

The kids are(n't) alright

The role of social media in youth mental health

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Outline of Today's Presentation

1. What do YOU think about youth social media use?
2. Landscape of Social Media and Youth Mental Health
3. Opportunities for the ECHO Program
4. The Future GenerAtlon
5. Final Takeaways



Goal: Share the state of the science on youth media use and mental health and inspire future investigations that leverage ECHO's rich data to explore novel research questions spanning developmental stages, health outcomes, and clinical and non-clinical subgroup populations.

Audience Poll 1

What type of influence do you think social media has on kids and teens?

- A. Mostly negative
- B. Mostly positive
- C. Neither positive nor negative (neutral)
- D. It depends

What do US parents and kids think?

FIGURE 6. Percent of parents and youth who say the influence of social media is mostly positive or mostly negative



Figure reproduced from: Common Sense Media, The State of Kids and Families in America, 2025,¹ based on responses from nationally representative samples of 1,000 parents and 800 12-17yr olds.

Audience Poll 2

What would you rate as the biggest problem facing today's youth?*

- A. Bullying
- B. Child/teen mental health
- C. Cost of healthcare/health insurance
- D. Internet safety
- E. Obesity
- F. School violence
- G. Smoking/vaping
- H. Social media
- I. Too much screen time/use of devices
- J. Unhealthy diet

*Acknowledging this is not a comprehensive list!

What do US parents think?

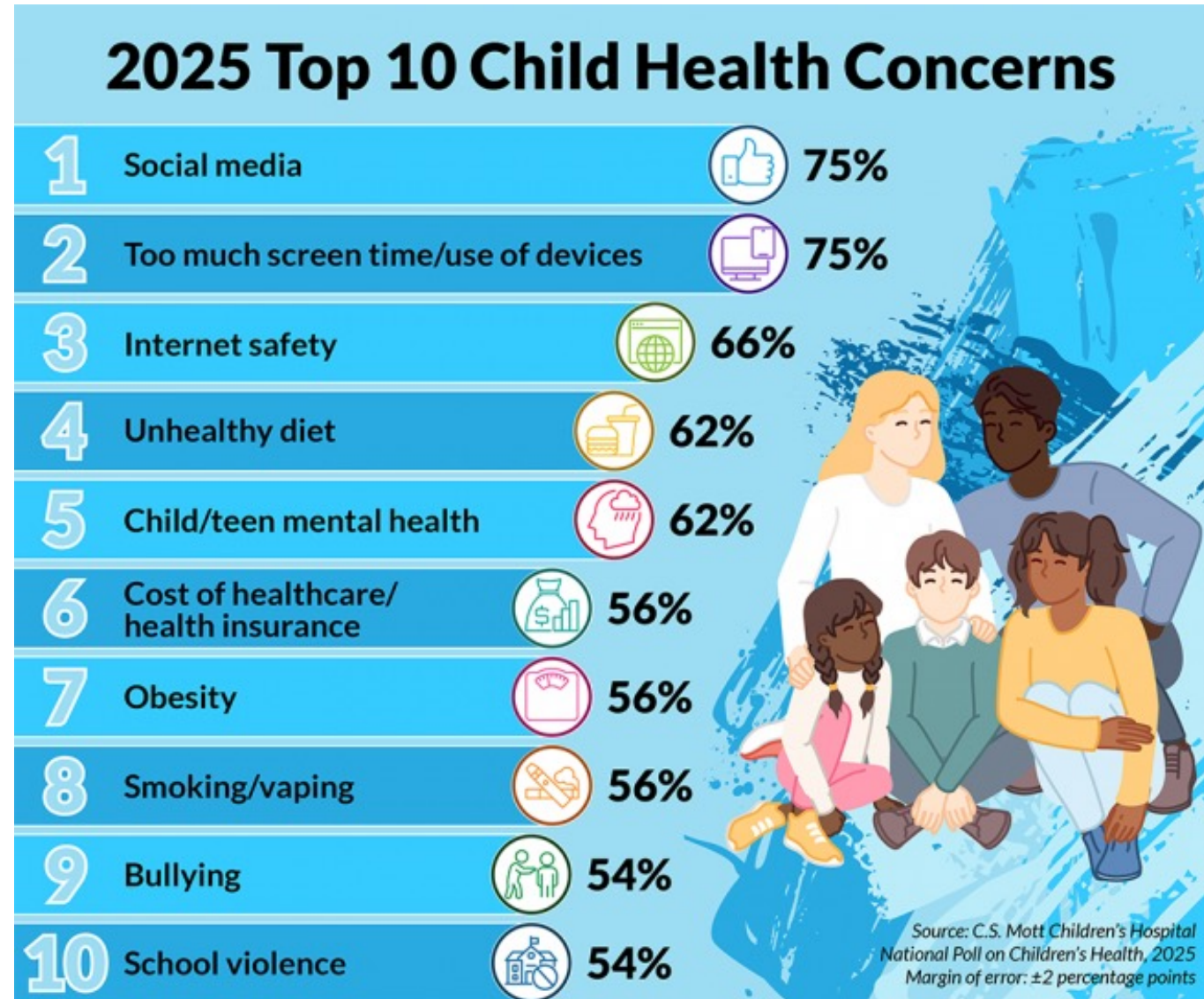
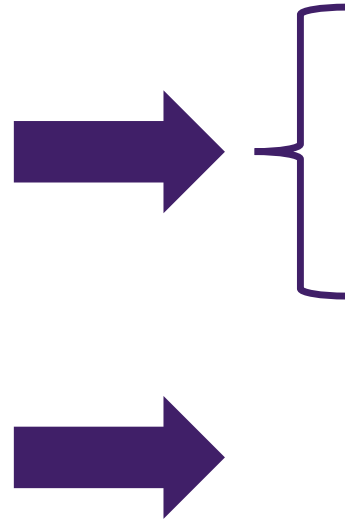


