

Digital Mirrors: Kids' body perception
Matt Sheehan | Media Relations Coordinator
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Up to 95% of kids age 13-17 and nearly 40% of children age 8-12 use a social media platform, according to the U.S. Surgeon General.

The report "Social Media and Youth Mental Health" says evidence indicates that there are "ample indicators" that social media can have a "profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents." Additionally, the advisory says that social media usage can disrupt vital activities for someone's health and well-being like sleep and physical activity.

It's no secret a major part of posting that "picture perfect" moment happens after the picture is taken. Through editing with filters, body positioning, and now even artificial intelligence, the photos you see of those you follow may not be an accurate representation of their life.

Kyle Boerke, Psy.D, is the director of behavioral health outpatient services for OSF HealthCare and a clinical child psychologist. He says what we go through as social media users when looking at the influencers we follow is called "upward social comparison."

"You, as a teenager, take your worst day and you are comparing it to this video of somebody's best day. Or I would say, artificial day, because it's not real due to the filters and editing," Dr. Boerke says. "We have a lot of research that talks a lot about the direct correlation between time spent on social media and an increase in anxiety and depression. We're talking about a one-to-one correspondence where every hour spent on social media increases your likelihood of anxiety and depression."

What can we do?

"Limit your exposure to social media as a whole. But certainly, limit those individuals that are negative and that are body shaming. There are body positive individuals out there."

Dr. Boerke says, in many cases, the people you follow on social media aren't your friends. You don't know them personally, and you've probably never met them, and never will.

"More important than who you follow on social media is who you surround yourself with in real life. Surround yourself with positive individuals in real life. Surround yourself with people who truly know you, care about you, support you and are going to be there for you in hard times," Dr. Boerke adds.

Social media is a tool

While social media is used, whether intentionally or not, for negative purposes, there are some cases where it can be used for positive outcomes.

"There are influencers out there that have a good message on body positivity and being healthy, as opposed to your weight and what your figure looks like. However, for every one of those, there are ten to twenty that by using filters, Photoshop and artificial nature. How they portray themselves can be a huge influence," Dr. Boerke says.

In most cases, people may hear “social media” and think of the apps Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), Snapchat and Facebook. But he says a major social media platform reaching the youngest of kids is YouTube.

“I just want to caution everybody that even at a young age, be aware of what they’re watching and be aware of how much time they’re spending on these,” Dr. Boerke says. “While the themes throughout these YouTube videos are mostly good, there’s still probably some upward social comparisons happening even with our six and seven-year-olds.”

What if I’ve built a community on social media?

Connecting with people going through your same experience can potentially be good. But Dr. Boerke says that can also be troubling, because you can get into a group with people who feel/think the same way you do, and they recommend you do something that is detrimental to your health.

“If you are struggling, tell an adult in your life and ask to talk to somebody. Start with your pediatrician or primary care physician. They can get you in touch with a therapist or psychologist that can help have those discussions with you,” Dr. Boerke says.

OSF HealthCare offers behavioral and mental health services across the Ministry to support adults, teens and children seeking diagnosis, short-term treatment or long-term management of mental and emotional health challenges.

The services offered can best fit your needs, from outpatient therapy to medication management. If you’re interested in speaking with a medical professional, [visit the OSF HealthCare website](#).