



ECHO

Environmental influences
on Child Health Outcomes

A program supported by the NIH

Study Summary

Strong Friendships Matter More than Time Spent on Social Media for Adolescent Mental Health, ECHO Study Finds

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Who sponsored this study?

The Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes (ECHO) Program, Office of the Director, National Institutes of Health supported this research.

Why was this study needed?

Teens spend a significant amount of time using social media, raising questions about how their digital and social experiences intersect. Recent concerns outlined by the U.S. [Surgeon General's Advisory](#) suggest potential negative influences of social media on youth mental health. A 2021 national survey of 8th and 10th graders, cited in the U.S. Surgeon General's report on social media and youth mental health, found that teens spent an average of 3.5 hours per day on social media. More recently, a [2023 Gallup survey](#) of 13- to 19-year-olds reported that the average had increased to 4.8 hours per day. While a large number of previous studies focus on negative mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety, ECHO researchers examined teen social media use in relation to both positive and negative mental health effects.

What were the study results?

High-quality peer relationships were the strongest predictor of teen well-being, regardless of social media use, with a magnitude nearly three times as large as the association between social media use and poor mental health. Teens who reported high quality peer relationships were more likely to experience positive mental health, while teens who reported poor quality relationships were more likely to report worse mental health, even at similar levels of social media use.

What was the study's impact?

The study highlights the importance of improving the quality of peer relationships rather than merely limiting social media use to enhance teens' mental health.

Who was involved?

The study included 963 teens aged 13 to 18 from three ECHO Cohort Study Sites across the United States.

What happened during the study?

Teens ages 13 to 18 reported how much time they spend on social media and whether they use it actively (like posting and commenting) or passively (like scrolling and browsing). Researchers used the PROMIS® assessment tools and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire to measure teens' mental well-being, including life satisfaction, sense of purpose, symptoms of depression, and the quality of their friendships.

Footnote: Results reported here are for a single study. Other or future studies may provide new information or different results. You should not make changes to your health without first consulting your healthcare professional.

What happens next?

Studying social media use and mental health over the course of adolescence could help researchers better understand how these factors influence each other throughout this sensitive stage of development. Future research could also focus on finding ways to strengthen peer relationships to support teens' mental health.

Where can I learn more?

Access the full journal article, titled “Adolescent social media use and mental health in the Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes (ECHO),” in the [Journal of Adolescent Health](#).

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