

DISCUSSION GUIDE

**Sexual Risk Avoidance
Education Program**

STEP OUT OF THE FRAME: SOCIAL MEDIA AND OUR MENTAL HEALTH

**A Discussion Guide for
Youth-Serving Professionals
to Engage Youth in Conversations
about Healthy Social Media Use**

June 2024



INTRODUCTION

According to surveys, **97% of teens are online daily**. Nine in 10 teens use YouTube, and a majority of teens ages 13 to 17 say they use TikTok (63%), Snapchat (60%), and Instagram (59%). For older teens ages 15 to 17, these shares are about seven in 10. Nearly half of teens say they use the internet “almost constantly” (Anderson et al., 2023).

Although teens can benefit in many ways from using social media, studies have shown that social media use is linked to anxiety, depression, and lowered self-esteem among teens (Boers et al., 2019; Riehm et al., 2019; Zagorski, 2017).

As an educator, you may be wondering how to help teens avoid the risks and maximize the benefits of social media. This brief animated video, [Step Out of the Frame – Social Media and Our Mental Health](#), gives youth-serving providers a platform to initiate conversations with teens about healthy and unhealthy social media use. It is narrated by three teens who talk candidly about their experiences on social media. The video discusses the benefits and pitfalls of social media use and covers topics such as effortless perfection, social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), and uncontrolled use of social media—behaviors known to affect youth mental health.



This discussion guide will help you use the video as a springboard for conversations that engage teens in reflecting on their own social media habits and discover opportunities to create healthier habits.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

BEFORE showing the video to your students, ask them these questions:

1. What words do you associate with social media? For the next minute, jot down all of the words you can think of.

Tip: For question #1, use a flip chart, white board or other means to display the results of this brainstorming activity (e.g., shared Google Doc, Google Slides, Zoom's whiteboard feature).

2. What do you use social media for? What are some pros and cons of using social media that you have heard of or experienced yourself?

Tip: When teens answer question #2, probe to understand the role of social media in their lives. Use questions and comments like “tell me more about that” or “can you share an example?” to learn the specific pros and cons of social media for the youth you work with. You’ll hopefully discover things you don’t already know about the pros and cons of social media in their lives from their own perspectives. It will also help generate peer support for healthy social media use among students in your class because they will learn that many teens struggle to find a healthy balance.

3. What might frustrate you about the way that adults talk about teens’ use of social media?

Tip: When teens answer question #3, try not to get defensive. Instead, probe to understand how teens feel about the assumptions many adults make about their use of social media and other digital technology. You may find that they feel misunderstood or stereotyped. This will help you support them in a nonjudgmental way!

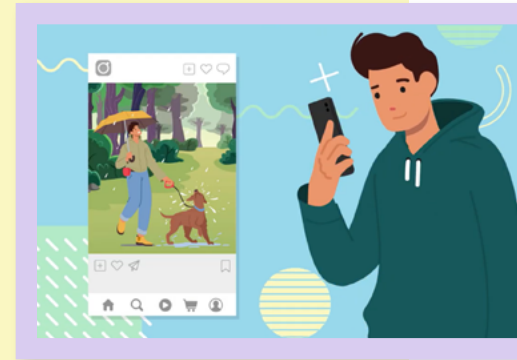
AFTER showing the video to your students, ask them these questions:

4. What are your initial reactions after watching the video?
5. What was the main takeaway message of this video for you?

6. What were some positive ways the teens in the video used social media? What are some benefits of social media in your own lives?

Tip: For question #6, if students don't mention these points, briefly bring up some of these examples:

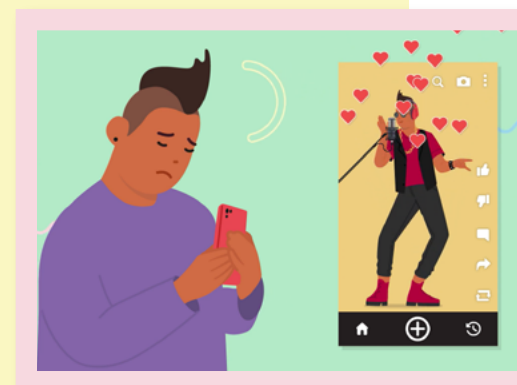
- It can help teens connect with friends and strengthen their friendships.
- It can help teens find others who have shared interests.
- It can link teens to extracurricular activities and worthwhile projects and motivate them to participate.
- It can reduce geographic barriers and help teens interact with people who are too far away to see in person.
- It can reduce teens' feelings of isolation.
- It can increase teens' sense of belonging.
- It can be a source of social support for some teens, especially those who might face exclusion in their regular social circles.
- It can provide an outlet for sharing ideas or personal or artistic expression.
- It can help them find information about topics of interest to them.
- It can be inspiring to see what others are doing in the community.
- It can be entertaining (e.g., funny memes, online videos, creative Instagram reels).



