helpful ways.

Parents who regularly talk to children about their social media use can:

- support children to recognise how they feel when they are engaging on different social media platforms

- help them identify 'triggers' such as certain content or interactions which may change their mood

- check in with children when they are on social media; ask how they are feeling and what they can do to help regulate their emotions; and

- talk about what they can do when they notice negative emotions coming up while they're online.

There are different ways parents can implement these skills, such as:

- checking in on children while they are using social media and asking them to describe what they are thinking or feeling in relation to what they are doing online

- building children's vocabulary around different emotions they may be feeling by suggesting additional words to the ones they currently use

- modelling how different content/interactions can make someone feel, explaining what changes might occur in their mood, thinking or physical reactions

- supporting the child to recognise when their emotions might be changing and helping them to think of ways they can manage this (e.g. taking a break, showing someone what has been upsetting for them, engaging in skills to protect themselves such as blocking or reporting content)

- talking about positive emotions too – why they are making the child feel happy and what they are noticing about their thoughts or physical reactions to this

- watching videos together (following the child's lead and seeing what they are interested in/ wanting to watch) and pausing to reflect on what feelings they are both experiencing.

Summary

Social media use with pre-teens is increasing and it is important to support parents and pre-teens to navigate this space. The pre-teen years are a time of rapid social, emotional, physical and cognitive changes and social media can present challenges for this age group as they are experiencing these changes. Therefore, it is crucial for practitioners to view this time as a 'window of opportunity' to help support parents and pre-teens navigate this space.

Whether or not a child is already using social media, it is helpful to build awareness of social media use in pre-teens and the possible impacts on mental health and wellbeing.

Scan the QR code for links to a range of related resources for parents and practitioners:

AVAILABLE HERE

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