



2018

# **SOCIAL MEDIA, SOCIAL LIFE: Teens Reveal Their Experiences**

## Credits

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Common Sense is the leading independent nonprofit organization dedicated to helping kids thrive in a world of media and technology. We empower parents, teachers, and policymakers by providing unbiased information, trusted advice, and innovative tools to help them harness the power of media and technology as a positive force in all kids' lives.



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# A LETTER FROM OUR FOUNDER

Friends,

What goes on in the minds of teenagers when they engage with social media, seemingly lost in their screens? It's a question we as parents often ponder as we fret about the effects of social media on our children's well-being.

To find the answer, Common Sense went straight to the source and surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,141 teens in the United States, age 13 to 17. What they told us is eye-opening and vastly more nuanced than we expected.

I'm especially excited to share the results of our 2018 *Social Media, Social Life* survey with you. Considered alongside the findings from our 2012 survey of the same name, they offer a rare glimpse into our teens' worlds. Fair warning: Many of the insights are likely to challenge some parents' notions of whether social media is "good" or "bad" for teens.

Like teenagers themselves, this research presents a complex picture that defies simplistic judgments. For example, on the one hand, teens feel social media strengthens their relationships with friends and family, provides them with an important avenue for self-expression, and makes them feel less lonely and more connected. At the same time, teens acknowledge that social media can detract from face-to-face communication and make them feel left out or "less than" their peers. In general, however, teens are more likely to say that social media has a positive effect on how they feel.

That dichotomy is amplified when it comes to more vulnerable teens who score lower on a measure of social-emotional well-being. These teens are much more likely to report feeling bad about themselves when no one comments on their posts or feeling left out after seeing photos on social media of their friends together at something they weren't invited to.

Teens are often depicted as being heedless of the consequences of spending so much time on their smartphones. In reality, our survey reveals that teens are fully aware of the power of devices to distract them from key priorities, such as homework, sleep, and time with friends and family.

Nevertheless, teens are spending far more time on social media than ever before. The percentage of teens who engage with social media multiple times a day has gone from 34 percent in 2012 to 70 percent in 2018. And whereas Facebook once played a commanding role, with 68 percent of teens in 2012 turning to the platform as their main social media outlet, today's teens have moved on to newer platforms, especially Snapchat and Instagram.

With the ever-shifting social media landscape, our research has never been more critical. As new platforms emerge, our reviewers at Common Sense Media and Common Sense Education help keep parents and educators informed of the strengths and shortcomings of the latest crop of social media tools, giving us important information to guide our children toward the best possible experience, as well as an understanding of what to watch out for. The insights contained in this report also fuel our advocacy efforts to minimize the harmful aspects of social media while promoting its potential to support our children and their connection to their communities.

This is why the Common Sense Research program exists: to inform and enrich conversations we have about kids' use of media and its effects on their social and emotional well-being. Though the insights presented here haven't been condensed into a 140-character summary or a 15-second video, I promise they will be well worth your time.



James P. Steyer, *founder and CEO*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim Steyer". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

COMMON SENSE IS GRATEFUL FOR THE GENEROUS SUPPORT  
AND UNDERWRITING THAT FUNDED THIS RESEARCH REPORT:

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# JULIE LYTHCOTT-HAIMS SAYS SOCIAL MEDIA HAS THE POWER TO CONNECT AND HEAL

**As someone who writes and talks about the importance of human connection, what do you think of the report's finding that teens today prefer texting over talking?**

My work is around humans — humans thriving, humans connecting. And I worry so much about the report's findings of the lack of person-to-person contact. But in my work — and in my experience — I find that the need for human connection always wins out. Maybe kids are just taking the easy way out due to shyness, fear, or social awkwardness. We just need to make sure that we — as parents, educators, and others who can impact kids' lives — encourage those important face-to-face conversations.

**There has been an uptick in teens' exposure to hate content since the last *Social Media, Social Life* research was released in 2012. How do you think that affects kids?**

I think when you see hate content over and over, you become anesthetized to it. It becomes a part of the "new norm" instead of the feeling you ought to have — which is outrage and disgust. So I worry about today's teens' ability to empathize. I think that means that as parents we need to be aware of and really talk to our kids and help them process what they are reading and seeing on social media.

**You have said that as a child you struggled with low self-esteem as a result of racism. The report found that social media plays a heightened role — positive and negative — in the lives of teens already struggling with social-emotional well-being. What advice would your teen self give to them?**

I began to heal as a black woman and love myself finally when I was able to be in a community with other folk who had experienced what I was experiencing. So to the extent you can use social media to connect with people struggling with the same issues as you, social media can be an incredibly powerful support network. I would urge my teen self to find others online she could relate to — whether it's racism, academic pressure, being bullied, sexism, or whatever.

**As you're an author and former Stanford University dean, many people seek your counsel about how to put one's best self forward. How can teens do this on social media?**

Social media is a new method of connecting and communicating with humans. Think about what kind of character you want to cultivate on social media. Are you a kind and generous person? Do you help people? Behave on social media the way you'd behave with your grandma at the dining table. Easier said than done, believe me, I know!

**You said using social media reminds you of a quote by the famous spiritual leader Ram Dass, who said, "We're all just walking each other home."**

Yes, because I think social media is a wonderful way to demonstrate that you care, that you take an interest in someone. This is where the positive side of social media really comes in. You can see the healing power as we start to radiate kindness and goodness and gratitude through our tweets and posts. So I think there's tremendous power in this thing — and it's our job as grown-ups to teach our kids how to be responsible citizens in this new realm.



Julie Lythcott-Haims  
New York Times best-selling  
author, educator, and  
Common Sense board member



# SOCIAL MEDIA: START CONVERSATIONS WHEN KIDS ARE YOUNG

When I was 15 years old, I was the victim of a vicious cyberbullying attack. That Halloween, a girl whom I had never met dressed up as me for Halloween and posted a picture on Facebook that went viral. Suddenly, I received hundreds, and then thousands, of cyberbullying messages. My classmates and even people I had never met told me to kill myself and that my life was worth nothing.

I was devastated. I felt like the entire world was against me. I didn't know where to find hope.

In an effort to heal, I wrote a book about my experiences titled *The Survival Guide to Bullying*. My book was published in 18 countries around the world and became a best-seller. I went on tour and spoke to students, teachers, and parents around the country and learned more than I could ever have imagined about social media and the way young people use it.

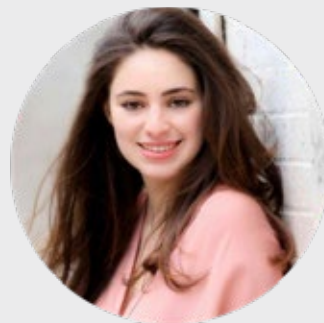
Very quickly, I went from demonizing social media to realizing the power and possibility it inhabits. Here is the truth: Social media is social currency for young people. It is a portal to potential and possibilities, even for people who feel hopeless, uninspired, scared, and alone.

When I was younger, I was enmeshed in the negativity social media can create, but today I witness tremendous positives. Many of my fans and followers have gone on to write books and create music, YouTube channels, and social justice movements purely from the power and possibility of social media and technology. This brings me great hope.

As this report from Common Sense shows, lots of negative things can happen on social media. Cyberbullying is still very real and deeply traumatic. I see the greatest opportunity for change to occur being when kids are very young — perhaps in the first and second grades — when behavioral patterns can be affected. It is crucial for parents and teachers to have conversations about digital citizenship with children as soon as they start school.

Today, when I speak to parents and educators, I urge them to recognize that social media is not going anywhere, and stopping your child from using social media is not the answer. My parents did not allow me to use social media in middle school, so I made secret accounts. (Once again, social media is social currency for young people.)

Parents and educators have the space and opportunity to have conversations with kids about social media, their behavior on it, and the pros and cons of a digital footprint. Instead of being divided by technology, be on their side and show them you care, and they will reward you by being honest with you.



Aija Mayrock

Author, *The Survival Guide to Bullying*: Written by a Teen



# SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL HEALTH: RISKS AND REWARDS

“Is social media bad or good for kids’ mental health?” This is one of the most common questions that parents and educators ask the child psychologists and psychiatrists at the Child Mind Institute. The honest answers are “both” and “it depends on the child.”

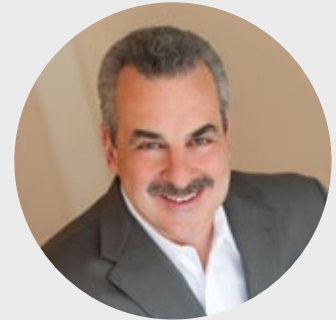
Those answers are backed up by research, including the Common Sense Media surveys that inform this report and the academic literature described in the Child Mind Institute’s 2018 *Children’s Mental Health Report* on anxiety in childhood and adolescence. While most youth see social media as neutral, significant minorities believe that apps like Facebook and Instagram have either positive or negative effects.<sup>1</sup>

When we look at how social media behaviors correlate to mental health symptoms, we see that more time spent using social media is tied to an increase in mental health symptoms.<sup>2</sup> Eighth-graders who spend 10 or more hours a week on social media are 56 percent more likely to report being unhappy than those who spend less time.<sup>3</sup> We also see that higher emotional investment in social media is strongly correlated with higher levels of anxiety.<sup>4</sup> It remains unclear whether social media is causing negative outcomes or whether children with mental health issues are turning to social media to soothe their symptoms.

It is troubling that youth at the highest risk are the ones who care the most about social networking and online communities. These are the children who can be the most negatively affected by cyberbullying and who can become distraught over the expectations built into curating their online selves.

But they are also the kids who benefit from finding communities to embrace them, from being able to interact freely and practice social skills in a safe space online. It is fitting that the Common Sense Media survey finds large effects of social media on social-emotional well-being in making teens feel *less* lonely and *more* confident — and that these effects are greatest in the at-risk youth for whom social media is very important. This is our experience as mental health professionals, when children and adolescents are allowed to have developmentally appropriate, time-limited access to positive social media and online content.

Children and teens seem very grown-up these days, competent with technology and image making. But they are still our children. They do not have a “right” to make themselves anxious or depressed through overexposure to social media and the toxic messages it can bring. If we do our job as parents and educators, we can steer at-risk children toward beneficial online experiences and help them reap the rewards of this new way of communicating.



Harold S. Koplewicz, M.D.  
President, Child Mind Institute

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<sup>1</sup>Anderson, M., & Jiang, J. (2018). *Teens, social media & technology*. Retrieved from Pew Research Center website: [http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2018/05/31102617/PI\\_2018.05.31\\_TeensTech\\_FINAL.pdf](http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2018/05/31102617/PI_2018.05.31_TeensTech_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>Vannucci, A., Flannery, K. M., & Ohannessian, C. M. (2017). Social media use and anxiety in emerging adults. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 207, 163-166. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2016.08.040>

<sup>3</sup>Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why today’s super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy — and completely unprepared for adulthood (and what this means for the rest of us)*. New York, NY: Atria Books.

<sup>4</sup>Woods, H. C., & Scott, H. (2016). #Sleepyteens: Social media use in adolescence is associated with poor sleep quality, anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. *Journal of Adolescence*, 51, 41-49. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.05.008>

# INTRODUCTION

THIS SURVEY IS THE second wave of an ongoing study tracking social media use among American teenagers: how often they use social media such as Instagram, Snapchat, or Facebook; their attitudes about social media's role in their lives; experiences they have on social media; and how social media makes them feel. As such, it offers a unique opportunity to observe changes in social media use over time, and to deepen our understanding of the role of social media in teens' lives.

Wave one of the study was conducted among a nationally representative sample of more than 1,000 13- to 17-year-olds in 2012, when Facebook ruled the social media landscape and the fact that half of teens checked their social media sites every day was extraordinary. Wave two (the focus of this report) was conducted in March and April of 2018, among a separate sample of 1,141 13- to 17-year-olds, and offers an up-to-date snapshot of social media use among today's teens.

A lot can happen in six years. We thought at the time of our first survey that social media had pervaded teenagers' lives; but, as many of us have come to suspect and this study confirms, what we saw then was just the tip of the iceberg. Six years ago we wrote that Facebook "utterly dominates social networking among teens," and 68 percent of all young people said it was their main social media site. Today, only 15 percent do. Six years ago, four out of 10 teens (41 percent) had their own smartphones; today nearly nine out of 10 (89 percent) do, meaning that social media can be accessed anytime and any place, allowing use to grow exponentially. Six years ago, 34 percent of teens used social media more than once a day; today 70 percent do, including 16 percent who use it "almost constantly" and another 22 percent who use it several times an hour. Six years ago, about half (49 percent) of all teens still said their favorite way to communicate with friends was in person; today less than a third (32 percent) say so. Six years from now, we may see these statistics as quaint.

As social media use has expanded and evolved, concerns about its role in teens' lives have grown as well. Linking social media use to technology addiction, the decay of in-person social skills, and multiple harms to kids' mental well-being make for good headlines but may obscure and confuse the actual role of social media in teens' lives. This survey is designed in part to help shed light

on some of those concerns. As technology becomes more accessible, are teens' preferences changing from face-to-face communication to online interactions? To what degree are teens occupied by social pressures regarding how they present themselves online and how they compare to others? How widespread is cyberbullying, and how are teens coping with it? Is social media contributing to or helping to alleviate depression and loneliness among adolescents, and how has this changed, if at all, over the past six years?

Many questions in the current survey replicate those asked six years ago, while others delve more deeply into new aspects of social media use. Among the topics covered:

- what teens' favorite ways of communicating with friends and family are, and whether or not they think social media detracts from face-to-face interactions;
- how frequently teens use social media, and which sites they use the most;
- what roles social media plays in their lives, including its overall importance as well as its use for creative expression and meaningful communication;
- how teens do or don't regulate their own social media use, including putting devices away at meals, when doing homework, in social situations, while driving, or when going to sleep;
- how the heaviest social media users compare to other teens in terms of their social and emotional well-being, and whether that has changed in the past six years;
- what teens themselves have to say about how social media affects their sense of depression, anxiety, loneliness, or self-image, and whether that has changed in the past six years;
- how many teens have been cyberbullied or tried to help others who have been victimized by cyberbullying;
- the degree to which teens are "chasing likes" by organizing their social media lives around building online popularity; and

- the extent to which teens encounter racist, sexist, and homophobic content in social media, and whether their experiences in that regard have changed in recent years.

The survey asked teens to report how often they engage in certain behaviors on social media, but it also asked them how using social media makes them feel. While self-reports should not be our only metric for assessing the impact of social media on young people, giving voice to teens' experiences and opinions is important and relevant. In addition to the quantitative data provided in this report, we also include direct quotes from the hundreds of survey participants who provided personal responses to open-ended survey questions or who were part of focus groups held to help refine the survey questionnaire.

Because teens' involvement with social media is something many of us have personal experience with, it can be difficult to step back and take an objective look at what is happening in the country as a whole. Our own immersion in this world can easily affect our ability to observe and understand social media's broader role in society and in the lives of adolescents. We hope that the data presented in this report offer new insights to help inform the work of all those who care about the healthy development of young people in our society.

# KEY FINDINGS

## 1 Social media use among teens has increased dramatically since 2012.

A total of 81 percent of teens use social media, roughly the same as “ever” used it in 2012. But it is the frequency of social media use that has changed most dramatically. The proportion of teens who use social media multiple times a day has doubled over the past six years: In 2012, 34 percent of teens used social media more than once a day; today, 70 percent do (see Figure A). In fact, 38 percent of teens today say they use social media multiple times an hour, including 16 percent who say they use it “almost constantly.” The increasing frequency of social media use may be fueled in part by the dramatic increase in access to mobile devices: The proportion of teens with a smartphone has more than doubled since 2012, from 41 percent up to 89 percent. Even among 13- to 14-year-olds, 84 percent now have a smartphone, and 93 percent have some type of mobile device such as a tablet.

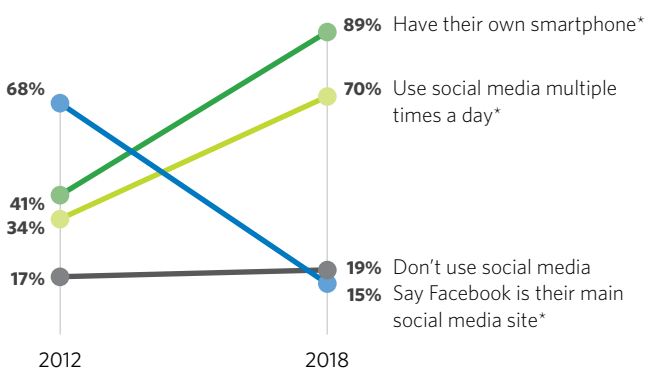
Amid increased social media use, the decline of Facebook has been precipitous. In 2012, 68 percent of all teens listed Facebook as their main social networking site. Today, 15 percent say Facebook is their main site, as compared to 41 percent of all teens who say Snapchat, and 22 percent who say Instagram (which is owned by Facebook). (When one 16-year-old girl was asked in a focus group whom she communicates with on Facebook, she replied, “My grandparents”).

## 2 Only a very few teens say that using social media has a negative effect on how they feel about themselves; many more say it has a positive effect.

Across every measure in our survey, teens are more likely to say that social media has a *positive* rather than a *negative* effect on how they feel (see Figure B). For example, 25 percent say using social media makes them feel less lonely, compared to 3 percent

**FIGURE A. Social Media and Digital Device Use, 2012 vs. 2018**

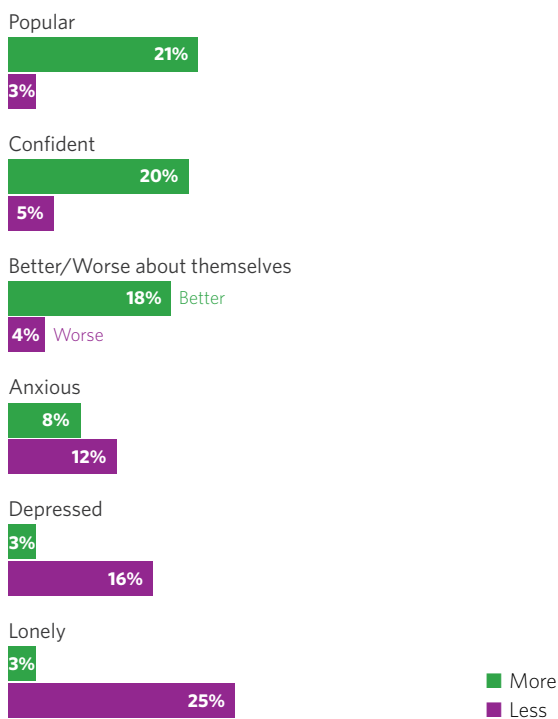
Percent of 13- to 17-year-olds who:



\*Differences over time are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

**FIGURE B. Self-Reported Effects of Social Media on Social-Emotional Well-Being, 2018**

Among 13- to 17-year-old social media users, percent who say using social media makes them feel:



Note: All differences are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .









who say more; eighteen percent say using social media makes them feel better about themselves, compared to 4 percent who say worse; and 16 percent say social media use makes them feel less depressed, compared to 3 percent who say more. (The rest say using social media doesn't make much of a difference one way or the other.) Despite the increased use of social media that has occurred over the past six years, teens are no more likely to report having a negative reaction to social media on any of these measures today than they were in 2012.

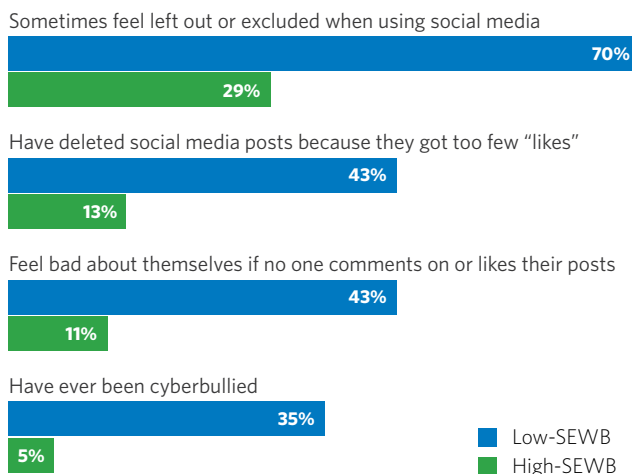
### 3 Social media has a heightened role — both positive and negative — in the lives of more vulnerable teens.

The survey included a social-emotional well-being (SEWB) scale based on concepts such as happiness, depression, loneliness, confidence, self-esteem, and parental relations (see the "Methodology" section, on page 21, for more details). About one in five teens (19 percent) is in the "high SEWB" group, 63 percent in the "medium" group, and 17 percent in the "low" group. Social media is significantly more important in the lives of those who are lowest on the SEWB scale. Nearly half (46 percent) of teen social media users at the low end of the SEWB scale say social media is "extremely" or "very" important in their lives, compared to 32 percent of those at the high end of the scale. Teen social media users on the low end of the scale are also much more likely to say they've had a variety of negative responses to social media (see Figure C), such as feeling bad about themselves when nobody comments on or likes their posts (43 percent agree "strongly" or "somewhat," vs. 11 percent of high-SEWB teens); feeling left out or excluded after seeing photos on social media of their friends together at something they weren't invited to (70 percent vs. 29 percent); and deleting social media posts because they didn't get enough likes (43 percent vs. 13 percent). Disturbingly, more than a third (35 percent) say they have been cyberbullied, compared to 5 percent of high-SEWB teens.

But these more-vulnerable teens are also more likely to say that social media has a *positive* rather than a *negative* effect on them. (see Figure D.) For example, 29 percent of them say using social media makes them feel less depressed, compared to 11 percent who say it makes them feel more depressed (the rest say it doesn't make a difference one way or the other); twenty-two percent say social media makes them feel better about themselves, compared to 15 percent who say worse; and 39 percent

**FIGURE C. Experiences on and Responses to Social Media, by Social-Emotional Well-Being Status, 2018**

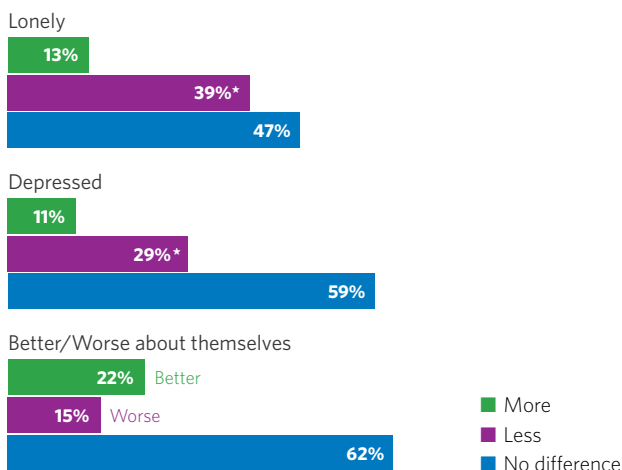
Among 13- to 17-year-old social media users, percent who say they:



Note: "SEWB" stands for "social-emotional well-being." See "Methodology" section (page 21) for definitions of the low-, medium-, and high-SEWB groups. All differences between groups are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

**FIGURE D. Self-Reported Social Media Effects, 2018**

Among low-SEWB 13- to 17-year-old social media users, percent who say using social media makes them feel:



\*Statistically significant compared to answers of "more" at the level of  $p < .05$ .

Note: "SEWB" stands for "social-emotional well-being."



say using social media makes them feel less lonely, compared to 13 percent who say it makes them feel more lonely.

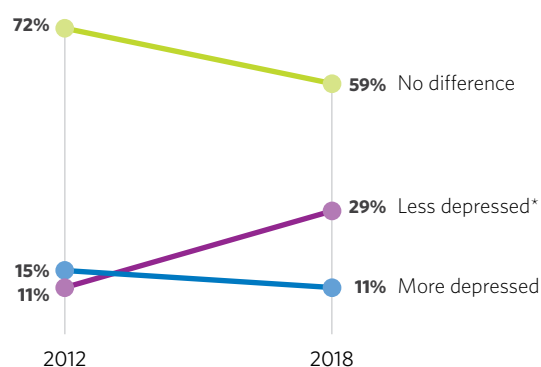
Despite the increased use of social media among teens between 2012 and 2018, there has been no increase in the proportion of these more vulnerable youth who say they feel negative effects from their social media use; but there *has* been an increase in the proportion who report a *positive* effect (see Figure E). For example, in 2012, 11 percent of low-SEWB teens said using social media made them feel less depressed; today, 29 percent say it makes them feel less depressed. In other words, it is possible that the beneficial effects of social media, for vulnerable teens, have increased over the past six years.

## 4 Teens' preference for face-to-face communication with friends has declined substantially, and their perception of social media's interference with personal interactions has increased.

The proportion of teens who say their favorite way to communicate with their friends is "in person" has dropped from nearly half (49 percent) in 2012 (when it was their top choice) to less than a third (32 percent) today (when it's a close second to texting) (see Figure F). And teens are more likely to say they're distracted from personal relationships by social media today than they were in 2012: Fifty-four percent of teens agree that using social media "often distracts me when I should be paying attention to the people I'm with," up from 44 percent in 2012; and 42 percent agree that the time they spend using social media "has taken away from time I could be spending with friends in person," up from 34 percent six years ago.

**FIGURE E. How Social Media Affects Depression, 2012 vs. 2018**

Among low-SEWB 13- to 17-year-old social media users, percent who say using social media makes them feel:

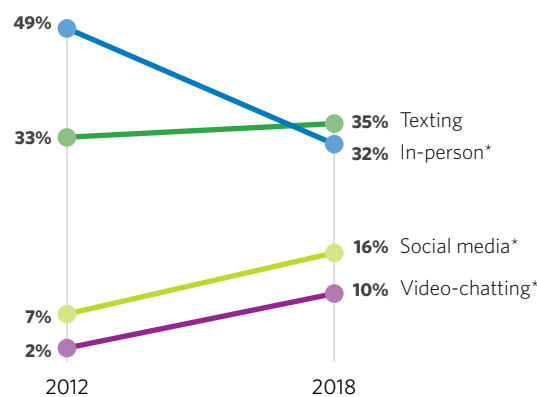


\*Difference over time is statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

Note: "SEWB" stands for "social-emotional well-being." See "Methodology" section (page 21) for definitions of low-, medium-, and high-SEWB groups.

**FIGURE F. Preferred Method of Communication, 2012 vs. 2018**

Among 13- to 17-year-olds, percent who say the following is their favorite way to communicate with friends:



\*Differences over time are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .









# 5

## Many teens think tech companies manipulate users to spend more time on their devices and say that digital distractions interfere with homework, personal relationships, and sleep.

Nearly three out of four teens (72 percent) believe that tech companies manipulate users to spend more time on their devices. And many teen social media users say that social media often distracts them from other important things: Fifty-seven percent agree that using social media often distracts them when they should be doing homework, and 54 percent agree that it often distracts them when they should be paying attention to the people they're with. A large proportion of all teens (44 percent) say they get frustrated with their friends for being on their phones so much when they're hanging out together. More than two-thirds (68 percent), regardless of whether they use social media themselves, agree with the statement "Social media has a negative impact on many people my age," including 20 percent who "strongly" agree. Nearly a third who own smartphones (29 percent) say they've been woken up by their phones during the night by a call, text, or notification. Many teens say digital obsession is a problem for their parents as well: Fully a third (33 percent) of teens say they wish their parents would spend less time on their devices, up from 21 percent in 2012.

# 6

## Teens have a decidedly mixed record when it comes to self-regulating device use.

Many young people turn off, silence, or put away their phones at key times such as when going to sleep (56 percent do so "all" or "most" of the time), having meals with people (42 percent), visiting family (31 percent), or doing homework (31 percent) (see Figure G). But many others do not: A significant number of teens say they "hardly ever" or "never" silence or put away their devices when doing homework (37 percent), visiting family (34 percent), having meals with other people (31 percent), or going to sleep (26 percent).

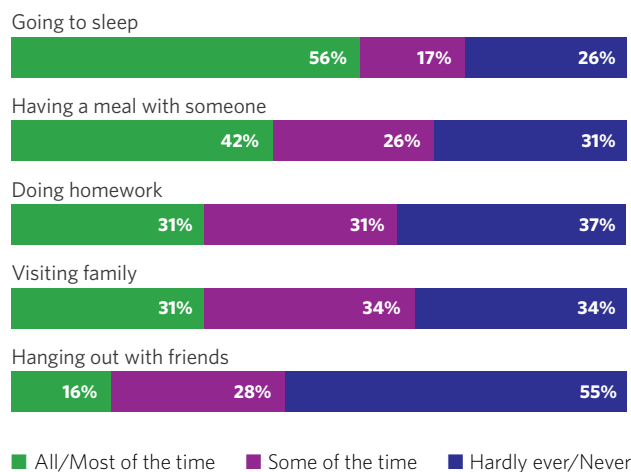
# 7

## There has been an uptick in teens' exposure to racist, sexist, and homophobic content on social media, ranging from an increase of 8 to 12 percentage points.

All told, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of teen social media users in 2018 say they "often" or "sometimes" come across racist, sexist, homophobic, or religious-based hate content in social media; one in five (21 percent) say they "often" do so. Over the past six years, there has been an increase in exposure to each individual type of content. For example, the percent who "often" or "sometimes" encounter racist content has increased from 43 percent in 2012 to 52 percent today, and exposure to content that denigrates someone because of their religion grew from 34 percent to 46 percent of teens on social media.

**FIGURE G. Silencing Digital Devices, 2018**

Among 13- to 17-year-olds with a cellphone, percent who say they turn off, silence, or put away their phones when:



Note: Segments may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

## 8

### Some teens have been cyberbullied, including about one in 10 who say their cyberbullying was at least “somewhat” serious.

More than one in 10 teens (13 percent) say they have “ever” been cyberbullied (see the “Methodology” section, on page 21, for a definition), including 9 percent who say this has happened to them either “many” or “a few” times (the rest say “once or twice”) (see Figure H). Similarly, 9 percent of teens say they have been cyberbullied in a way they consider at least “somewhat” serious (the rest say either “not too” or “not at all” serious). More than one in five teens (23 percent) have tried to help someone who has been cyberbullied, such as by talking to the person who was cyberbullied, reporting it to adults, or posting positive stuff about the person being cyberbullied online.

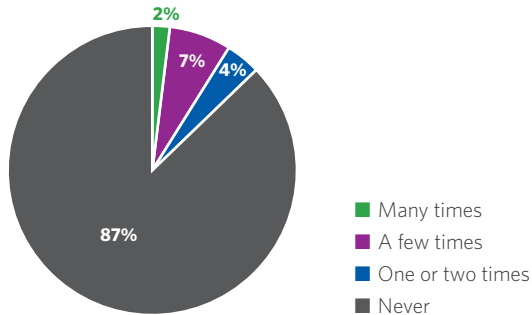
## 9

### Social media is an important avenue of creative expression for many teens.

More than one in four teens (27 percent) say social media is “extremely” or “very” important to them for expressing themselves creatively. Using social media for creative expression appears to be especially important to the most vulnerable teen social media users—those lowest on the scale of social-emotional well-being. Thirty-seven percent of those teens say social media is “extremely” or “very” important to them for that purpose, compared to 21 percent of teen social media users who are high in social-emotional well-being. For example, in open-ended responses to the survey, one 17-year-old white girl wrote that one of the benefits of social media is that she can “get my artwork out to the public”; a 14-year-old African American girl wrote that “[s]ocial media allows me to have a creative outlet to express myself”; a 14-year-old white boy said he likes social media because “I get to share things that I make”; and a 16-year-old Hispanic/Latino boy wrote that he likes using social media because “I get to post my costume and design work.”

**FIGURE H. Cyberbullying, 2018**

Percent of 13- to 17-year-olds who say they have been cyberbullied:

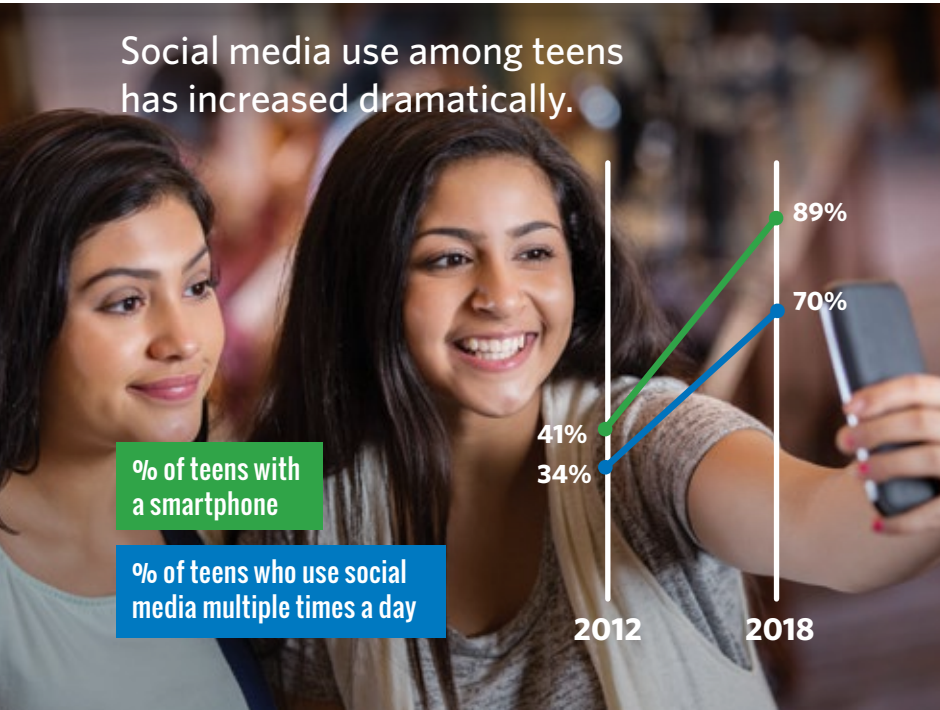






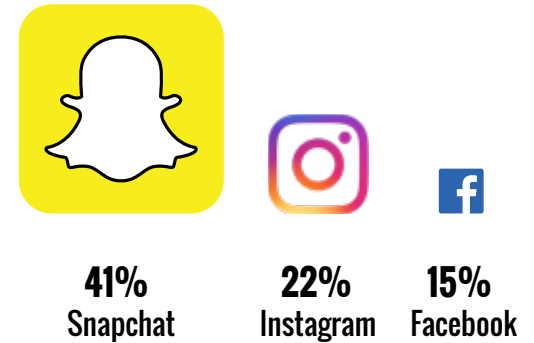
# Social Media, Social Life 2018

Among 13- to 17-year-olds in the United States



Teens overwhelmingly choose Snapchat as their main social media site.

Percent of teens who say they use each social media site the most:



They're being distracted from other important things and their friends.

**57%**  
of all teens agree that using social media often distracts them when they should be doing homework.

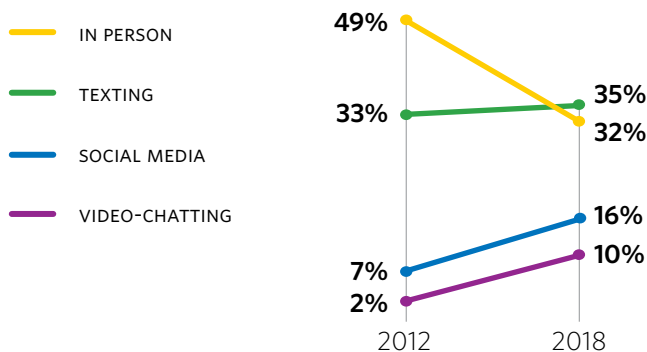
**54%**  
of teen social media users agree that it often distracts them when they should be paying attention to the people they're with, **compared to 44% in 2012.**

**29%**  
of teen smartphone owners say they've been woken up by their phones during the night by a call, text, or notification.

**42%**  
of teens agree that social media has taken away from time they could spend with friends in person, **compared to 34% in 2012.**

Teens don't value face-to-face communication with friends as much as they used to.

Teens favorite way of communicating, 2012 vs. 2018



What happens online stays online.

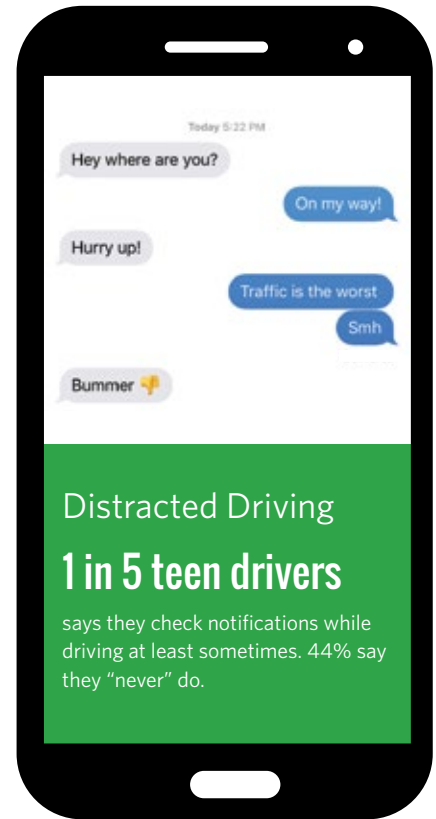
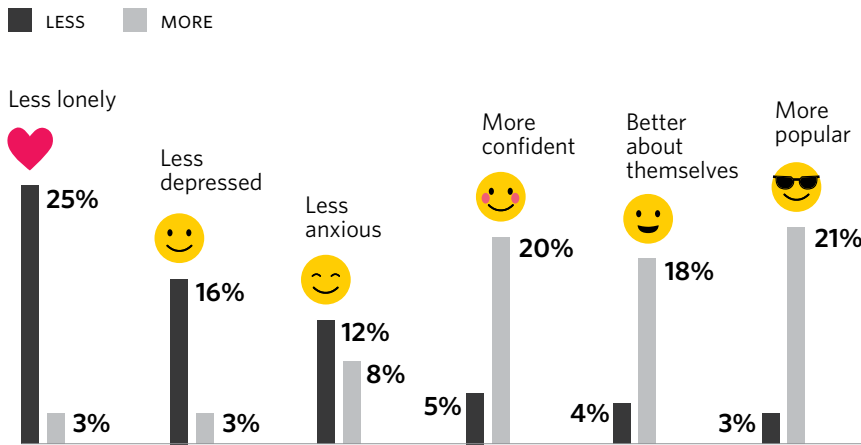
When asked to pick which comes closer to the truth, teens say:

- 54%** If parents knew what actually happens on social media, they'd be a lot more worried about it.
- 46%** Parents worry too much about teens' use of social media.



## Teens are much more likely to say social media has a positive rather than a negative effect on how they feel.

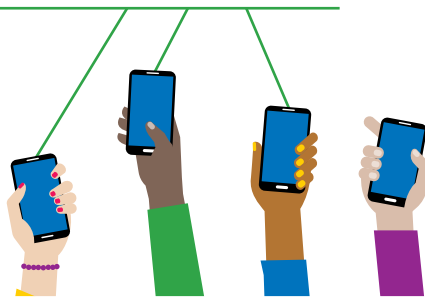
Social media users who say using social media makes them feel "more" or "less":



## Teens think they're being manipulated.

**72%**

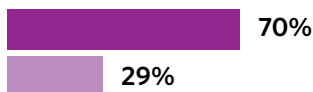
Of teens believe that tech companies manipulate users to spend more time on their devices.



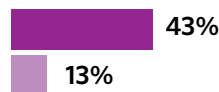
## Teens with low social-emotional well-being experience more of the negative effects of social media than kids with high social-emotional well-being.

Percent of social media users who say they:

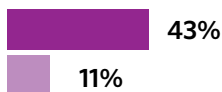
Sometimes feel left out or excluded when using social media



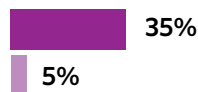
Have deleted social media posts because they got too few "likes"



Feel bad about themselves if no one comments on or likes their posts



Have ever been cyberbullied

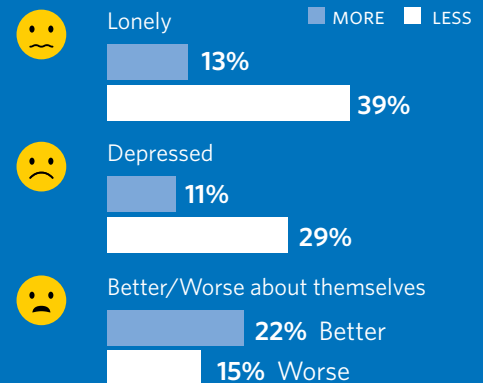


LOW SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING  
HIGH SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

See Methodology section for definitions of the high, medium, and low SEWB groups.

### Looking closer at teens with low social-emotional well-being

Percent who say using social media makes them feel:



METHODOLOGY: This report is based on a nationally representative survey of 1,141 13- to 17-year-olds in the United States. The survey was administered online by the research group GfK using their KnowledgePanel® from March 22, 2018, through April 10, 2018. Participants were recruited using address-based sampling methods. The margin of error for the full sample at a 95 percent confidence level is +/-3.4 percent. The overall design effect for the survey is 1.4048.



# METHODOLOGY

THIS REPORT IS BASED on a nationally representative survey of 1,141 13- to 17-year-olds in the United States. The survey was administered online by the research group GfK using their KnowledgePanel® from March 22, 2018, through April 10, 2018. The full text of the questionnaire and all topline results can be found in the Appendix of this report.

The 2018 survey is the second wave of the *Social Media, Social Life* survey. The first wave was conducted in 2012, and findings were presented in the Common Sense report *Social Media, Social Life: How Teens Views Their Digital Lives*. Each wave was conducted among separate cross-sectional samples of U.S. teens. A portion of the current survey repeats items from the 2012 questionnaire, for the purpose of tracking changes over time. Where available, trend data is provided in the current report.

## Survey Sample

**The use of a probability sample.** GfK’s KnowledgePanel® members were recruited using address-based sampling (ABS) methods (previously, GfK relied on random-digit dialing [RDD] methods). Once household members are recruited for the panel and assigned to a study sample, they are notified by email for survey taking. The use of a probability sample means the results are substantially more generalizable to the U.S. population than are results based on “convenience” samples. Convenience samples only include respondents who volunteer through word of mouth or advertising to participate in surveys.

**Participant recruitment and respondent compensation.** GfK sampled parents of 13- to 17-year-olds from its KnowledgePanel®. The survey consisted of two stages: initial screening to confirm the panelist was the parent of a teenager age 13 to 17 who was able to answer the survey, and the main survey with the study-eligible respondents. GfK operates an ongoing modest incentive program to encourage participation and create member loyalty. The incentive program includes special raffles and sweepstakes with both cash rewards and other prizes to be won.

**Weighting.** The use of probability-based recruitment methods for the KnowledgePanel® is designed to ensure that the resulting sample properly represents the population of the U.S.

geographically, demographically (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, income), and in terms of home internet access. Study-specific post-stratification weights were applied once the data were finalized, to adjust for any survey nonresponse and to ensure the proper distributions for the specific target population. Geodemographic distributions for this population were obtained from the March 2017 supplemental data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey.

Demographics of Survey Sample (n=1,141)	Benchmark	Unweighted percentage	Weighted percentage
<b>Age</b>			
• 13	19%	19%	19%
• 14	19%	22%	19%
• 15	19%	19%	20%
• 16	21%	19%	21%
• 17	21%	21%	21%
<b>Gender</b>			
• Boys	51%	50%	51%
• Girls	49%	50%	49%
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>			
• White*	54%	60%	54%
• Hispanic/Latino	23%	16%	23%
• African American*	14%	13%	14%
• Other*	6%	5%	6%
• 2+ races*	3%	6%	3%
<b>Household income<sup>†</sup></b>			
• <\$25,000	13%	13%	13%
• \$25,000–49,999	19%	17%	19%
• \$50,000–74,999	16%	20%	16%
• \$75,000+	52%	50%	53%

\*Not Hispanic

†Income breaks used in data analysis were <\$50,000, \$50,000–99,999, and \$100,000+.

Source of benchmarks: March 2017 Supplemental Data, Current Population Survey, U.S. Census Bureau



**Margin of error, design effect, and response rate.** The margin of error for the full sample at a 95 percent confidence level is +/-3.4 percent. The overall design effect for the survey is 1.4048. As a member of the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), GfK follows the AAPOR standards for response rate reporting. The study completion rate (COMR1) for this survey was 55.9 percent, the study breakoff rate (BOR) was 10.4 percent, the study qualification rate (QUALR) was 59.6 percent, and the cumulative response rate (RR3) was 4.4 percent. To calculate the cumulative response rate, GfK used AAPOR RR3 but notes that there were no cases of unknown eligibility at the profile survey and study stages.

## Analyses and Presentation of Data in the Text

**Analyses.** In addition to providing descriptive findings for the population of teens as a whole, the data were also analyzed by demographic groups, including age (13- to 14-year-olds and 15- to 17-year-olds), gender (male and female), race/ethnicity (African American, Hispanic/Latino, and white), and household income (lower, middle, and higher). Definitions of the income and race/ethnicity categories are provided below. In addition, two scales were used to group respondents by frequency of social media use and by level of social-emotional well-being. Those scales are described in more detail below.

**Income categories.** For analyses, respondents were divided into three relative income categories: “lower-income” (households earning less than \$50,000 a year, which is 200 percent of poverty for a family of four according to the federal poverty guidelines<sup>1</sup>; (thirty-one percent of our sample were in this category); “middle-income” (households earning between \$50,000 and \$99,999 a year, and 30 percent of our sample); and “higher-income” (families earning \$100,000 a year or more, and 38 percent of our sample).

**Race/ethnicity categories.** The term “African American” refers to any respondents who self-identified as “black, non-Hispanic.” The term “white” refers to any respondents who self-identified as “white, non-Hispanic.” The term “Hispanic/Latino” refers to any respondents who self-identified as “Hispanic.” The term “other” is a collapsed category that includes individuals who self-identified as another racial group or as two or more races, none of which was Hispanic. Where findings are broken out by race/ethnicity, results are presented only for white, African American,

and Hispanic/Latino teens. Respondents in the “other” category are included in results based on the total sample but not in results that are broken out by race, due to the small group size.

**Social media use categories.** The questionnaire included an item asking teens how often they use social media, with response options including “almost constantly,” “a few times an hour,” “once an hour,” “a few times a day,” “once a day,” “a few times a week,” “once a week,” “less than once a week,” and “never.” For purposes of data analysis, respondents were grouped into three categories:

- **Heavy** social media users are defined as those who use social media “almost constantly” (16 percent).
- **Moderate** social media users are defined as those who use social media from once a day to several times an hour (57 percent).
- **Light** social media users are defined as those who either don’t use social media at all or use it no more than a few times a week (27 percent).

In the 2012 wave of this survey, the frequency measures were different from those used in 2018 (for example, in 2012 there was no response option of “almost constantly”). In 2012, heavy users were defined as those who used social media at least six times a day (17 percent of teens in 2012); moderate users were defined as those who used it less than six times a day and more than once a week (57 percent); and light users were defined as those who used social media less than weekly or never (26 percent). In addition to these categories, frequency of social media use was also used as a continuous variable in both 2012 and 2018, in analyses exploring whether there is a relationship between social media use and social-emotional well-being.

**Social-emotional well-being scale.** The survey included a social-emotional well-being (SEWB) scale developed by the study authors prior to the 2012 survey. The 11-item scale measures attributes related to SEWB in adolescents as identified by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (such as happiness, depression, loneliness, confidence, self-esteem, and parental relations). Respondents were presented with a series of statements and asked whether each statement was “a lot,” “somewhat,” “not too much,” or “not at all” like them. Examples of items on the scale are: “I’m happy with my life,” “There are lots of things I can do well,” “I’m lonely,” and “I often feel sad or depressed.” Several items were adapted from other scales such

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1. National Center for Children in Poverty, “Explanation of Terms and Data Sources,” [www.nccp.org](http://www.nccp.org)

as the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale, the Loneliness Questionnaire, and the Kaiser Family Foundation's Contentedness Scale<sup>2</sup>. The full scale can be found in Q35 of the topline in the Appendix of this report; items 35a–35j and 35n are included in the scale. This scale is not meant to be used diagnostically to assess whether respondents are clinically depressed, anxious, or lonely. However, we believe it is suggestive of participants' social-emotional well-being and points to areas of future research using other validated scales. Cronbach's alpha for the scale is 0.87, meaning that its 11 items are highly internally consistent.

Responses to the 11 items were coded numerically and summed, and each respondent was given a mean score (items with a negative valence were reverse-coded). Respondents missing three or more items on the scale were dropped from these analyses (four individuals, or 0.04 percent of the sample). Respondents whose scores were one standard deviation above or below the mean for the entire population are considered to be in the "high" or "low" social-emotional well-being groups. About one in five teens (19 percent) are in the "high SEWB" group, 63 percent in the medium group, and 17 percent in the low group. Using this same method to group respondents into SEWB categories, in 2012 19 percent of respondents were in the high group, 62 percent in the medium group, and 16 percent in the low group. In both years, the use of one standard deviation above and below the mean also resulted in identical numerical cut points on the scale.

**Statistical significance.** During data analysis, findings on specific items were compared over time, between demographic groups, by frequency of respondents' social media use, and by social-emotional well-being score. Unless otherwise noted, findings based on these analyses are described in the text in a comparative manner (e.g., "more than," "less than") only if the differences are statistically significant at the level of  $p < .05$ . In tables where statistical significance has been tested, superscripts (using letters such as *a*, *b*, or *c*) are used to indicate whether results differ at a statistically significant level within a set of columns or rows (e.g., by gender, or 2012 vs. 2018). Means that share a common superscript, and means that have no superscript at all, are not significantly different from each other.

**Percentages.** Percentages will not always add up to 100 due to rounding or multiple response options or because those who marked "don't know" or did not respond are not included. "Nets," such as the total agreeing with a statement either "strongly" or "somewhat," may not reflect the totals of subitems due to rounding.

## Definitions

**Social media.** The survey did not provide respondents with a formal definition of social media. In the questionnaire, respondents were simply asked, "Have you ever used social media, such as Instagram, Snapchat, or Facebook?" When asking respondents which social media they use, we did not include YouTube on the list because focus groups indicated that it is most often used as a video-watching site, even though it has some social media functions. However, respondents were offered an "other" category to list sites they use that were not on our list.

**Cyberbullying.** The definition of cyberbullying used in the survey and presented to respondents is "bullying that takes place over devices like phones, tablets, and computers. It can happen in social media, texts, or gaming, where people can view, participate in, or share content. It includes repeatedly sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, or mean content about someone else, on purpose. It can include sharing private information about someone else to cause embarrassment or humiliation."

## Limitations

This is a cross-sectional survey, which means that the survey was administered to two separate samples at two different points in time (2012 and 2018). The survey is based entirely on self-reports. As such, the survey is useful for providing descriptive statistics and trends over time, and for exploring associations among variables. It cannot demonstrate causality among any of those variables.

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2. See for example Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 49, 71–75; Achenbach, T. (1991). *Manual for the youth self-report and 1991 profile*. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont, Department of Psychiatry; Roberts, D. F., & Foehr, U. G. (1991). *Kids and media in America*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press; Sawatzky, R., Ratner, P. A., Johnson, J. L., Kopec, J. A., & Zumbo, B. D. (2009). Sample heterogeneity and the measurement structure of the multidimensional students' life satisfaction scale. *Social Indicators Research*, 94(2), 273–296. doi: 10.1007/s1120500894234; Ebesutani, C., Drescher, C. F., Reise, S. P., Heiden, L., Hight, T. L., Damon, J. D., & Young, J. (2012). The loneliness questionnaire-short version: An evaluation of reverse-worded and non-reverse-worded items via item response theory. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 94:4, 427–437. doi: 10.1080/00223891.2012.662188; Harter, S. (2012). *Self-perception profile for adolescents: Manual and questionnaires*. Denver, CO: University of Denver.

# CONCLUSION

SOCIAL MEDIA HAS BECOME such a prevalent means of communication that it is now inextricably woven into the fabric of teens' lives. Social media use is central to how teens "talk" to their friends, make plans for after school, coordinate their extracurricular activities, get their news, keep up with their cousins and aunts and uncles, organize themselves politically, learn new styles and fashions, connect with people who share their same hobbies and interests, document and share the highlights of their lives, avail themselves of inspiration, and express their creativity. The days when we could talk about a singular "effect" social media has on teens are long gone; its role in teens' lives is complex, nuanced, and varied.

This survey offers a unique opportunity to peel back the curtain and get a glimpse into that complexity and nuance. As a nationally representative probability survey, it sheds light on the social media practices of young people from all walks of life; and because it tracks changes from 2012 to today, it enables us to observe how teens' relationship with social media, and social media's role in their lives, is evolving.

The complexity of social media's role in young people's lives may frustrate those looking for easy answers or simplistic solutions. But it is a reality that this survey has made abundantly clear. According to teens themselves, using social media strengthens their relationships with friends and family at the same time it detracts from face-to-face communication. Social media makes teens feel less lonely and more connected at the same time teens sometimes feel left out and "less than" their peers. Social media helps *alleviate* teens' depression by connecting them to support and inspiration, and also *contributes* to depression for those who get stuck in a loop of isolation and self-abnegation. As noted before, this study can't say with certainty whether social media *causes* harm or improvements to teens' well-being, but it certainly points to areas where researchers can and should do additional work, helping to sort through unhelpful dichotomies about whether social media is good or bad, and getting vulnerable teens the help they need.

One reality that emerges from this survey is that while the amount of time teens devote to social media is an important measure, it is by no means the only one. Reducing the relationship

between social media and teens' well-being to the notion that less social media will by itself solve teen depression and anxiety is far too simplistic—perhaps even dangerously so. For many teens, social media is a source of connection and inspiration, a chance to share their creativity and alleviate loneliness. And yet, for some, social media also sometimes raises their anxiety and increases their depression.

The survey clearly indicates that there are some teens for whom social media plays an outsized role. Young people who have less social-emotional well-being than their peers—who are more likely to say they are often sad or depressed, that they are lonely, that they feel rejected by others their age—these teens, not surprisingly, are especially vulnerable to the ups and downs of social media. But what is most important to recognize from this survey is that their relationship with social media is not uniform or one-dimensional. Social media is very important to them, helping many of them to feel less lonely, more confident, and more connected. But social media is also more likely to affect them negatively than it is for other teens—to make them feel left out, or worse about themselves.

It is these teens who deserve our special concern. And perhaps it is more important and more relevant to focus our attention on the teens rather than on social media. There are no easy answers for these young people. Less time on social media may be part of the solution—especially choosing times for devices and social media mindfully. But learning how to use social media in a way that boosts well-being rather than hinders it will likely play a part as well. Using social media to communicate with friends and express yourself are often thought of as “positive” uses, but it’s not easy for some teens to avoid negative social comparisons or to look for excessive validation from others. These are skills that are difficult and take time to develop but could also potentially be improved through social media platforms’ design choices.

Another important insight to emerge from the survey is the need for teens to strengthen their ability to regulate and moderate their device use—to engage with technology in general, and social media in particular, in a more deliberate way. Teens recognize that they are often being distracted from important priorities such as homework or the people they are with; yet too many of

them still don’t turn their devices off or put them aside in those moments. They understand that tech companies are manipulating them into spending more time on their devices, but they aren’t always able to resist. This is especially concerning when it comes to teens going to sleep or driving, where the potential health impacts for young people are substantial. But there are other, subtler ways in which teens may not even realize they’re being tracked or manipulated—what will it mean to have all their online interactions stored or saved and often viewable by unintended third parties? These skills, a subset of broader digital citizenship skills, can be taught and reinforced by parents and educators and supported by policies that make it easier for teens to thoughtfully integrate technology and social media into their lives.

One of the most compelling questions about digital communication is how it will ultimately impact the way humans communicate with and relate to one another. In this sense, teens may be the proverbial canaries in a coal mine. The fact that young people’s preference for face-to-face communication has dropped substantially over the past six years is therefore especially noteworthy. Are we starting to see a real shift, or will this turn out to be a temporary blip or something that teens grow out of? If teens are truly changing how they want to communicate with each other, how are technology and social media contributing to this change? And if this change is real, what will the implications be in the years ahead?

We hope this survey will help elevate the voices of youth in this national discussion. Most teens, even those who are lower in social-emotional well-being than their peers, are more likely to say that social media makes them feel *better* rather than worse, eases their depression rather than feeds it, makes them feel *less* lonely rather than more isolated. This is by no means definitive evidence about the impact of social media, but it is certainly an important component of what we need to know, a critical part of the conversation. And all of us—parents, educators, mental health professionals, policymakers—would be wise to listen.



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