Figure reproduced from Woolford et al., 2025,² based on responses from a nationally representative sample of 2,021 US parents of 1-18 year olds.

Audience Poll 3

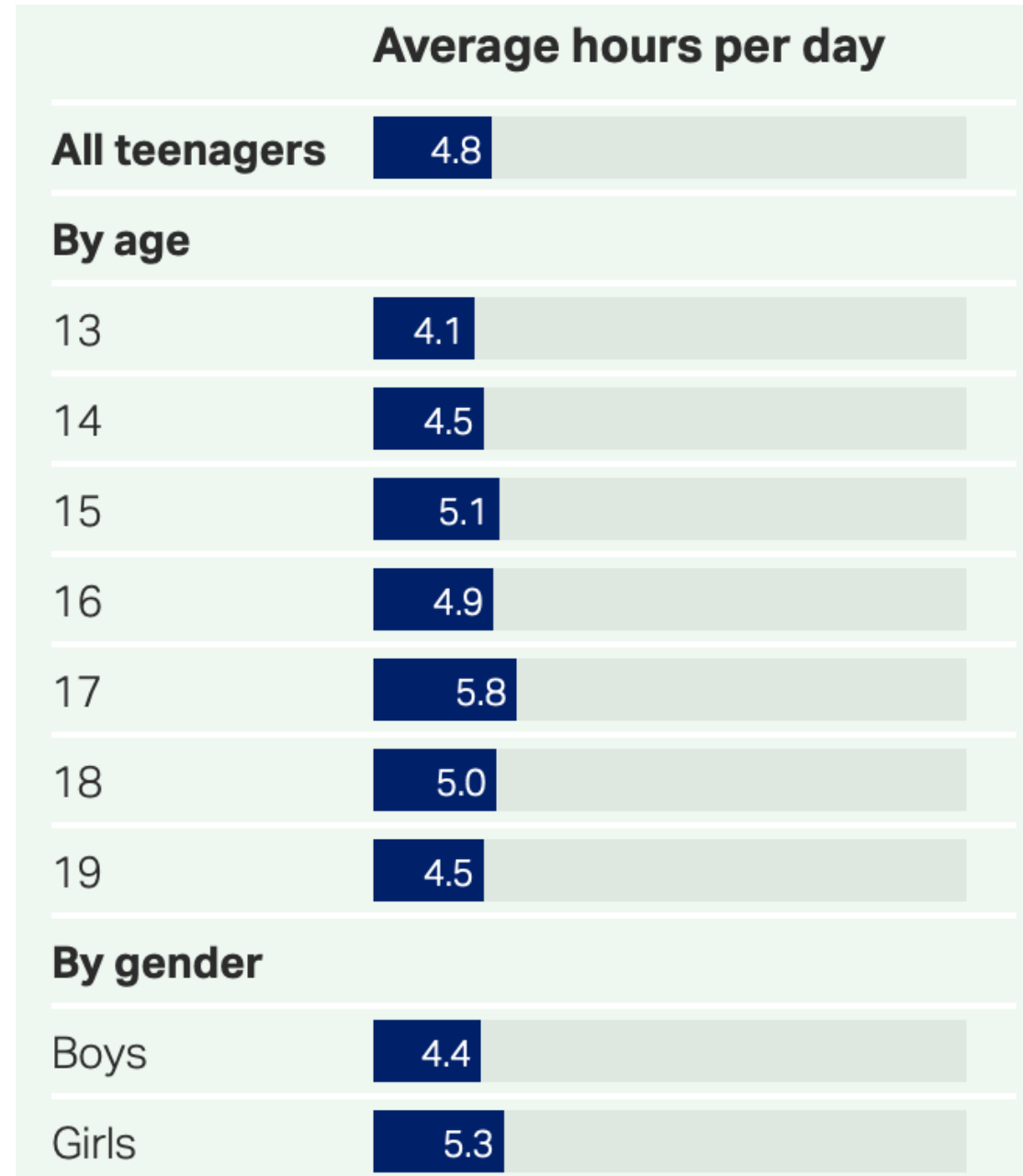
How much time per day do you think youth use social media?

