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Technology - Is being online affecting your child's mental health?

Find ways to help keep your child healthy in an age of screens and social media

We have all enjoyed how new tools and gadgets are keeping us more connected to family and friends. There has been a concern, however, on how these connections are affecting teens. There has been a rise in depression in teens with experts and parents wondering how much is due to social media and too much time spent online.

Dr. Nicholas J. Westers, Psy.D., ABPP, clinical psychologist at Children's Health℠ looks at how time spent online can impact mental health. He also shares tips for creating healthy and balanced digital habits.

The rise and risk of loneliness in an age of connection

A 2018 study found that feeling lonely has reached "epidemic levels" in the U.S. It also found that young adults are lonelier and in poorer health than older adults. Teens who use technology for more than an hour or two a day are more likely to report feeling depressed, lonely, or anxious.

Anxiety and depression can affect both our physical and mental health. Many are surprised to learn that feeling lonely can have the same effect. One study found that, in terms of its effect on dying, feeling lonely is like smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

But how much is spending time online to blame for this? Dr. Westers is hesitant to point the finger at any one thing. While technology can be a factor that contributes, it is better to create balanced tech habits and talk with your child about technology, instead of banning it all together.

To improve mental health, teach good habits for being online

Dr. Westers shares that being online can offer many benefits. It just depends on how you use it. He recommends teaching children 3 important parts of keeping healthy when going online:

1. Setting limits on going online (digital hygiene)

Set limits on how and when phones, tablets, computers and even gaming are used. This can go a long way in helping teens be online in ways that are healthy.

"It's important for parents to set an example, and that can be really hard," Dr. Westers admits. "If the rule is no phones at meals, then mom and dad should also put their phones away, or teens may not respect the rule."

Dr. Westers suggests parents talk with their teens about the following ideas for creating rules together that everyone in the family can agree to:

- **Establish "no phone" times.** For many families, this includes during meals as well as before and during bedtime.
- **Limit being online by balancing it with off-line activities.** This doesn't need to include time spent completing schoolwork, but it should not include phone, video games or watching TV.
- **Try a tech-free day.** Pick a day during the week that works best for everyone and try putting phones, gaming, computers, and tablets away for a whole day. This helps break every one of the habits of going online. It also helps foster creativity and connecting with others in the real world.
- **Take TVs, phones, tablets, and computers out of the bedroom.** Research has shown that these can make it harder to sleep well.

2. Being polite while online (digital etiquette)

"Parents teach their children how to be polite – saying please and thank you – and to use basic manners when talking to people face to face," Dr. Westers says. "The same should be done with online behavior."

Being polite online can help children and teens stay away from and know when cyber bullying is happening. Talk with them about what they can do if they spot it among their friends.

When talking with others face to face, we look at their face and listen to the tone of their voice to understand things like humor, being sarcastic, expressing joy or sadness or even anger. It is almost impossible to tell how someone is feeling from words shared online through text only. It is easy to read someone's message very differently from what they meant to say.

Help your child learn when it is important to **not** reply to a message or wait before the reply, especially when they are angry. Teach your child how to wait, think about, and reply politely.

Learning to be polite and show respect can help your child connect with others in a healthy way, both in person as well as online.

3. Being safe while online (digital safety)

Create rules for being online, chatting, and replying to messages they see when online. This should include:

- never meeting anyone in-person that they've met online
- not sharing personal information
- naming sites that children can visit.

Talk with your children about being online

Dr. Westers offers these tips for talking with your children and teens about their online habits:

Check in often
Set aside times, like meals, to talk about things they may have read or heard about while being online. Or use special times together when off-line to bring up things you may have heard or read about. This shows them that you are interested in what they do while online, but also that you are also willing to share what you are doing online.

Confirm that you understand their feelings
If your child tells you they feel lonely, respond with statements that support their feeling. You can say something like "I'm sorry you feel that way. How can I help?". Don't dismiss their feelings by saying things such as "You have plenty of friends. You shouldn't feel lonely." Not only does this tell them that their feelings are wrong, but they may not share as much in the future.

"Loneliness is an emotion – one we've all felt from time to time," Dr. Westers reminds parents. "You can still feel lonely, even when you're surrounded by people. If your child is sharing his or her feelings, work together to come up with a plan that may help him or her feel better, whether it's an activity you can do together, having a friend come over or having a family member to visit."

Get help if you're concerned about your child
Dr. Westers also cautions parents not to worry every time their child feels sad, depressed, or lonely. Teens especially can be moody, and this is normal for their age. Parents should talk with their child's doctor if they are concerned.

Learn more
Our doctors can help children and teens manage feelings of being lonely, depressed, and anxious. Learn more about programs we offer to support mental, emotional, and behavioral health.