

# Risks of Social Media to Young Pre-teen Children

## *Understanding and Mitigating the Dangers*

Recent studies indicate a surge in social media usage among pre-teens, often starting as young as 10 years old. With this early exposure, understanding the digital landscape and its associated risks becomes crucial for safeguarding young users.

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## Introduction

In today's digital age, the intersection of youth and social media has become a focal point of concern for parents, educators, and policymakers alike. As we navigate through the complexities of online interactions, the importance of safeguarding our youngest and most vulnerable users from the potential dangers of social media cannot be overstated. Recent studies have illuminated the extensive reach and profound impact social media has on pre-teens, signaling a crucial need for comprehensive strategies to protect them.

This urgency was notably recognized just Wednesday when the U.S. Congress convened a meeting with CEOs from leading social media companies, including Meta, TikTok, Snap, and Discord. This historic gathering aimed to address online child safety, marking a pivotal moment in the ongoing dialogue about the role of social media in our children's lives and the collective responsibility to ensure their digital well-being.

## Top Takeaways

- **Testimonies and Concerns:** The hearing featured emotional testimonies from children and parents who have been impacted by social media, highlighting cases of exploitation and harm. It reflected serious concerns about the role of social media in child safety, including issues like cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, and online predators.
- **Senators' Stance:** U.S. senators, including Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin and Senator Josh Hawley, expressed strong concerns about the social media companies' efforts in safeguarding children. They questioned the companies' commitment to child safety over profit and engagement.
- **Response from CEOs:** The CEOs, including Meta's Mark Zuckerberg, defended their platforms, highlighting the efforts and tools they have implemented to protect

minors. However, there was skepticism from lawmakers and advocates about the adequacy of these measures.

- **Legislation and Regulation:** The hearing also touched upon proposed legislation like the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA), which aims to hold tech companies more accountable for the safety of young users on their platforms. The article mentions that Snapchat has shown support for this bill, which is still under consideration.

## 1. Exposure to Inappropriate Content

Social media often exposes young users to various types of inappropriate content, including violence, discrimination, and adult themes.

According to the Pew Research Center's survey of U.S. teens conducted in 2023, a significant number of teenagers are active on various social media platforms, with many visiting sites like YouTube and TikTok daily. This extensive use of social media increases the likelihood of encountering inappropriate content. [8]

The Mayo Clinic notes that the type of content viewed on social media can significantly affect teens' mental health. Content depicting illegal acts, self-harm, or promoting eating disorders can be particularly harmful, especially for teens with existing mental health conditions. Exposure to discrimination, hate, or cyberbullying on social media platforms can also increase the risk of anxiety or depression among teens. The clinic emphasizes the importance of responsible social media use and parental involvement in mitigating these risks. [9]

## 2. Cyberbullying Report 2024

### Prevalence and Impact

Reports suggest that between 20% to 60% of middle school aged children, a have been cyberbullied, correlating with increased online activity during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Offensive name-calling, spreading of false rumors, and receiving unsolicited explicit images are the most common forms. An increase in cyberbullying cases is noted with the child's age, particularly on platforms like YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok, and Facebook. [1] [2]

- **47.7%** of parents with children **ages 6-10** reported their children were bullied.
- **56.4%** of parents with children **ages 11-13** reported their children were bullied.
- **59.9%** of parents with children **ages 14-18** reported their children were bullied.
- **54.3%** of parents with children **ages 19 and older** reported their children were bullied.

School Yard Bullying decreased by 28% between 2019 and 2021, however, it extended to the frequency and intensity of cyberbullying. [3]

### **Gender and Sexual Orientation Disparities**

Girls experience cyberbullying slightly more than boys, with distinct differences in the types encountered. LGBTQ youth report higher rates of cyberbullying compared to their heterosexual peers. [1]

### **Mental Health Concerns**

A significant portion of cyberbullying victims suffer from mental health issues like depression and anxiety. The impact increases the likelihood of suicidal thoughts and substance abuse. [3]

### **Bystander Effect**

Many children and young people have witnessed cyberbullying on social media, yet intervention by bystanders remains limited, contributing to the perpetuation of cyberbullying.

### **Parental and Social Media Response**

Parents often discuss internet safety following cyberbullying incidents, but fewer adjust parental controls. There is a consensus that more action is needed from social media platforms to combat cyberbullying. [3]

### **Global Perspective**

Cyberbullying is a global issue with varying satisfaction levels regarding anti-bullying measures. Europe and South America show general dissatisfaction with current measures. [3]

### **Platform Specifics**

Instagram is identified as the platform with the highest percentage of cyberbullies, followed by Facebook, Snapchat, and others. [3]

## **3. Privacy Concerns and Financial Extortion**

Research indicates an increasing awareness around the risks posed by social media to the privacy of pre-teens. The American Psychological Association (APA) and the National Law Review have both highlighted growing concerns regarding the privacy of young users on social media platforms. These concerns are not only about the type of personal information that children might inadvertently share but also about how this information is used by platforms and potentially by third parties.

The APA has been actively discussing the need for protecting teens on social media, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding their personal information from being exploited for commercial purposes or exposed to harmful content. The conversation around privacy concerns is not just about the information that young users are willing to share but also about the data collected by social media platforms through their online activities. [12]

Financial extortion on social media, particularly involving the threat of releasing personal or sensitive images unless a ransom is paid, represents a severe and growing concern within the digital landscape. This form of cyber extortion, often referred to as "sextortion," targets individuals who may have shared images or information under the assumption of privacy. Young users, including pre-teens and teens, are particularly vulnerable due to their developmental stage, potential lack of awareness about online risks, and the pressure to conform to social norms or gain approval from peers.

