

# New report: Most teens say social media makes them feel better, not worse, about themselves

By Caroline Knorr September 13

8-10 minutes



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What teenagers look like they're doing and what they're actually doing can be two totally different things — especially when it comes to social media. A bored-looking ninth-grader could be bonding with her new BFF on [Snapchat](#). A 10th-grade gamer may complain loudly when you cut off his Internet [but be secretly relieved](#). An awkward eighth-grader

could be [YouTube's hottest star](#). Common Sense Media [recently polled more than 1,100 13- to 17-year-olds](#) to update [a 2012 study](#) on teens and social media. The findings address issues such as [cyberbullying](#), [depression](#) and even the popularity of Facebook (spoiler alert: [It's not that popular with teens](#)).

Why now? Eighty-nine percent of teens have their own smartphones (compared with 41 percent in 2012). They grew up alongside [Instagram](#) and [Snapchat](#). They do research papers on Google Classroom, find emotional support on teen forums, share poetry on [Tumblr](#), and are more likely to text “I love you” before they’d ever say it to your face. But concerns about the negative consequences of social media have grown in tandem with its popularity among teens. Grim reports on [teen suicide](#), [addiction](#), cyberbullying and [eroding social skills](#) have caused many people to look at social media as a potential contributor — if not the cause. Here are some of the key findings from the report, what they mean for you and your teen and what you can do about them.

**They can't stop. They won't stop.** Seventy percent of teens use social media more than once a day (compared with 34 percent in 2012). Most teens think technology companies manipulate users to spend more time on their devices. Many of them also think that social media distracts them and their friends.

*What you can do.* They know it's getting in the way of important things, but they have a hard time [regulating their use](#). So help them. Encourage them to be mindful of how they feel before, during and after a social media session. If a certain friend or topic bugs them or brings them down, they

can block that person or mute the thread. Challenge them to do a task with [focused concentration](#), and without interruption, for longer and longer periods (try setting a timer).

**Thumbs mostly up.** 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. Twenty-five percent say social media makes them feel less lonely (compared with 3 percent who say more); 18 percent say it makes them feel better about themselves (compared with 4 percent who say worse); and 16 percent say it makes them feel less depressed (compared with 3 percent who say more).

*What you can do.* It's still important to check in. Ask open-ended questions about their social media lives: What's good? What's not so good? What do you wish you could change? And remember, social media is only one contributor to kids' overall well-being.

[\[How to use 'Eighth Grade' to start some important conversations with your teen\]](#)

**Managing devices is hit or miss.** Many turn off, silence, or put away their phones at key times such as when going to sleep, having meals with people, visiting family or doing homework. But many others do not: A significant number of teens say they “hardly ever” or “never” silence or put away their devices.

*What you can do.* If your teen is able to manage their own use, keep encouraging them. If not, [set specific screen rules for around the house](#). Establish screen-free times (such as during homework) and areas (such as the bedroom). Have device-free-dinner nights — and make sure to follow the rules

yourself.

**Snapchat and Instagram are where it's at.** In 2012, Facebook dominated social networking use among teens. Today, only 15 percent say it's their main site (when one 16-year-old girl was asked in a focus group whom she communicates with on Facebook, she replied, "My grandparents").

*What you can do.* Familiarize yourself with your teen's favorite social media platform by reading reviews or downloading it and playing around with it. Friend your teen if they'll allow it, but don't force it; instead, make time for [regular check-ins](#) to ask what's new on Snapchat and Insta and share your feeds with them.

**Less talking, more texting.** In 2012, about half of all teens still said their favorite way to communicate with friends was in person; today, less than a third say so. More than half say that social media takes them away from personal relationships and distracts them from paying attention to the people they're with.

*What you can do.* This is where [your guidance and role-modeling](#) of healthy online habits is really important. Put down your own phone (better yet, set it to do not disturb) when you're with your kids. Encourage them to be more aware about their device use, especially when they come away from interactions feeling like they were distracted. And if you think they need a break, prompt them to go phone-free for a while.

**Vulnerable teens need extra support.** Social media is significantly more important in the lives of [vulnerable teens](#) (those who rate themselves low on a social-emotional well-being scale). This group is more likely to say they've had

a variety of negative responses to social media (such as feeling bad about themselves when nobody comments on or likes their posts). But they're also more likely to say that social media has a positive, rather than a negative, effect on them.

*What you can do.* You may not know your teen is vulnerable. In fact, they may not know it. Because vulnerable teens can struggle more in all areas, use your intuition to dig deeper if you sense something is going on. Help them get the [best out of social media](#) and minimize anything that provokes a negative reaction. If they're creative, support their efforts to share their work online, as vulnerable teens say that expressing themselves on social media is extremely important.

**Exposure to hate speech is on the rise, while cyberbullying is less common.** Only 13 percent of teens report ever being cyberbullied. But nearly two-thirds say they often or sometimes come across racist, sexist, homophobic or religious-based hate content in social media.

*What you can do.* Talk to your kid about being a force for good on the Internet. Explain that [it reflects poorly on them](#) if they like, share or otherwise support messages of hate — even as a joke. If your kid knows the [person spewing hate speech](#), then encourage them to block, report or simply unfriend that person. Practice how to disagree with people respectfully and constructively. Encourage them to stand up for people who've been denigrated — without getting into an ugly war.

**Express yourself.** More than 1 in 4 teens say social media is “extremely” or “very” important to them for expressing themselves creatively.

*What you can do.* Be supportive. Although there are some risks to putting your work online, it's possible to do it safely, and it can actually help teens get their stuff noticed by schools, employers and mentors. Help them use privacy settings on whatever platform they choose to share their work so they don't expose themselves to potential predators. Offer advice on how to accept feedback and comments maturely. And find out how to protect their intellectual property.

*Caroline Knorr is Common Sense Media's parenting editor. This piece first ran at [CommonSenseMedia.org](http://CommonSenseMedia.org).*

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