- A. 1 hour or less/day
- B. 2-3 hours/day
- C. 4-5 hours/day
- D. 6-7 hours/day
- E. More than 7 hours/day

What do teens say?

On average, teens report spending **4.8 hours per day** on social media, with older teens and females spending more time than younger teens and males.

Figure reproduced from Gallup Familial and Adolescent Health Survey, Rothwell 2023,³ based on nationally representative sample of 1,567 teens.



Landscape of Social Media and Youth Mental Health

Local and National Policy



AP WORLD U.S. POLITICS SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT BUSINESS SCIENCE MORE

LIVE Minneapolis shooting 'Doomsday Clock' TikTok glitches Amazon Fresh, Amazon Go closures Neil Young's gift to Greenland

BUSINESS

States sue Meta claiming its social platforms are addictive and harm children's mental health

POLICY STATEMENT Organizational Principles to Guide and Define the Child Health Care System and/or Improve the Health of all Children

Digital Ecosystems, Children, and Adolescents: Policy Statement

Tiffany Munzer, MD, FAAP,¹ Joanna Parga-Belinkie, MD, FAAP,² Libby Matile Milkovich, MD, FAAP,³ Suzy Tomopoulos, MD, FAAP,⁴ Taiwo Ajumobi, DO,⁵ Corinn Cross, MD, FAAP,⁶ Roslyn Gerwin, DO,⁷ Sheri Madigan, PhD, R. Psych.^{8,9} and the Council on Communications and Media

American Academy of Pediatrics



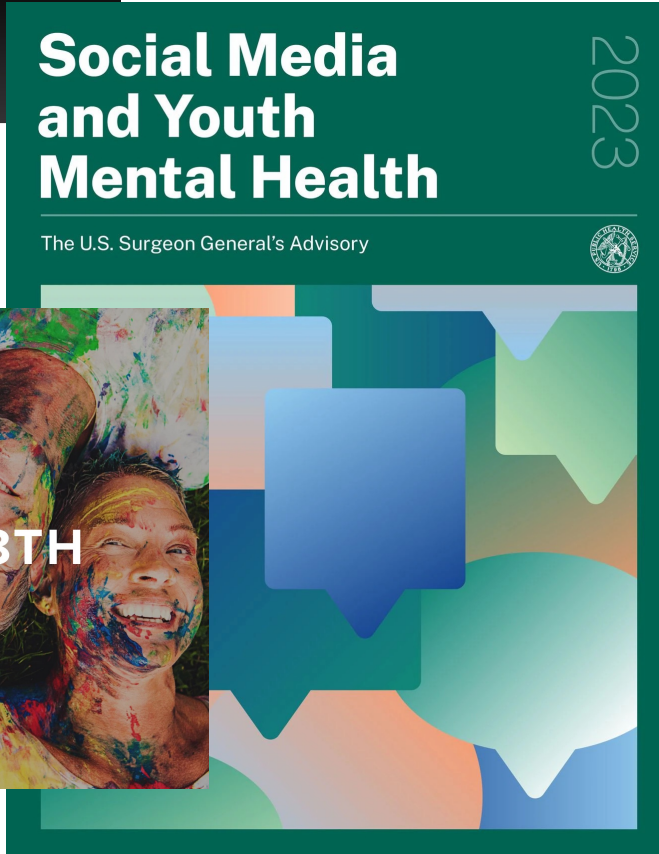
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Social Media and Adolescent Health

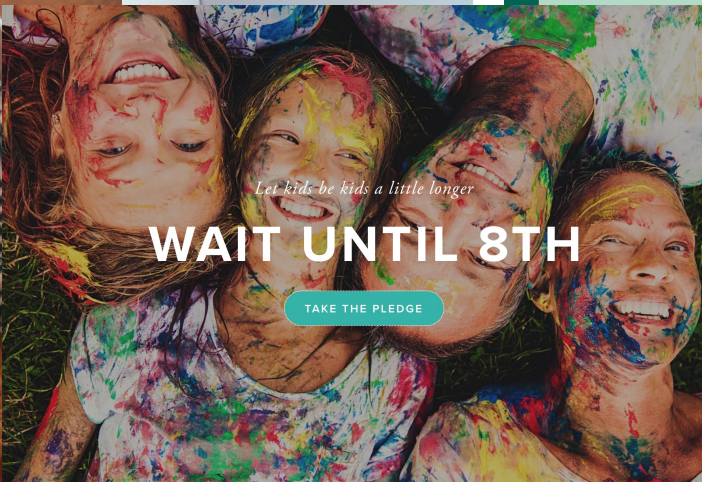
Consensus Study Report



Social Media and Youth Mental Health

2023


The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory



Let kids be kids a little longer

WAIT UNTIL 8TH

TAKE THE PLEDGE



NBC NEWS

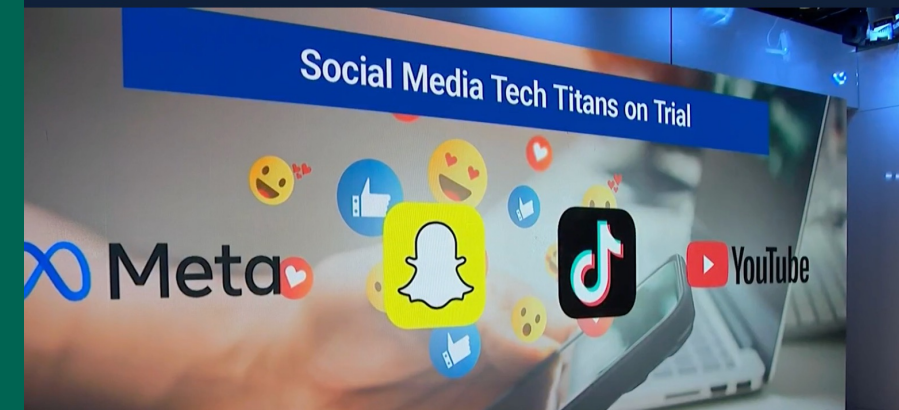
Suits head to a trial that could put CEOs on the stand

SHARE & SAVE

f X e ...

Landmark social media lawsuits head to a trial that could put CEOs on the stand

"We want these companies to be held accountable for the damage that they've done to individual people," a plaintiff's attorney said.



Social Media Tech Titans on Trial

Meta

YouTube

Logos for Meta, Snapchat, and TikTok are also visible.

Parallel Population-Level Trends

- Parallel rise of social media and youth mental health problems
- 20% of US 12-17yr olds have a diagnosed mental health condition⁴
- >90% use social media, and 46% are online “constantly”⁵

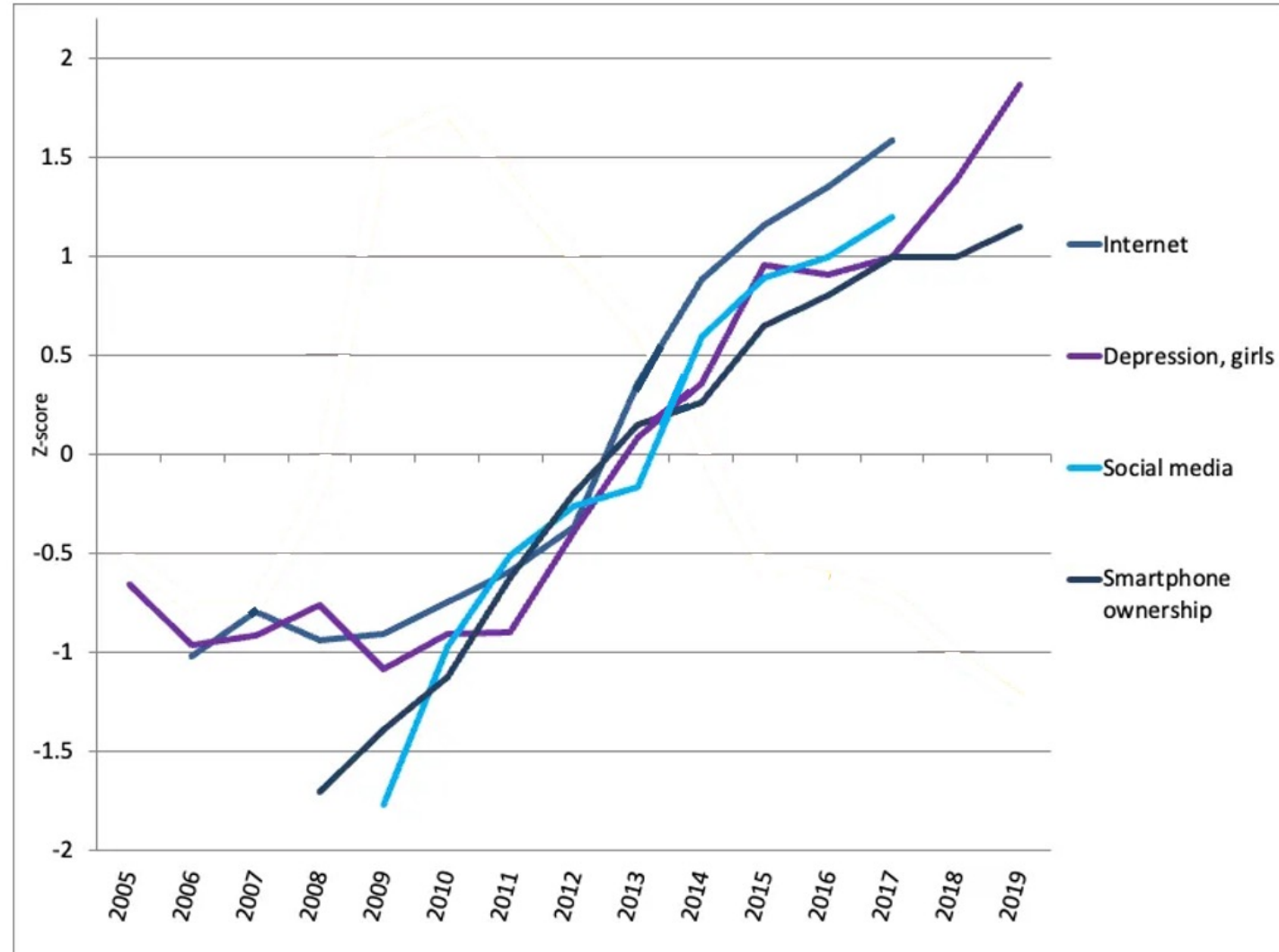


Figure modified and reproduced from in Twenge JM. Generations: the real differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—and what they mean for America's future. Simon and Schuster; 2023 Apr 25.⁶

