



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

## Skills for connecting on social media

### Connection and belonging

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who've been through tough times to spark hope and new ideas for skillfully and safely finding threads of connection through social media.

### Definition of 'parent'

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

### Does social media create connection or disconnect us?

We're all likely to have a different answer based on our experiences. And whether we feel like social media makes us feel more connected to others, less connected, or a bit of both, we may all have different reasons why.

This resource was created to help you think about how you use social media – whether it helps you feel more or less connected and whether you could benefit from further skills to help keep connections positive and safe.

### When social media helps us connect to community

Social media can be a space in which people with various identities, beliefs and ways of living can be seen and heard, which allows communities to develop and connect in ways that wouldn't have otherwise been possible.

At some times in life, social media may provide access to connection, especially for those of us who are:

- physically isolated by illness, disability or care responsibilities
- geographically isolated by living in rural or remote areas, poverty or lacking access to transport; or following migration and being far from loved ones
- socially isolated from experiencing family violence, abuse, bullying, distress or discrimination.

It can also provide a lifeline if there aren't people in our local area with shared experiences or identity similar to our own, for example:

- LGBTQIA+ folks
- bereaved parents
- families with disability
- families whose primary culture, ethnicity or language isn't locally reflected.

Being able to seek out shared understanding, connection and information specific to our experience or identity in online spaces can make a big difference.

Social media can be a way to:

- let people know we care about them
- discover new ideas that challenge us
- participate in social action and stand up for our families
- discover communities, services or events that improve our lives.

## When social media can cause disconnection

### Less time for children

While social media can help us find social connections online, it can take our time and energy away from parenting our children. When we have blank faces staring at our phones, we can't be attuned to our children or showing the care for them that we may want to. It can be helpful to wait to use social media until our children are in bed.

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**As parents, we need to constantly remind ourselves not to get swallowed up in our phones, as it can take us away from connections with our kids. But sometimes we use phones to message each other, even when we are in the same house, and that can be a nice balance, even a way to ask for help.**

JASON, PARENT, LUTRUWITA COUNTRY

### Less time for real life connections

When we spend a lot of time on social media it can mean we're less likely to reach out to in-person networks and relationships. If this feels like you, you might like to look at:

- [Connecting and caring for each other in tough times](#)
- [Feeling connection and belonging outside our families](#); and
- [Finding connection beyond family, friends and community](#).

### It's addictive

Social media algorithms (the rules and calculations that decide what we should be shown) are designed to keep us looking at our screens as long as possible, clicking, liking, sharing, chatting and playing. If you can't resist the urge to scroll, it's nothing to do with your willpower, it's because your brain is looking for another 'dopamine hit' that social media provides. The article [Learning about Dopamine](#) explains what's going on in our brains when we're having trouble not using gaming or social media even when we want to be doing something else, and how we can work together in families to make changes.

### Harmful information

Social media can be an overwhelming space where we are exposed to a lot of information, that is often emotionally charged, false and opinion-based, which may be harmful. It can also be a space where unhelpful ideas about what's 'normal' or 'good' in children and families can be reinforced, making those of us who don't 'fit' into these 'norms' feel lonely or like there's something wrong with us.

### Unsafe connections

As in other parts of life, using social media can also make us vulnerable to unknowingly connecting with people who intend to use or hurt us. And when we share personal information online, about ourselves or our families, it can be misused or exploited in ways that are sometimes hard to predict. The eSafety Commissioner has some great guidance on [how to safely use social media and online chat](#) as well as information for parents on [helping children stay safe online](#).

## Take a moment to think about...



The following questions are aimed at helping you think about how you use social media for connection.

### Connection

- What are the ways you use social media to feel or find social connection?
- What kinds of connection wouldn't be possible in your life without social media?
- Do you have any stories of times when social media connections helped you get through tough times?

