

# MENTAL HEALTH, TECHNOLOGY AND TODAY'S YOUTH

## *A Resource Guide for Parents*

For generations, parents have wanted to protect their children from harmful influences, especially the wrong friends, substance use, and negative media influence. But in the past 10 years, a new influence has emerged that's causing concern among parents. Today's technology, especially social media and online gaming, is causing a "big disconnect," taking kids away from everyday social interactions—and other forms of downtime. Studies show it is harming young people's mental health—not just in the U.S., but around the world.

### CHANGES SINCE 2020

#### TEENS ACROSS VARIOUS NATIONS

- 60% increase in suicide rates (U.S.)
- 81% increase in mental health hospitalizations (Aus)
- 78% increase in self-harm (U.K.)
- 76% increase in psychological distress (Nordic Nations)

#### U.S. COLLEGE STUDENTS

- 33% increase in addiction
- 109% increase in depression
- 134% increase in anxiety
- 72% increase in ADHD
- 100% increase in Eating Disorders



### A New Type of Feedback

In the past 10 years, therapists have noticed more parents seeking therapeutic interventions for their teenager's phone or internet usage, especially regarding social media and online gaming.

From the time we're born, we're hardwired to seek feedback and approval from others. Babies and toddlers seek feedback from parents and caregivers by smiling, developing relationships, and earning praise. Things change during puberty when peer relationships play a much larger role in providing this feedback.

Beginning in 2010 and escalating during the pandemic, today's youth experienced a surge in online experiences. During the pandemic, when they became more physically isolated, social media played a greater role in providing this feedback. With the popularity of features such as the "like" button and other algorithms, social media evolved from a place of connection with others to a place where validation is sought after by others.

Before this, children and teens had many other "real life" experiences, including more in-person time with family, friends, and extended community, which provided validation, feedback, and genuine connections—and time and space to recover from negative peer experiences.

# Understanding the Dopamine Response

- ▶ Dopamine is a chemical in the brain that allows us to experience pleasure. With the onset of those “like” buttons, social media offered a constant dopamine response, creating a feedback loop that keeps people wanting more.
- ▶ This response is much like the feedback loop that comes from substance use. When young people are separated from their phones and internet access, many have a hard time regulating their emotions.

## When is this technology most harmful?



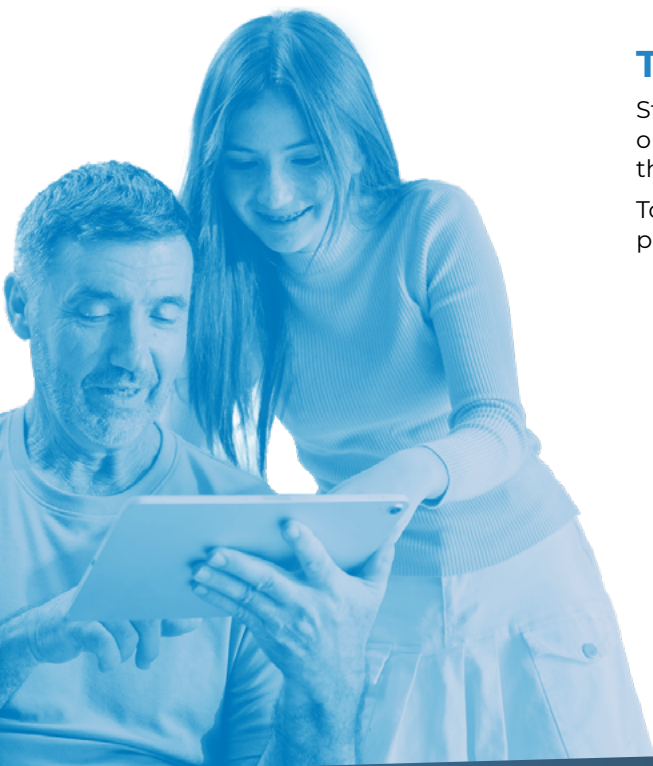
**Between the ages of 9-14, it is most harmful for girls with social media being the biggest offender.**



**When there are no boundaries in place.**



**When it replaces play, phone calls, and face-to-face interactions and connections.**



## Tips for Helping Kids

Studies show that even toddlers experience a dopamine response from online media—and they have difficulty regulating their emotions when these sources are removed.

To help their children manage and navigate today's technology safely, parents are advised to:

- Take a close look at their own phone/social media usage, and strive to set an example for healthy usage.
- Provide boundaries by delaying phone use and social media access.
- Be aware that social media has a greater risk of harming girls due to body image concerns, while boys are more likely to become addicted to gaming.
- Encourage free time outside and advise children to resolve conflicts in person and not online.
- Talk with your children about potential risks.
- Set age-appropriate rules and teach your children how to navigate the internet safely.
- Monitor their time online—making sure to avoid excessive screen time.
- Communicate, educate, and continue to become informed—about the many different issues and challenges impacting our kids today.

**For additional support and guidance, contact your Assistance Program.**

Services are free, confidential, and available to you and your family members. You can access them by phone or online 24/7/365. To learn more, visit [AllOneHealth.com/Member-Support](https://AllOneHealth.com/Member-Support).