



BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract

Young people in care benefit from the psychological, emotional and social support gained via social media networks - according to new research from the University of East Anglia's Centre for Research on the Child and Family (CRCF). Until now, the automatic assumption has been that platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp only pose a risk for this vulnerable group. But social media can help young people living in state care maintain healthy and appropriate birth family relationships and friendships, make new connections and ease transitions between placements and into adult independence. Researchers investigated how young people living in state care can benefit from social media use.

Benefits of social media

Support network

Having positive online networks helped young people in care gain 'social capital'. Digital networks were found to help bond a fragmented social life and act as a bridge beyond the immediate care-home environment. "Having a strong social support network helps with the physical and psychological isolation reported by young people in care," said Dr Hammond.

"We found that emotional support from people outside the care environment was very important. Keeping up to date with friends and, in some cases birth family members, about everyday life events really helped provide a sense of belonging and connectedness."

The study shows how platforms like Facebook can contribute to increased self-esteem and mental well-being, which is particularly helpful for young people in care who frequently report feeling worthless, depressed and isolated.

Dr Hammond said: "Stigma and shame are described by many young people in state care. We found that social media provides a window to life before being in care and a way of distancing themselves from it.

Avoiding homelessness

"The risk of homelessness is a problem for young people transitioning from state care but it's an area where using social media could help.

"If young people can reconnect with, create and maintain networks, they have a better chance of accessing supportive networks when it comes to things like finding accommodation."

Organisational support

Social media also gave young people the chance to network with organisations that could help them with opportunities for personal progression. However, they were not always keen to 'like' or 'follow' organisations that highlighted their experience of state care because it left them vulnerable to stigma.

"Communication via social media carries risks for all users. However, these risks do not stop their usage. Understandably, from the perspective of staff at residential care homes, there was a lot of concern about how best to monitor internet use but we need to be engaged in this digital space to help protect society's most vulnerable young people."

"A digital resilience informed approach, which recognizes digital vulnerabilities and seeks to empower the susceptible to navigate toxic elements of using digital and social media in the context of supportive relationships, enables social care professionals to support young people to engage in this digital space.

This is important as our research reveals that social networks need to be viewed as an important resource for psychosocial support and that the risks shift as young people mature and progress towards independence."

"Social work policy and practice needs to start to look at how connections created or maintained via social media can have benefits beyond the young peoples' time in care. This longer-term view is vital, as the outcomes for young people do not stop once they leave care.

"We are not advocating a social media free-for-all or presenting social media as a magic wand. But there are positive ways to encourage young people to engage."

Commenting on the new findings, NSPCC associate head of Child Safety Online, Andy Burrows, said: "At the NSPCC we know that the internet opens up the world for children and gives them a space to play, learn and connect.

"This valuable piece of work makes clear the benefits of social media for looked after children and we welcome this contribution to the understanding of the impact of online. However, social networking carries risks as well as benefits and there is a responsibility on social media sites to make their platforms safe for their young users, including looked after children who can often be particularly vulnerable, so that they are free to enjoy the online world."

Media benefits and child development

There are many negative messages about media, and how viewing and interacting with it might harm children. But children can also benefit from media. The benefits depend on how old children are, and what kind and quality of media they're using.

Young children

If your child is aged under two years, using media with an adult can help keep him connected with people he loves – for example, a fly-in fly-out parent. But if your child is aged under 18 months, he should use media only for video-chatting. If he's aged 18 months to 2 years, he should use media only when you or another adult can use it with him.

Older children and teenagers

If your child is older, carefully chosen TV programs, movies, apps and computer games can offer many developmental and social benefits. These can have more value through middle and later childhood. Also, social media can have social benefits for teenagers.

How media can benefit children

Younger children can get developmental benefits from using media. These benefits include:

- literacy skills – for example, children can start learning letters of the alphabet through programs like *Play School* and *Sesame Street*, or through educational computer games and apps like Teach Your Monster to Read
- numeracy skills – for example, children can start learning to count or identify shapes through programs like *Sesame Street* and *Play School*
- social skills – for example, children can start learning how to cooperate by watching TV programs and using computer games and apps that show helping behaviour. Examples include apps like Toca's Tea Party and websites like ABC for Kids.