### Disconnection

- Are there times when social media takes your attention away from your children? What might their experience be?
- Does social media take you away from other people or things that are important to you?
- Are there ways that using social media can, or has been, harmful to your wellbeing, or made you feel more isolated? How does this feel?

### Skills

- What can you do when social media disconnects you from your children, feels harmful or makes you feel alone?
- What skills do you have to use social media (or stop using it) in a way that increases connection with your children and communities in-person?
- Who or what might support you to use social media in more positive ways?

## Social media wisdom

Sometimes social media gifts us the humour and light-heartedness we need to get through tough times. But using it in a way that makes us feel more connected and guards against harm and disconnection takes skill, care – and ideally support.

Let's hear from some of the families we worked with to create this resource who've generously shared their wisdom around using social media.

### Tiff, step-parent

#### Moments of connection and feeling less alone

'I have had some really beautiful moments of people following my social media for a period of time and then sending me a message and saying what it has meant to them. Those kinds of connections are really lovely ways of seeing your effect on the world. And I've seen other friends post things like, "Tell me your favourite memory of me" or "Share a picture of us together" – all these invitations to connect. And those comment threads are always so lovely to read and participate in.

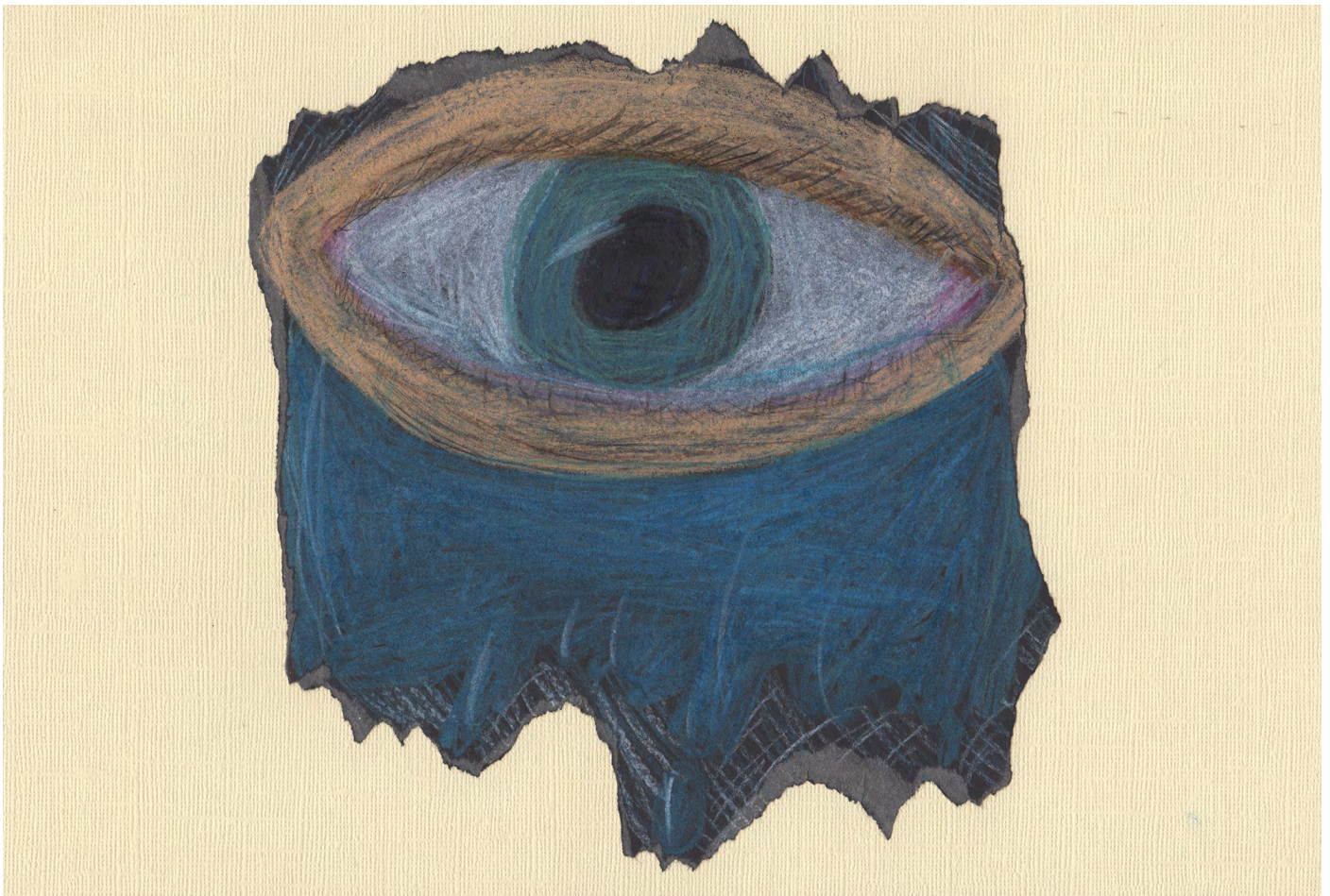
'There are a couple of people who post about neurodiversity, autism-affirming parenting practices. I find them incredibly helpful and sustaining in my parenting. I don't intend to engage with those posts because they tend to be public and I still am quite cautious around that. So it's totally passive, but I get so much from it, and I feel less alone when I'm reading what they're going through or how they've learned what their practices are.