7. What were some unhealthy social media use habits you noticed in the video? Which of these are also true for you?

Tip: For question #7, if students don't mention these points, briefly bring up some of these examples:

- **Social comparison:** This is when people compare themselves and their lives with what they see on social media. It can make people feel bad because they assume everyone else's lives are perfect while theirs are not. This is because people often attempt to display the perfect life on social media. Social comparison can negatively affect people's self-esteem.
- **Isolation from friends and family:** Although social media is a great tool to stay in touch with friends, family, and other loved ones, it can also contribute to feelings of loneliness when used in place of one-on-one conversations.
- **Effortless perfection:** Effortless perfection is the idea that someone is good at everything without even trying. This idea can place impossible expectations on people and can increase feelings of hopelessness, depression, anxiety, and being overwhelmed.
- **Uncontrolled use of social media:** It can be easy for people to become overly absorbed with social media. In addition to harming one's mental health, uncontrolled social media use can cause people to neglect the important relationships and responsibilities in their lives.



8. Can you think of any other potentially negative aspects of social media that teens should be thinking about?

Tip: For question #8, if students don't mention this point, briefly bring up these examples:

- **Inappropriate sharing and online safety:** The internet can be a place where criminals take advantage of people's desire to connect with others. Sharing personal information increases your odds of being a victim of fraud or other types of harm. Personal information includes your location, sexually explicit photos, or things like family and relationship drama.
- **Cyberbullying:** Cyberbullying can happen on social media. This is when someone uses technology to harass, threaten, shame, scare or embarrass another person. It can lead to negative mental and physical health effects on those who are bullied.

9. Did the video motivate you to change the way that you use social media? What are some tips you have about ways people your age can change their habits to have a healthier relationship to social media?

Tip: For question #9, if students don't mention these points, briefly bring up some of these examples:

- Pay attention to what triggers social comparisons and consider muting or unfollowing accounts that trigger negative feelings.
- Remind yourself that people tend to post only their best moments on social media and leave out the parts that seem undesirable, boring, difficult, or sad.
- When you find yourself starting to compare your life to others, remember the positive things about yourself and your life.
- When possible, make plans to see people in person to strengthen your relationships.
- Make a list of activities you like to do with friends or family in person so you have fun suggestions when the opportunity to hang out comes up.
- Surprise someone with a phone call and brighten their day.
- Use social media to share information about issues that are important to you instead of sharing highly personal information.
- Avoid following accounts that pull you into angry and unproductive debates.
- Think twice before posting. Anything you post on the internet can spread quickly and stays on the internet forever.
- Post without filters. They can be fun to use but often create unrealistic expectations and can negatively affect your self-esteem and body image.
- Turn off your ability to see the number of likes or views a post received. This allows you to focus more on the quality of the interaction you see online instead of the numbers of likes and comments.
- Be kind to yourself. Focus on the goals that are most important to you and don't expect to be good at everything.
- Remind yourself that no one's life is perfect, and we all need help sometimes.
- Set limits on your social media use. Manage your screen time using your phone or use other apps to set a time limit.
- Make screen-free zones in your home where you don't use your phone.
- Turn off notifications or delete some of your apps.
- Take frequent breaks from social media and do something else you enjoy.



ACTIVITY: STUDENTS SHARE THE MESSAGE!

Build on your discussion about the Step Out of the Frame – Social Media and Our Mental Health video and reinforce the concepts by having your students create messages to inform their peers about healthy social media use. Using themes from the video, have students think of creative messages that advocate for healthy social media use. Depending on time and resources, the messages could be just words or they could include photos, GIFs, or videos. Tell students to be creative and use any format they'd like. They could make an Instagram post; a TikTok video; a poster, flyer, or postcard; or anything they think would appeal to their peers.

Example messages:

- “No situation is picture perfect.”
- “Social comparisons harm.”
- “Let’s advocate for being real online.”



RESOURCES FOR YOUTH-SERVING PROFESSIONALS

[Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence](#) : American Psychological Association

[Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#): The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory


[Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023](#) : Pew Research Center


RESOURCES TO SHARE WITH TEENS

[Mental Health Resources for Teens](#): *We Think Twice*™


[Teen Sexting—Think Twice Before You Hit “Send”](#): Administration for Children and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau

[Tip Sheet on Social Media Use and Mental Health](#): Youth Engaged 4 Change

[CyberTipline](#) : National center for Missing and Exploited Children

[General Tips and Advice](#) : U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Stop.Think.Connect.™

[Grades 9–12 Student Tip Card](#): U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Stop.Think.Connect.™

[Social Media Safety for Teens](#) : National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

REFERENCES

- Anderson, M., Faverio, M., & Gottfried, J. (2023, December 11). *Teens, social media and technology 2023*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2023/12/11/teens-social-media-and-technology-2023/> 
- Boers, E., Afzali, M. H., Newton, N., & Conrod, P. (2019). Association of screen time and depression in adolescence. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 173(9), 853–859. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2019.1759> 
- Riehm, K. E., Feder, K. A., Tormohlen, K. N., Crum, R. M., Young, A. S., Green, K. M., Pacek, L. R., La Flair, L. N., & Mojtabai, R. (2019). Associations between time spent using social media and internalizing and externalizing problems among US youth. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 76(12), 1266–1273. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2019.2325> 
- Zagorski, N. (2017, January 17). Using many social media platforms linked with depression, anxiety risk. *Psychiatric News*. <https://psychnews.psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/appi.pn.2017.1b16> 

This resource was developed by RTI International under contract #GS-00F-354CA/75ACF122F80015 Task 4 with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau.

Suggested Citation: McIntosh, C., & Dickinson, D. (2024). *Step Out of the Frame: Social media and our mental health: A discussion guide for youth-serving professionals to engage youth in conversations about healthy social media use*. Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau.