



Middle Schoolers and Social Media

A report of the Early Adolescents & Social Media Study

Peer Relations Study Group University of Wisconsin-Madison June, 2017

Not that many years ago, cell phones were expensive devices for making phone calls or texting in limited locations. They were rarely in the hands of someone under 16. Children might be able to access the Internet via a family computer easily monitored by parents.

Nowadays, as early as age 11, young people can expect to have easy access to smart phones. These devices can be used not only to call or text, but also to play games and access the Internet, including a rapidly expanding number of social media sites. Because they work virtually anywhere and don't even require wi-fi, parents and school adults have a difficult time monitoring cell phone use.

Smart phones—and the Internet, more generally—open an exciting and informative world to young people. They help teens learn and let them connect to friends or family members they can't see every day. But they also can lead to undesirable experiences, such as social isolation or bullying, and psychological problems such as depression or Internet addiction.

How do middle school students get started with social media? How do they establish good habits of media use? Are parents or peers most influential in guiding young people's use of social media? What strategies do parents or school adults use to oversee young people's interactions on the Internet or social networking sites? Do these strategies work? These questions guided our recent study.

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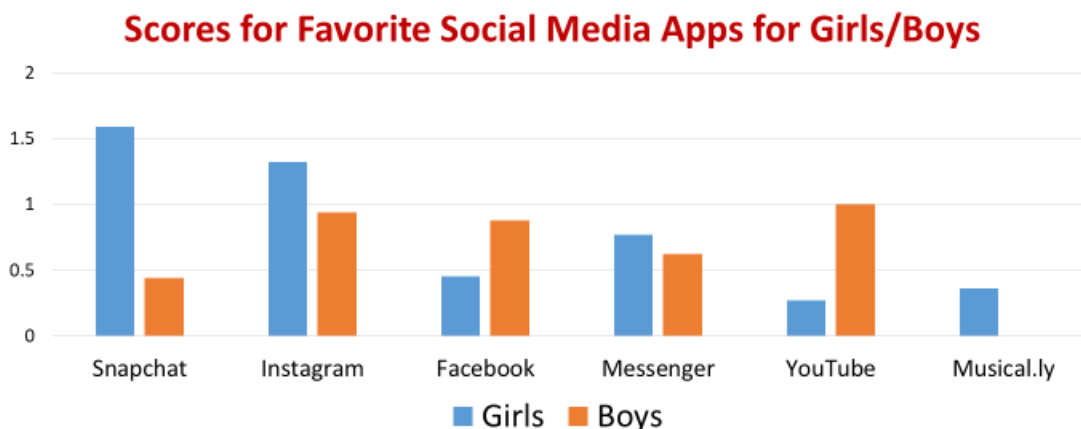
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Your favorite social media? Girls and boys disagree.



Ask middle school students to name their 3 favorite social media apps and you'll quickly see how much the social media landscape has changed recently. *Facebook* has clearly lost its dominance. It made the "top 3" lists of only a third of our study participants. Some apps that were popular a few years ago (*Vine*, *MySpace*) weren't mentioned at all.

Most striking is the sharp difference between boys' and girls' rankings of favorite apps. We created a score for each app based on the number of individuals who named the app and how it was ranked (most favorite, second, or third). *Instagram* finished second for both genders (see chart below). *Snapchat* ranked first among girls, but only fifth among boys. Boys' favorite social media app, *YouTube*, finished 7th on our list for girls. *Facebook* and a messaging service (e.g., *iMessage*) finished third and fourth, respectively, among girls, and in the reverse order among boys. A quarter of the boys picked a gaming app as their favorite social media, but each picked a different game. Just one girl included a game in her top 3.



All told, participants named 20 different apps in the lists of their three favorites. This shows how diversified middle schoolers' use of social media has become. What's more, if we were to have asked these students the same question 6 months later, we suspect that other social media would have made the list because of the quick pace of change in people's favorites.

We found that, nowadays, teens use different social media for different purposes or to connect to different people. One app may be best for communicating with family members, another for finding out what's happening after school or this weekend, another for determining what's cool or acceptable among peers, still another for displaying one's identity to others. Combine this with young people's tendency to change their allegiance to various social media and you can see the difficulty adults have keeping on top of how someone is using social media. But take heart: most middle schoolers concentrate their attention on just 1 or 2 apps.