For **older children**, the developmental benefits of media include:

- intellectual benefits – for example, children can develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills by playing computer games designed to develop these skills, or they can develop ethical thinking by comparing family values with values in fiction or documentaries
- educational benefits – for example, TV shows and movies based on books can encourage children to read
- social benefits – for example, joining online clubs can help children practise using social media safely, or playing computer games with friends and family can help them practise turn-taking and cooperation

- creative benefits – for example, children can develop skills in imagination, art, video-modelling, music and media by using software and apps like My Story or Bubl Draw, or they might be inspired to make something by a TV show.

For **teenagers** the benefits of media include opportunities to develop or explore:

- reading, writing and critical thinking skills – for example, by using blogs and chat rooms
- social connections – for example, by connecting with others on social media
- political and social awareness – for example, by watching news, current affairs and documentaries, or reading about issues online
- values – for example, by observing role models in the media
- new creative forms – for example, by learning to play the guitar using YouTube videos and a guitar tabs app
- support options – for example, by using peer-based or professional online counselling
- forms of self-expression – for example, by contributing to debates on websites or creating content like blogs or short videos.

Helping your child get media benefits

You can help your child get media benefits by being involved with your child and her use of media – for example, you can visit quality websites together, encourage your child to use educational software, and watch TV shows that offer extra learning opportunities.

When you're watching TV and movies together, try discussing how the plot works, how your child feels about what's happening, and what would happen in real life if you behaved badly or illegally.

You can also talk about how the people are actors, and how special effects make things seem to happen.

Deciding what media is 'good'

Deciding whether a TV program, movie, computer game, app or website is good quality can be tricky.

You can find out about classifications at Australian Classification. And you can use online reviews to help you decide whether a movie, app or game is high quality and whether it has educational benefits. You could try:

- our movie reviews
- Australian Council on Children and the Media – App reviews
- Common Sense Media.

Other parents and your child's teachers can also be a useful source of information about quality media that's good for children. Content with a **good story that doesn't depend on violence** for its entertainment value is always worth looking for. You can also look for TV programs and movies that **give your child the chance to find out about new things** like places, animals, people, ideas, issues and cultures she couldn't see or connect with otherwise. These can inspire her to try new activities and think about new ideas. This can be done through playing, creating something or finding out more about a topic. Movies or TV programs with **good role models** can also positively influence your child. Good role models are people or characters who are doing things or behaving in ways that you wouldn't mind your child copying, or that you'd like your child to copy.

Some movies and TV programs can expose your child to **diversity**, especially ethnic diversity, which is a good thing. Software, apps and websites that get children drawing pictures or making up stories or rhymes can **foster creativity**. For preschoolers especially, this can also be a way for them to express ideas and feelings. Computer games that give young children simple choices – choosing a character or finding a background for a picture – can also help your child make creative decisions. The more interactive computer games and websites are, the better they'll be at helping your child learn more effectively. Avatars and games can give older children and teenagers the opportunity to **develop identity** and empathy by letting them 'try on' different physical and psychological characteristics.

Spreading Kindness & Social Awareness

A teenager's desire to discover new information, explore new ideas, express themselves, and be interconnected has a profound impact on their social media engagement. They use various social networking sites, especially Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, as a way of giving voice to the voiceless. They can do this through starting awareness pages for minority groups, or advocating equal rights through posting or sharing supportive messages. Social media is a great platform upon which teenagers can begin to champion their own rights, and the rights of others. In fact, a report into youth mental health actively recommended use of "online initiatives to improve access, appeal, and affordability of mental health services", and collaborative online initiatives can play a major role in supporting children who are engaging in suicidal ideation.

