



**POLICE  
SCOTLAND**

**POILEAS ALBA**

# Social Media

Guidance for Parents & Carers

Police Scotland Cybercrime

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## Social Media Advice for Parents and Carers



Cybercrime Harm  
Prevention Unit  
Police Scotland

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## 1 Social Media

### 1.1 What is Social Media?

Social media are interactive technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks. Users usually access social media services through web-based apps on desktops or download services that offer social media functionality to their mobile devices.



### 1.2 Why is Social Media so prevalent in young people's lives?

Social media is now an important part of many people's lives. In fact, a study suggests that half of the children who are aged between eight and seventeen years have social networking profiles like Facebook, Instagram etc. Not only the young people, but people of all ages, and all professions are using social networking sites as a means of communication.

Social media plays a dominant role in our day to day life. It creates a wide range of impact on people when it is shared on social media.

To stay in touch with your friends is important to all and social media has attempted to use its influence in doing this positively. Instant messaging, images, status updates, image-sharing, video-sharing are few of the major elements that play a role in the recognition of social media.

Almost all teenagers in the UK have a strong Internet presence and extensively share personal content and opinions online.

### 1.3 Why is there so much Social Media use by young people?

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The answer lies largely in the change in lifestyle where increasing numbers of single working parent and dual-working parent households and after school programs that eat into play and socialisation time of the kids.

The lack of time for face-to-face socialisation is compounded by practical issues such as the pandemic, and parental restrictions that stem from fears of predators, drug dealers and gangs.

Changes in society along with the advent of Internet and its various applications, have resulted in the emergence of an unrestricted social life in a virtual setting. As parents we scrutinise who our children interact with in the real world but what controls do we have in the virtual world?

The increased presence of youth online has raised serious concerns about the safety of Internet and social media use. Difficulty in self-regulation, lack of awareness of repercussions of privacy compromise and susceptibility to peer pressure are listed as reasons for teenagers' cavalier attitude towards online risks such as sexting, cyberbullying and exposure to inappropriate content as they navigate social media. On the other hand, there has also been criticism that surrounds the safety of extensive digital (in particular Internet/social networking) use by youth.

The risks of Internet and social media to teenagers is just as real as the risks in society. Cyberbullying, in the forms of name-calling and gossiping, spreading rumours, making threats or otherwise sending malicious messages through emails, message boards and social media, has augmented offline bullying and estimates of the incidence of cyber bullying range from 23 to 72% in various studies.

Exposure to age-inappropriate content is another serious risk because it causes much damage to an age-group that is already prone to sexual uncertainty and uncommitted and possibly unsafe sexual exploration. Dangerous communities that support self-harm activities, such as anorexia, drug use, and such other disruptive concepts are also serious pitfalls of unsupervised Internet usage among teens.

## **1.4 Can parents and carers influence online behaviours?**

Young people already emotionally imbalanced or prone to disruptive behaviour are obviously more vulnerable online and are more likely to commit to unsafe or irresponsible actions in the virtual world. However, there are some risks that are common to all young people and such risks are largely built on the attitude and behaviour of the youth themselves, rather than them being victims of an unfair attack.