'I love memes! There is a feeling of connection with people who share a vibe. Memes can be so validating. There is something powerful about taking experiences that can be so difficult and making them funny.'

#### Knowing what you're looking for and asking for it

'Having in my mind an idea of who I'm wanting to connect with or what I'm looking for makes it a bit easier to find it, because social media is such a huge ocean and so much of it is trash.

'When I make a post looking for connection, I will often frame it at the beginning with a specific request: "This is what I'm looking for." That's a skill that I learned specifically from African-American social media influencers who will often say, "White folks are welcome to comment on this" or "I am only looking for responses from racialised folks." It sets a context for the kinds of engagement that they would welcome, and gives them permission right at the beginning to ignore, block or delete people who didn't pay attention.



LUCY, 12 YEARS OLD

‘Sometimes, it can be really helpful to send a message to one or two people. To actually reach out for a direct connection can be really hard and vulnerable. It’s not always possible, but when it is, it can be helpful.’

### **Vulnerabilities you may be unaware of**

‘I’m not a biological parent or a legal guardian. I call myself a step-parent. Both of my step-kids are neurodivergent and have received services from quite young.’

‘Part of my community organising, since even before I became a parent, has been around neurodivergence and resisting some of the pathologising ways of understanding autism. I was open about that in my social media, and then even though I had been very careful and never talked about our direct experiences, I was critical about the types of therapy that were used with the kids.’

‘I didn’t realise that this would make me, and my partner, vulnerable when the therapy team found my social media and were upset by it – took it personally even though I hadn’t named them at any point. I was told quite forcefully to stop

posting anything public about this. It cut me off so fast from an entire section of my life. I realised that it didn’t actually matter how careful I was about that – there can be a vulnerability that you’re not always aware of.’

### **Pulling back from the digital space**

‘Going outside and touching grass can sometimes be really helpful. But I don’t think it has to be going outside. When there’s an experience of hurt or harm or isolation or disconnection that happens in the phone or on the computer, it can be reparative to pull back in from that digital space and find a way to be with your body: like make a cup of tea, go outside or water a plant. Whatever it is that pulls back in all of that self that has been put out into digital space.’

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... it’s totally passive, but I get so much from it, and I feel less alone when I’m reading what they’re going through ...

TIFF, STEP-PARENT

## Take a moment to think about...



### ...Tiff's experiences

The following questions are aimed at helping you think about how you use social media for connection.