Educational Benefits

Teenagers use social media platforms such as Facebook in order to complete collaborative assignments. It provides a space for them to share and discuss ideas, plan and delegate tasks, and upload and provide feedback on completed works. Also, social media itself can actually

be an educational resource - with social networking sites such as YouTube and Wikipedia being heavily referenced as a source of information. Finally, sites like YouTube have an endless supply of educational videos that help teenagers to develop or refine various skills, such as cooking, fixing household items, or speaking other languages. Some YouTube videos also provide objective overviews of important contemporary issues that can help teenagers to become engaged and make informed decisions.

Real World Skills

Through using social networking sites, teenagers learn to confidently interact in a range of different social contexts online, which is essential to their digital development. Engaging with different people in various different environments over the internet strengthens online proficiency and gives teenagers an understanding of appropriate digital discourse. During adolescence, children are being prepared for tertiary education and their eventual integration into the workforce, and this requires a strong understanding of responsible online behaviours and an ability to constructively contribute within a collaborative online space.

Enhancing Creativity

Social media refers to online services that enable users to connect with other users, and create and share content. One of the positive effects of social media on teenagers is that it encourages them to think outside of the box and exercise creativity in how they engage with their audience and friends. Furthermore, given that they make up the vast majority of people using social networking sites, teenagers are at the forefront of moulding the future of social media.

Confidence & Independence

Engaging on social networking sites can be a new adventure for young people. It is like exploring a new place where different skills are needed. Young people learn to mould their character to be more confident and independent in order to be heard or have a positive online presence. This eventually transfers to their daily lives.

Interconnectivity & Identity

Social media is capable of building and extending teenagers' personal and collective identities. During adolescence, teenagers have access to newfound independence, and begin to form and experiment with new identities. Social media provides them with the necessary freedom to self-discover through trial and error. In the online world, teenagers feel safe seeking support for issues they wouldn't otherwise feel comfortable discussing, such as mental health, sexuality, and reproductive health. Today's youth rely on social media in order to raise and spread awareness, share in their experiences, and combat stigma. Teenagers who

are able to be vulnerable online can establish relationships that are based on mutual trust and empathy, which can have truly positive effects on their health and wellbeing.

Tolerance & Diversity

Social media not only allows but encourages teenagers to connect with other teenagers from different cultural, lingual, religious, and ethnic backgrounds - and explore a range of diverse ideas. This broadens teenagers' scope of reference and teaches them tolerance.

Since its inception, social media has been the topic of contentious debate. While its popularity and prevalence has only grown, many are still dubious about its overall value to society, and to young people in particular. Yet, for some reason, teenagers themselves are often left out of the conversation about the positive effects social media can have in their life. However, contrary to popular belief...

- Social media does not make all teenagers feel worse about their own lives
- The majority of teenagers do not feel pressured to post images or content on social media that makes their life look good to other people
- Most teenagers do see social media as a positive space that provides them with comfort and support

Social media is a space that's powered by people, and can, therefore, echo people's very best intentions, as well as their very worst; those who seek to hurt others are emboldened by the internet, yet the same can be said for those who seek only to help others. So, while there are risks associated with it, there are also numerous positive effects of social media on teenagers, and - with vigilant risk management and ongoing support and education - social media can be a fun, educational, and safe space for our children and teenagers.

CONCLUSION

Social media has become interwoven into the fabric of contemporary adolescence. Young people rely heavily on social media for communication, interaction, and the dissemination of information.

Use of social media amongst adolescent children is evolving at an unprecedented pace, and with potential implications for their wellbeing. To understand these implications, there needs to be wider collective awareness of the different types and uses of social networking sites, their impacts on the wellbeing of teenagers, and an understanding of the opportunities made available by them. While conversations surrounding social media and teenagers tend to veer into negative territory, it's also worthwhile considering the many positive effects of social media on teenagers.

- 68% of teenagers claim that social media provides them with support during difficult times
- 46% of teenage girls agree that social media empowers them to speak out about the things they care about
- 83% of teenagers say that social media makes them feel more connected to their friends

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