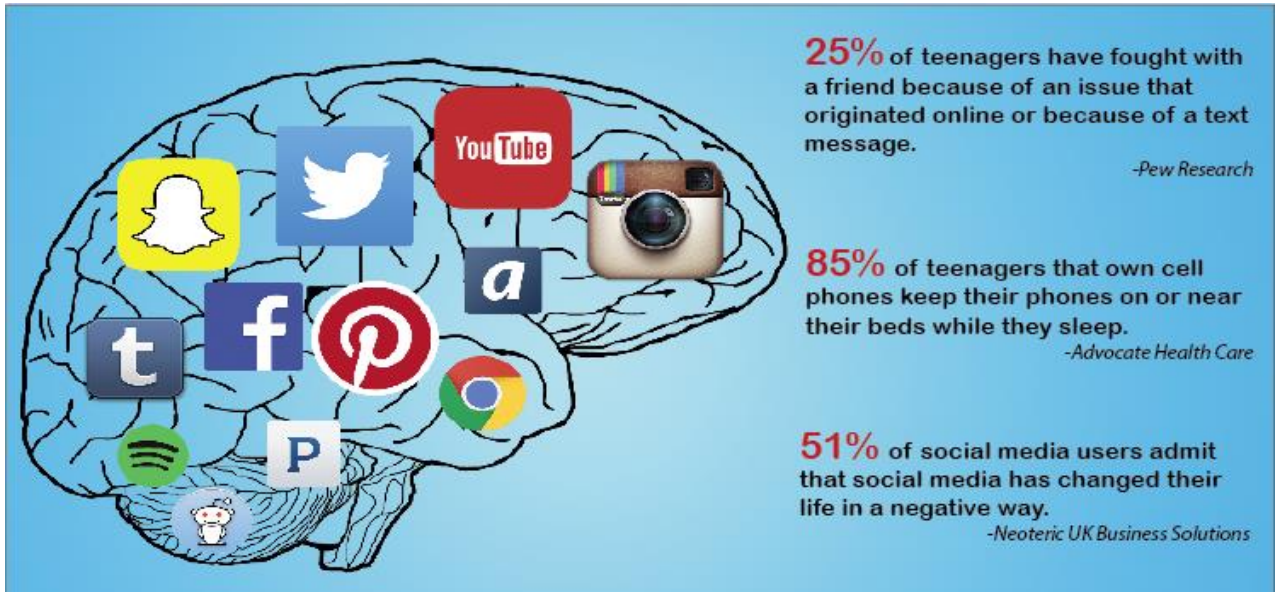
Research has shown that there is a positive correlation between parents' level of privacy concern and that of their teenaged children. Thus, parents can influence their children's attitudes and behaviour through advice and perhaps monitoring the use of social media by teenagers.

However, the latter could be a double-edged sword, as teenagers, naturally inclined to rebel against parental insurgence into their private space, may practice deception, which may override any parental measure to increase safety. For example, adolescents may use pseudonyms and false identifying information like age and location to protect themselves, on the advice of their parents. Ironically, the same technique could also be adopted by them to insulate themselves from the eyes of parents.

## **1.5 The teenage brain and Social Media**

For teens social media can become almost addictive. In a study by researchers at a brain mapping centre, they found that certain regions of teen brains became activated by "likes" on social media, sometimes causing them to want to use social media more.

During the study, researchers used an MRI scanner to image the brains of 32 teenagers as they used a fictitious social media app resembling Instagram. The teenagers were shown more than 140 images where "likes" were believed to be from their peers. However, the likes were actually assigned by the research team.



As a result, the brain scans revealed that in addition to a number of regions, the nucleus accumbens, part of the brain's reward circuitry, was especially active when they saw a large number of likes on their own photos. According to researchers, this area of the brain is the same region that responds when we see pictures of people we love or when we win money.

Researchers say that this reward region of the brain is particularly sensitive during the teen years, which could explain why teens are so drawn to social media.

In another part of the study, researchers could see a correlation between social media and peer influence. Participants in the study were shown both neutral photos and risky photos. What they found is that the type of image had no impact on the number of likes given by teens in the study.

Instead, they were likely to hit "like" on the popular photos regardless of what they showed. Researchers believe this behaviour shows that peers can have both a positive and negative influence on others while using social media.

## 1.6 Parental controls



Parental controls put you in control of what content your child can see. Combined with privacy settings these can help you protect your children from the things they shouldn't see or experience online.

Internet Matters have [guides](#) for step-by-step instructions to set controls on popular entertainment services & search engines.



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Internet Matters also have step by step [guides](#) to help you set up the right controls and privacy settings on the networks, gadgets, apps, and sites they use to give them a safer online experience.

### 1.7 Advice from Social Media platforms

The following guidance is provided by each of the major social media platforms. Click to read detailed information.

[Facebook: basic privacy settings and tools](#)

[Twitter: how to protect and unprotect your Tweets](#)

[YouTube: privacy and safety](#)

[Instagram: privacy settings and information](#)

[LinkedIn: account and privacy settings overview](#)

[Snapchat: privacy settings](#)

#### Use two-factor authentication (2FA) to protect your accounts

Two-factor authentication (often shortened to 2FA) provides a way of 'double checking' that you really **are** the person you are claiming to be when you're using online services, such as social media, banking or email. Even if a criminal (or someone simply looking to cause mischief) knows your password, they won't be able to access any of your accounts that are protected using 2FA.

The website [Turnon2fa](#) contains up-to-date instructions on how to set up 2FA across popular online services such as **Instagram**, **Snapchat**, **Twitter** and **Facebook**.