- What stood out to you from reading about Tiff's experiences with social media?
- Does anything in Tiff's stories give you ideas for your family? Which ideas do you think are the most important?
- What kinds of connection and relationships do you want to prioritise in your life? Could you ask your children this question as well?
- What steps might you want to take next? Is there anyone or anything that could help you?

### Lola, 17 years old

#### Using social media to feel or find connection

'You can make connections on social media that you couldn't in the real world with issues like distance and anxiety. You can also find people with similar interests easily on social media and it's easy to get in touch with them.

'Me and my friends use social media as our main way to formulate plans, aside from school. I couldn't get in touch with relatives that live away from me without social media. Me and my boyfriend first really connected through a social media platform, that's how we got to know each other.'

#### Social media can help in tough times

'There's been times where either me or my friends have been sitting at home at night with feelings that have made us upset, but with social media we have been able to reach out to each other and talk so we haven't had to sit alone with our feelings, that's definitely helped with stuff. Social media is the only way we can connect, especially before we had car licences, social media created a pathway that wouldn't have been accessible otherwise at that time.'

## Being aware of isolation and harm

'With social media, people post things they want other people to see, so a lot of the time you're seeing lots of photos and videos of people hanging out, doing exciting stuff and maybe you don't have the opportunity to do that so that can make you feel isolated.

'And you have to be careful who you talk to when using social media – people have the opportunity to portray whatever identity or persona they want, so this opens opportunities for people to lie about who they truly are. They could have unethical motives, it's easy to fall for it so you have to be careful who you talk to and make sure you trust them. If you know their name, personally, if someone has added you, you can talk them in real life to make sure it's them. A lot of sites use photos to communicate ... if they aren't sending pictures of full faces, and you are already suspicious, this is a red flag. With Snapchat for instance, pictures are taken and sent in real time so they're back and forth, which lets you make sure the person is who they say they are. In the past I've had creepy people contacting me. When this happens I've blocked them – just don't give them anything and don't entertain their stuff.'

## Take a moment to think about...



### ...Lola's experiences

- What stood out to you from reading about Lola's experiences?
- Do Lola's experiences give you ideas for your family? Which ideas do you think are the most important?
- What kinds of connection and relationships do you want to prioritise in your life? (Could you ask your children this question too?)
- What steps might you want to take next? Is there anyone or anything that could help you?

Thanks for taking the time to read these stories. What might be missing from them? What are your ideas for using, or disconnecting from, social media?

### Dive deeper into podcasts

In this long but fascinating podcast, author Johann Hari and host Rich Roll talk about the [impact that technology, including social media, can have on our focus, attention and connections](#). They also discuss the impact on children and offer some ideas for ways forward.

#### From Emerging Minds...

- [Screen time: Finding a healthy balance for children and young people](#) (Emerging Minds)
- [Gaming: Finding a healthy balance for children and young people](#) (Emerging Minds)

### Resources to help with safe and positive social media connections

- Relationships Australia (Queensland) has a short blog on [social media and isolation](#).
- If you're up for a longer read, then you might like to borrow [Stolen focus](#) by Johann Hari from your local library. Hari looks at the ways social media and other facets of modern life are impacting our ability to concentrate and connect.

#### For those of us navigating social media use with children or young people

- Raising Children Network has information for parents covering benefits, risks, talking with children about social media, and establishing family guidelines on [social media for pre-teens and teens](#). RCN also has information on [screen time use across the age groups](#).
- The article [Learning about Dopamine](#) can help you understand what's going on in our children's brains when they're having trouble balancing use of gaming or social media and how we can work together in families to make changes.

### More connection and belonging resources

Have a look at the following options and choose what feels right for you and your family.

- [Feeling connection and belonging outside our families](#)
- [Finding connection beyond family, friends and community](#)
- [Supporting children's social connections in tough times](#)
- [Why are connection and belonging important?](#)
- [When we're really struggling to parent](#)
- [Songs for connection and belonging](#)
- [See all resources on connection and belonging](#)

Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family?  
[First check out our practitioner guide.](#)

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