Takin' it slow:

How middle schoolers approach social media

It may seem as if middle school students are totally engrossed in social media. Some of our study participants said they were on social media 10 hours or more each day! (We didn't believe them.) But a closer look revealed that most were pretty cautious in how they used social media.

Although students have accounts on several social media, they tend to focus their activity on just one or two. They don't seem to post something as often as older students. They're more likely to respond to something someone else has posted than to post something themselves. And a lot of their time online is spent looking at other people's sites.

Many of our participants weren't sure whether their social media accounts were public (accessible by anyone) or private (restricted to those they had accepted as friends or followers). In general, they tended to only let family members, people they knew, or kids their own age be friends or followers on their social media sites. Often, however, they followed the Instagram, YouTube, or Twitter sites of famous people.

"I'm ready
for *Snapchat*;
I just don't
want it."

Posting something on social media is a risk that many of our participants were reluctant to take. "No, I don't post videos," one boy confessed, "because I don't think I can make one that people would think is funny enough to watch." And if students have a bad experience on social media (getting teased or embarrassed, or having too few people "like" their post), they often just quit their account.

One girl planned to drop her Instagram account because few people tagged her in pictures or "liked" pictures she posted. "People all have a competition on who gets the most likes," she said. "That just doesn't make it fun anymore." Most also said that they would steer clear of people who posted pictures or messages that they thought were offensive or inappropriate.

We were not able to view study participants' social media pages to verify what they told us. But based on what they said, they seem to be more *cautious consumers* of social media than *active producers* of media content. Better to learn by watching others than learn by posting something that peers will ridicule. Their words can cleverly disguise their "wait and see" attitude. "I'm ready for Snapchat," one boy said. "I just don't want it."





School rules

How schools handle middle schoolers' use of social media

Most middle schools have pretty clear rules about cell phone use, but rules aren't always followed very strictly—by teachers as well as students! That's the word from our study participants, who came from a variety of schools (both public and private) in and around Madison.

Schools may block certain websites (including some social media), but with growing numbers of students having their own phones and cell plans, it's hard for these efforts to be successful. So, schools tend to restrict when and where students can use their own devices. Several students spoke of the “tally rule”: Caught once with your cell phone out in class, you get fair warning. Caught twice, the phone goes to the teacher for the period. A third time and the phone ends up in the office until a parent comes to retrieve it (probably along with a lecture to the student on the way home). The rule can extend to iPads or tablets if the student uses them to connect to social media.

Most students comply with the rules, trying to use their phones only at lunch or other free time at school. They don't want to risk having their phone taken away—by teachers or their parent. But students take their cues from teachers. Some teachers strictly enforce the rules, but others are laxer. They allow phone use if there's free time at the end of class.

And there's a bigger problem looming: as tablets and cell phones add functions, they can become important learning tools in the classroom. How do teachers encourage use of cell phones for learning while monitoring their “misuse” for socializing during class? And is it fair for some students to use their tablet or phone if other students don't have one?



With all the pressure that teens and pre-teens face to keep up with what's going on socially, it's hard to resist the urge to be constantly connected, checking for the latest social media updates. That's why many students “sneak a peek” when they think no one's looking. Forging and enforcing sensible rules will continue to challenge school staff. Learning to live with the rules will be a continuing challenge for students!

He started it!

Sibs' role in students' social media use

Parents are great sources of advice or assistance for all sorts of teenage issues, but not necessarily for social media use. Many parents don't have enough experience to be useful. Often, middle school students will turn to an older brother or sister for help instead.



Whether it's deciding which app to use, what picture to post, or how to respond to someone's snarky comment online, students rely on older siblings to be their guides. Sometimes it's just a matter of watching what a sibling does and copying it. Other times it's getting a lesson on how to make something work. And the older sibling has the upper hand. Hardly ever did we find a participant in our study teaching an older sibling how to do something with social media.

"My older brother had a Kik account first. He showed me how to do it."

Not only do siblings know more than parents, they're also less judgmental. They're more likely to show a brother or sister how to do something without asking questions about why they want to. In some families, an older brother or sister takes over the "parenting" responsibilities for a younger sibling's social media use. But most students we talked to got

a parent's permission to use a social media app before having an older sibling show them how.

Social media have become an important way that siblings interact with each other. They trade texts or share ideas on what to say on Snapchat or Instagram. But everything isn't perfect. Several of our study participants said they were embarrassed or angered by something an older sibling posted or "snapped" about them.

In some families, an older sibling supervised a middle schooler's social media use.

"I actually blocked my brother," one girl said, "because he was making fun of my photos, like 'Oh, you post the stupidest stuff.' So, I blocked him."

Those who didn't have an older sibling relied more on friends to learn how to use social media. Or they had to fend for themselves. Questions or appeals for help from their own younger siblings prompted them to hone their social media skills. Even without much input from parents, social media use can be a family affair.

65

Percent of participants whose older sibling helped them with social media.

Do parents keep tabs?

Monitoring a child's social media use

Guiding and supervising a child's social media use can be a real challenge for parents. Most grew up before these media became popular, and many parents still aren't adept at using them. Parents in our study used a variety of strategies. Their approach depended on their own comfort and familiarity with social media as well as how involved their child was with these media.



84

Percent of youth in our study under legal age when they started a social media account

20

Percent of parents who helped set up the account

At one extreme were a few parents who gave their child free rein, allowing the child to get whatever media accounts desired and never checking on what the child did. At the other extreme were a few parents who had strict rules. They set limits on the time a child could spend on social media, which apps could be used, and the age at which they could be accessed. Some parents routinely checked everything the child posted or viewed on social media. Either approach worked for some families, but often they led to students spending excessive time on social media or creating schemes to hide use from parents—like borrowing friends' cell phones or creating accounts under a false name.

Parents devised several clever strategies to keep tabs on a child's social media use. One was to encourage the child to use the parent's account for starters. Another was to insist that the child have the parent as a "friend" or "follower" on any account. These approaches allowed a parent to easily check on what the child was posting or how peers were responding to a child's posts. A few parents gave an older sibling the responsibility to keep tabs on the child and report any problems or concerns; this worked especially well when the older sibling was also the child's main source of advice on how to use a particular app.

Parents who knew more about social media could monitor the child by being a co-creator of the child's media content. One father helped his son create *YouTube* videos about playing a certain video game. A mother guided her daughter through the steps to create "My Story" on *Snapchat*.

Some parents relied on random checks or regular but infrequent reviews (once a week or every 2 weeks) of the child's posts and texts. This wasn't too concerning to students who spent more time looking at others' posts than posting themselves, and who only texted family members and a few friends. For those who were more active on social media, the threat of random checks could lead them to use a texting app their parents weren't aware of. About a quarter of our study participants admitted that their parent didn't know everything they did on social media—often because they hid some information from the parent.

Looking for guidelines on monitoring teen's social media use? Check out this website:
<http://pacecounselinggroup.com/children/social-media-rules-engagement-parents-edition/>



One parent took her cue from her daughter. When the child seemed to be upset or acting strangely, she would ask to review the daughter's social media accounts for cues on the source of the worrisome behavior. This would work well for children who can't easily hide their feelings.

It seems clear that, just as most parents are probably not aware of everything their middle schooler does on social media, most children are probably unaware of all the parent is doing to monitor their use of these media. Parents may quietly check a child's apps, ask a sibling for updates, or check with parents of friends to keep tabs on a child's activities without the child's awareness.

We found that students often referred to trust when talking about parents. The child wanted to maintain the parent's trust by not doing anything foolish on social media, and the parent wanted to maintain the child's trust by not being intrusive in how they monitored social media use. In these early stages of children's social media use, most young people were sufficiently open with parents, and most parents sufficiently respectful of the child's needs, to maintain a delicate balance of trust and awareness.

FIVE THINGS PARENTS CAN DO

1. **BE AWARE:** Read articles, talk to other adults to stay current on how various social media work and which ones are "in" and "out" among teens. This will help you set reasonable guidelines.
2. **SHOW INTEREST:** Ask your children about their social media, listen to their stories, give advice or assistance when asked. Children share more with parents who seem genuinely interested and supportive.
3. **SET GUIDELINES:** Establish clear rules for your child's use of social media and try to be consistent in enforcing the rules.
4. **KEEP TABS:** Find a reasonable way to monitor what your child is doing on social media. Be consistent with how you keep tabs on your child's activity on social media.
5. **BE FLEXIBLE:** As children grow older, adjust the guidelines to give them more responsibility to manage their social media on their own.

Study of Early Adolescents and Social Media

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<http://website.education.wisc.edu/prsg/>