For more information on why you should use 2FA wherever you can, read the [NCSC's official guidance on two-factor authentication](#).

### 1.8 Understanding your digital footprint



It's worth exercising some caution when using social media. Not everyone using social media is necessarily who they say they are. Take a moment to check if you **know** the person, and if the friend/link/follow is genuine.

Less obviously, you should think about your digital footprint, which is a term used to describe the entirety of information that you post online, including photos and status updates. Criminals can use this publicly available information to steal your identity, or use it to make phishing messages more convincing.

Think about **what** you're posting, and **who** has access to it. Have you configured the privacy options so that it's only accessible to the people you want to see it?

Consider what your followers and friends **need** to know, and what detail is unnecessary (but could be useful for criminals).

Have an idea about what your friends, colleagues or other contacts say about **you** online.

The Information Commissioners Office (ICO) is the UK's independent body set up to uphold information rights. ICO state that it's your right to be informed about how organisations are using your data, even if it happens behind the scenes. This includes understanding how people use your data to target you with social media adverts. ICO have created a number of [resources](#) to help you understand your rights with regards to your online data.

ICO have further [guidance](#) on social media privacy settings and factsheets on some of the most popular social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, LinkedIn and Google) to assist you in taking control over how your personal information is used.

LSE (London School of Economics) have developed toolkits for [young people](#) and also for [parents](#) to help them talk to children about their data and privacy online, including data protection, the digital economy and a range of privacy issues.

## 2 Negative and Positive Impacts of Social Networking

### 2.1 Legal age for accessing Social Media

The reason most social media services use an age limit of 13 or over is in part because of a law in the USA. The COPPA law or Children's Online Privacy Protection Act states that any organisations or people operating online services (including social media services) are not allowed to collect the personal information of anyone under the age of 13 without parental permission.



### 2.2 Social Networking

Undoubtedly, social networking plays a vital role in broadening teen social connections and helping them learn valuable technical skills. But what impact is all of this social networking having on young teen minds? Most reports indicate that the impact can be significant.

Not only are teens' developing brains vulnerable to so much time online, but because they often have difficulty self-regulating their screen time, their risks can increase with the more time they spend. Additionally, they are more susceptible to peer pressure, cyberbullying and sexting—all activities involving digital communication—making navigating the online social world treacherous at times.

There are a number of health issues that may develop as a result of too much time online.

#### 2.2.1 Depression



Researchers are just beginning to establish a link between depression and social media. While they have not actually discovered a cause-and-effect relationship between social media and depression, they have discovered that social media use can be associated with an intensification of the symptoms of depression, including a decrease in social activity and an increase in loneliness.

Several additional studies have shown that the prolonged use of social media may be related to the signs and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, especially in children.

### **2.2.2 Anxiety**

Teens often feel emotionally invested in their social media accounts. Not only do they feel pressure to respond quickly online, but they also feel pressure to have perfect photos and well-written posts, all of which can cause a great deal of anxiety. In fact, some studies have found that the larger a teen's social circle online the more anxiety they feel about keeping up with everything online.

It takes a lot of time and effort to keep up with the unspoken rules and culture of each social media platform. As a result, this puts additional pressure on teens, which can cause feelings of anxiety.

Additionally, if teens commit a faux pas online, this also can be an extreme source of anxiety. Many teens, especially girls, are prone to worry about what others might think of them and how they will respond when they see them next. Then factor in cyberbullying, sextortion, and other cruel online behaviours and you can see why social media can be a toxic source of anxiety for many teens.

### **2.2.3 Sleep deprivation.**

Sometimes teens spend so many hours on social media that they begin to lose valuable sleep. Consequently, this sleep loss can lead to moodiness, a drop in grades, lack of physical activity, and overeating, as well as exacerbate existing issues.



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In fact, research shows a strong link between increased screen time and the development of ADHD-related symptoms, such as difficulty with focusing, emotional regulation, poor attention, hyperactivity, and getting enough sleep.

Additionally, one British study published in the *Journal of Youth Studies* surveyed 900 teens between the ages of 12 and 15 about their social media use and its impact on sleep. What they found was that one-fifth of the teens said they "almost always" wake up during the night and log in to social media.

The study also revealed that girls were significantly more likely than boys to wake up and check social media on their phones. In addition to reporting feeling tired all the time, they also reported being less happy on average than teens whose sleep was not disturbed by social media.