#### **Understanding Financial Extortion in the Context of Social Media**

Financial extortion through social media can take several forms, but commonly it involves an individual or group threatening to release compromising photos, videos, or information unless the victim pays a ransom. This could start from seemingly innocent interactions or friendships formed online, which may later exploit the trust built to manipulate or blackmail the victim.

#### **Impact on Victims**

The impact of such extortion on young individuals can be profound, affecting their mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and in extreme cases, suicidal thoughts. The fear of public shaming, alongside the potential for lasting digital footprints, exacerbates the distress experienced by victims.

### **4. Addiction and Screen Time**

The addictive nature of social media and its relation to excessive screen time is a growing concern. Teen's report finding it difficult to give up social media, with girls more likely to struggle with this than boys. About 54% of teens say it would be very or somewhat hard to give up social media, with older teens finding it more challenging than younger ones. <sup>[11]</sup>

A Pew Research Center survey from September to October 2023 found significant daily usage of platforms like YouTube and TikTok among teens. About 58% of teens reported daily use of TikTok, with 17% describing their TikTok use as almost constant. Snapchat and Instagram also showed high daily usage. This extensive use of social media indicates its integral role in teens' lives. <sup>[10] [11]</sup>

### **5. Social Comparison and Self-Esteem**

A survey by the Dove Self-Esteem Project updated in April 2023, notes significant influence of social media on teens' self-esteem. It mentions that a considerable number of tween and teen girls spend more time on social media than with friends in person, and that this exposure to edited and curated content creates unattainable beauty standards. It was found that many girls take numerous selfies before choosing one to post, and half of them are

influenced by idealized beauty content, leading to lower self-esteem. The Dove Self-Esteem Project encourages detoxifying social media feeds to combat these negative impacts. [6]

A study published on Medical Xpress in May 2023 points out that nearly 70% of parents believe that social media image editing apps and filters negatively influence children. This concern is particularly about the impact on children's body image and mental health, suggesting a need for open discussions about body positivity and the realistic portrayal of beauty standards [7]

## 6. Monitoring and Restriction Apps

With the increasing risks associated with social media, several apps have been developed to help parents monitor and restrict their children's social media use. Apps like OurPact, Qustodio, and FamilyTime offer features like screen time management, content filtering, and location tracking. For example, OurPact allows parents to schedule screen time and block certain apps, helping to ensure a balanced digital diet for pre-teens.

OurPact: Website - <https://www.ourpact.com>, Monthly MSRP: \$6.99

Qustodio: Website - <https://www.qustodio.com>, Monthly MSRP: \$4.58

FamilyTime: Website - <https://www.familytime.io>, Monthly MSRP: \$2.25

## 7. Enhanced Mitigation Strategies

Enhancing mitigation strategies to manage the risks associated with social media use among children and teens is crucial. Alongside the strategies already mentioned, such as using parental control tools, open communication, staying informed, encouraging healthy habits, and collaborating with others, here are some additional approaches parents and guardians can consider:

- **Setting Clear Boundaries and Limits:** Establish specific times when social media use is allowed and times when it is not, such as during family meals, or before bedtime. This helps in balancing online activity with offline life.
- **Engaging in Co-Use of Media:** Share media experiences with your children. This not only allows for bonding but also provides opportunities to discuss the content they are consuming, fostering critical thinking about media messages.
- **Promoting Digital Literacy and Critical Thinking:** Teach children to critically evaluate the information they encounter online. This includes understanding the difference between real and fake news, recognizing advertising, and learning about the permanence of online actions.
- **Encouraging Offline Activities:** Encourage children to participate in activities that don't involve screens, such as sports, reading, or spending time outdoors. This can help reduce screen time and promote a healthier, more balanced lifestyle.
- **Monitoring Content and Use:** While respecting privacy, it's important to be aware of what your child is viewing and sharing online. Regularly discuss their online interactions and experiences.

- **Using Educational Resources and Tools:** Utilize resources provided by educational websites, non-profit organizations, and other platforms that offer guidance on safe internet use.
- **Building Emotional Intelligence:** Teach children about empathy, kindness, and the impact of their actions online. Encourage them to come to you with any problems or concerns they encounter on social media.
- **Staying Updated with Technology:** Keep up with the latest social media platforms and trends. This can help in understanding the digital environment your child is navigating.
- **Creating a Family Media Plan:** Develop a family media use plan that aligns with your family's values and needs. This plan should include rules about media use and communication strategies.
- **Positive Reinforcement:** Recognize and praise your child for responsible online behavior. Positive reinforcement can encourage them to continue using social media in a healthy and respectful way.

Implementing these strategies can help in creating a safer and more positive online experience for children and teens. It's important to remember that open dialogue and education are key in guiding young users in the digital world.

## Conclusion

As we navigate the vast landscape of social media, it's clear that its impact on young pre-teens is a growing concern for parents looking to protect their children from the pitfalls of online interactions. The research underscores not just the popularity of these platforms among youth but also the pressing need for effective strategies to mitigate risks such as cyberbullying, inappropriate content exposure, and privacy invasions. This comprehensive approach aims to ensure that while children can explore the benefits of digital connectivity, they remain shielded from its darker aspects.

As parents, educators, and guardians, our role is pivotal in guiding pre-teens through their social media journey safely. This involves open discussions about online safety, setting practical boundaries around screen time, and fostering an environment where children feel comfortable sharing their online experiences. By staying informed about the latest trends and potential online hazards, we can better equip our youth to navigate social media wisely, ensuring their digital experiences are positive and enriching. Together, we can create a safer online world for our pre-teens, empowering them to use social media responsibly and with a clear understanding of its impact.

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