

FAMILY MENTAL HEALTH

Lessons & Activities

Social Media and the Internet

- “A child does need to learn how to use social media and the internet in a positive way. . . . The importance is having a balance between giving your children freedom and monitoring their technology use, and a balance between using technology and being in the ‘real world.’ Finding those balances can lead to a more open relationship between you and your children.”
—Dr. Greg Hudnall
- Purpose: This lesson will stress the importance of practicing internet safety and give examples of how to keep family members safe online.

Parent Pre-reading

There are many opinions about youth and their use of social media and the internet: when to let your children join social media platforms, when to give them a phone with internet access, what limits to put on social media and internet use, and more. Regardless of what you do in your family, parents need to be aware of the effects social media and the internet can have on their children in relation to suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

Studies have shown that there could very well be a connection between social media and internet use and suicide rates, and there are several ways online use increases the risk of suicidal behavior. The first is cyberbullying and cyber harassment. One study looking at 2000 middle school students found that cyberbullying victims were twice as likely to attempt suicide than those who were not victims because it magnifies feelings of isolation and hopelessness, which increases the risk of suicide. The second way is the amount of pro-suicide and even suicide how-to information online. Anyone with internet access can read suicide descriptions or other writing that sensationalizes suicide, which increases someone’s risk of suicide. The third way is that online chat rooms and discussion forums allow individuals to pressure others to die by suicide, or even make suicide pacts. Social media could also show suicide notes left by others and therefore influence anyone who may come upon them.

Social media and the internet can be dangerous for people who are already vulnerable and can influence pro-suicide behavior. It presents suicidal ideas to individuals who may have never been exposed to it otherwise. With these cautions in mind, parents need to decide what is best for their children to protect them online.

Besides going through this lesson and talking with your children, parents can try the following suggestions:

- Put parental controls and a tracking device on your child’s phone. There are many apps available that help with this.

- Ask your children to give you their phones at a certain time each night.
- Keep any technology away from the dinner table.

These are just a few suggestions. Figure out what is best for your family and specific children. However, if you suspect your child is struggling with suicidal thoughts or browsing dangerous websites, don't hesitate to intervene.

Preparation

Prepare any materials necessary to create your family media use plan, as described in the activity.

Preview the video that goes along with this lesson.

Optional: Have a copy of *The Technology Tail: A Digital Footprint Story* by Julia Cook available to read with your family.

Lesson

Using social media and the internet can be a positive experience. Social media allows users to meet, connect, and keep in contact with people. The internet is full of useful information and can be a great asset to learning.

However, using social media and the internet isn't always a positive experience. Through the internet and social media, the risk of suicidal behavior can increase through cyberbullying, prosuicide information, and online suicide notes, to name a few. Unfortunately, these often either hurt people so much they are pushed over the edge or sensationalizes suicide in a way that makes them more inclined to go through with it.

It's important to understand that by simply seeing prosuicide information or reading a news report that sensationalizes suicide does not mean an individual will attempt suicide. In most cases, the people most at-risk of increased suicidal behavior after seeing and reading online content are those who are already struggling with mental health problems or thoughts of suicide.

Even if someone isn't struggling now, seeing content like that can be disturbing, and there are several ways to combat some of the negative experiences of social media and the internet.

- Use apps to help monitor any behavior that could lead toward self-harm. An example is [Bark](#), which monitors texts and online activity and alerts parents of potential risk.
- Connect on social media platforms. Being "friends" and "following" one another helps the whole family watch out for each other.
- Put the computer in a common place in the house where it can always be seen.
- Make a plan for what to do if you see something online that makes you uncomfortable or upset. Whether it's a prosuicide website or news article or something else, know who you can turn to (parents) or what you can do (report the content to the applicable platform).

There are also several ways you can help keep others safe online. The following are some suggestions on how to help others stay safe:

- Be careful what you post. Maintain good online manners and be kind.
- If you see someone post something online and think they might be suicidal, get help. Reach out to the person and tell an adult.

Being careful online can often prevent family members from being exposed to suicidal ideas they may have never been exposed to otherwise.

Adapting for Younger Children

Summarize the lesson in a few simple sentences that your child can understand. Even young children are exposed to online content, so it's important that they know how to act (i.e., be kind) and what to do if they see something that upsets them (i.e., tell a parent).

To help your child better understand the lesson, you could read *The Technology Tail: A Digital Footprint Story* by Julia Cook. This story is about how everything kids put on social media can help or hurt other people. This digital trail can't be erased, so everyone should be as kind and respectful through the screen as they are in person. Some questions you could ask and points you could go over after reading the story include the following:

- What does "THINK" stand for? How can it help us while using the internet?
- Why is it important to be kind online? Is it different than being kind in person?

Activity

As a family, create a family media use plan. Type it up, write it down, or get creative by making a poster board. However you decide to make it, hang it up on the fridge or somewhere the whole family can see it. Below are some suggestions on what your family could include.

Screen-Free Zones: These can be places such as the kitchen or bedrooms with shut doors.

Screen-Free Time: These can be times when they're walking across the street, driving, eating meals, or one hour before bed.

Technology Curfews: Decide what time each night children will turn in their phones to be charged overnight in the parents' room (or other location).

Permissible Entertainment Ratings: What level of rating requires a parent's permission or requires a parent's presence while viewing.

Permissible Parenting Monitoring: Checking browsing history, texts, installing apps, or tracking child's phone.

Recreational Screen Time Limit: This is where you decide how many hours each day each child and parent can use screen time. Obvious exceptions are using internet for work or homework.

Video

This video goes over some tips to use while online to keep children and teens safe.

<https://youtu.be/c20T9XCXqjA>

References

American Academy of Pediatrics through HealthyChildren.org, “How to Make a Family Media Use Plan.” Retrieved from <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/How-to-Make-a-Family-Media-Use-Plan.aspx>.

Amy McElroy, “8 Ways Parents Can Teach Internet Safety to Teens.” Posted on Noodle. Retrieved from <https://www.noodle.com/articles/8-ways-parents-can-teach-internet-safety-to-teens>.

David D. Luxton, Jennifer D. June, and Jonathan M. Fairall, “Social Media and Suicide: A Public Health Perspective.” American Journal of Public Health 102, suppl. 2 (2012): S195–S200, as found at NCBI, accessed February 7, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3477910/>.

Gregory A. Hudnall, Hope Squad: The Successful Suicide Prevention Program for Youth [Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, Inc., 2018], 85–86.

Additional Resources

The following are just a few of the websites, numbers, and apps that provide convenient information about suicide prevention. Click on the icon to find out more about the resource.