### 2.2.4 Envy.

Jealousy and envy—while normal emotions—can wreak havoc on teen brains if they dwell on comparing themselves to their peers. They may fixate on what someone else has or experienced, that they themselves have not. Due to the way accounts are curated, it can appear to the reader that other people lead more exciting lives than they do, which only feeds feelings of inadequacy.

Unfortunately, what teens often do not realize is that people tend to only post their "highlight reel" on social media and often keep the mundane or difficult experiences off the Internet. As a result, another person's life may look perfect online, but offline they have struggles just like anyone else.

Still, it is easy for a teen to play the comparison game and start thinking that everyone is happier or better off than they are. As a result, this can feed into depression, loneliness, anger, and a variety of other issues.

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### **2.2.5 Communication issues.**



While social media is a great way to keep in touch with friends and family, it also is not the same as face-to-face communication. For instance, a teen cannot see a person's facial expressions or hear their tone of voice online.

As a result, it is very easy for misunderstandings to occur, especially when people try to be funny or sarcastic online.

Many teens spend so much time online checking statuses and likes that they may forget to interact with the people right in front of them. For this reason, friendships and dating relationships can suffer when social media takes centre stage in a person's life. As a result, teens risk having relationships that are not deep or authentic.

Teens who place a priority on social media will often focus on the pictures they take that show how much fun they are having rather than actually focusing on having fun. The end result is that their relationships and life satisfaction may suffer.

### **2.2.6 Promotes creativity.**



Kids who have a passion for photography, art, video production, music or writing can use applications like blogs, YouTube and Instagram to express themselves. Social media can be a great source of creativity, with kids posting poems, posing interesting questions or sharing funny or cool videos.

### **2.2.7 Fosters purposeful mindfulness.**

Social networking can encourage your children to practice public speaking and presentation skills by creating video interviews, podcasts and SlideShare presentations on topics that interest them.

### 2.2.8 Connecting with peers with similar interests.

Social media can give kids the opportunity to meet peers who share their interests, which can boost their confidence in face-to-face interactions.



### 2.2.9 Promote awareness.

Social media allows for a deeper understanding of various cultures and world issues whilst providing resources for young people to research topics of interest.

### 2.2.10 Promotes critical thinking.



More educators are integrating social media into the classroom. Due to the pandemic home learning and interaction was promoted by schools

## 3 Social Media Platforms Useful Information

### 3.1 Main Social Media Apps

#### TEXTING APPS

#### 3.1.1 GroupMe



GroupMe is an app that doesn't charge fees or have limits for direct and group messages. Users also can send photos, videos, and calendar links.

#### What parents need to know?

- **It has adult themes.** The embedded GIFs and emojis have some adult themes, such as drinking and sex.

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- **Teens are always connected.** Without fees or limits, teens can share and text to their heart's content, which may mean they rarely put the phone down.



### 3.1.2 Kik Messenger

Kik Messenger is an app that lets kids text for free. It's fast and has no message limits, character limits, or fees if you only use the basic features. Because it's an app, the texts won't show up on your kid's phone's messaging service, and you're not charged for them (beyond standard data rates).

#### What parents need to know?

- **Stranger danger is an issue.** Kik allows communication with strangers who share their Kik usernames to find people to chat with.
- **It's loaded with covert marketing.** Kik specializes in "promoted chats" -- basically, conversations between brands and users. It also offers specially designed apps (accessible only through the main app), many of which offer products for sale.



### 3.1.3 WhatsApp

WhatsApp lets users send text messages, audio messages, videos, and photos to one or many people with no message limits or fees.

#### What parents need to know?

- **It's for users 16 and over.** Lots of younger teens seem to be using the app, but this age minimum has been set by WhatsApp.
- **It can be pushy.** After you sign up, it automatically connects you to all the people in your address book who also are using WhatsApp. It also encourages you to add friends who haven't signed up yet.



### 3.1.4 Discord

Discord started as a place for gamers to chat while playing video games but has become a bigger platform where users can use text, voice-chat, and video-chat to discuss a wide variety of topics.

#### What parents need to know?

- **There are public and private "servers"** or discussion groups. Teens can join public groups, ask to join private ones, or start their own. The safest option is for them to join a private group with people they know in real life.
- **Some groups are more moderated than others, some have warnings of inappropriate content, and some are hate-filled.** There are plenty of groups that are meant for adults only, and some are totally tame and well moderated. If your child is in one of the latter, the risk is much lower.