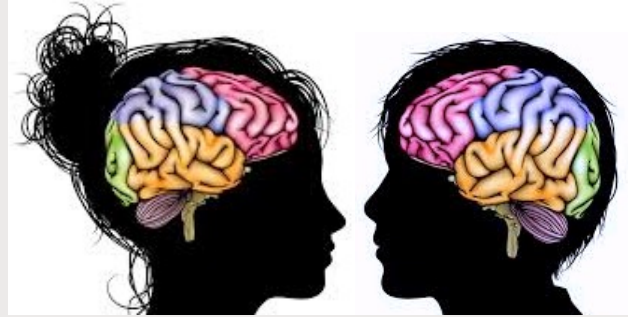
Developmental Context

Peak Onset for Mental Health Problems



- Common mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and eating disorders, occurs at 14-15yrs^{7,8}

Changes in Brain Structure and Function



- Heightened sensitivity to social rewards, such as attention and admiration from others^{9,10}
- Prefrontal cortex not fully formed, resulting in poorer judgement, lower emotion regulation at a time when emotion often guides media use and processing^{9,11, 12}

Autonomy & Identity



- Increased autonomy from parents¹³
- Developmental task of identity exploration and heightened reliance on feedback from others, focus on being liked and fitting in with peers¹³

Current State of the Research

“We do not yet have enough evidence to determine if social media is sufficiently safe for children and adolescents.”

- US Surgeon’s General Advisory, 2023¹⁴

“The Committee’s review of the literature did not support the conclusion that social media causes changes in adolescent health at the population level.”

- National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2024¹⁵

Inconsistent and Inconclusive Findings

“...most reviews interpreted the associations between social media use and mental health as ‘weak’ or ‘inconsistent,’ whereas a few qualified the same associations as ‘substantial’ and ‘deleterious.’”¹⁶

- Cross-sectional studies often find **small (0.05-0.17) negative associations**¹⁶⁻²⁰
- Some longitudinal studies replicate these findings, but others **do not**^{16,21,22,24}
- **Large heterogeneity** in findings across studies¹⁶⁻¹⁸
- Across studies, social media use **accounts for <1%** of the variation in adolescent mental health outcomes²³



Possible Explanations for Inconsistencies

1. Emphasis on time spent, not **how, why, or what**
2. Many do not include **important confounders**²³
3. Most focus on population-level averages without recognition for **differential susceptibilities**^{23,25,26}
4. Heterogeneity in **ages and developmental stages** across studies
5. Most assume unidirectional and linear relationships but could be **bidirectional and non-linear**^{21,22,24,27}



Opportunities for the ECHO Program

Initial Investigation

Journal of Adolescent Health 76 (2025) 647–656



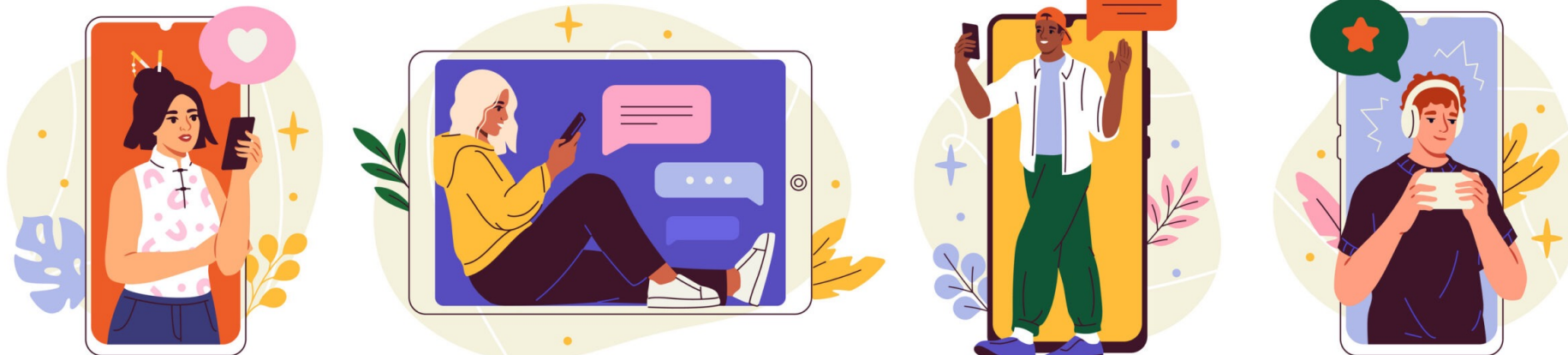
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Original article

Adolescent Social Media Use and Mental Health in the Environmental Influences on Child Health Outcomes Study



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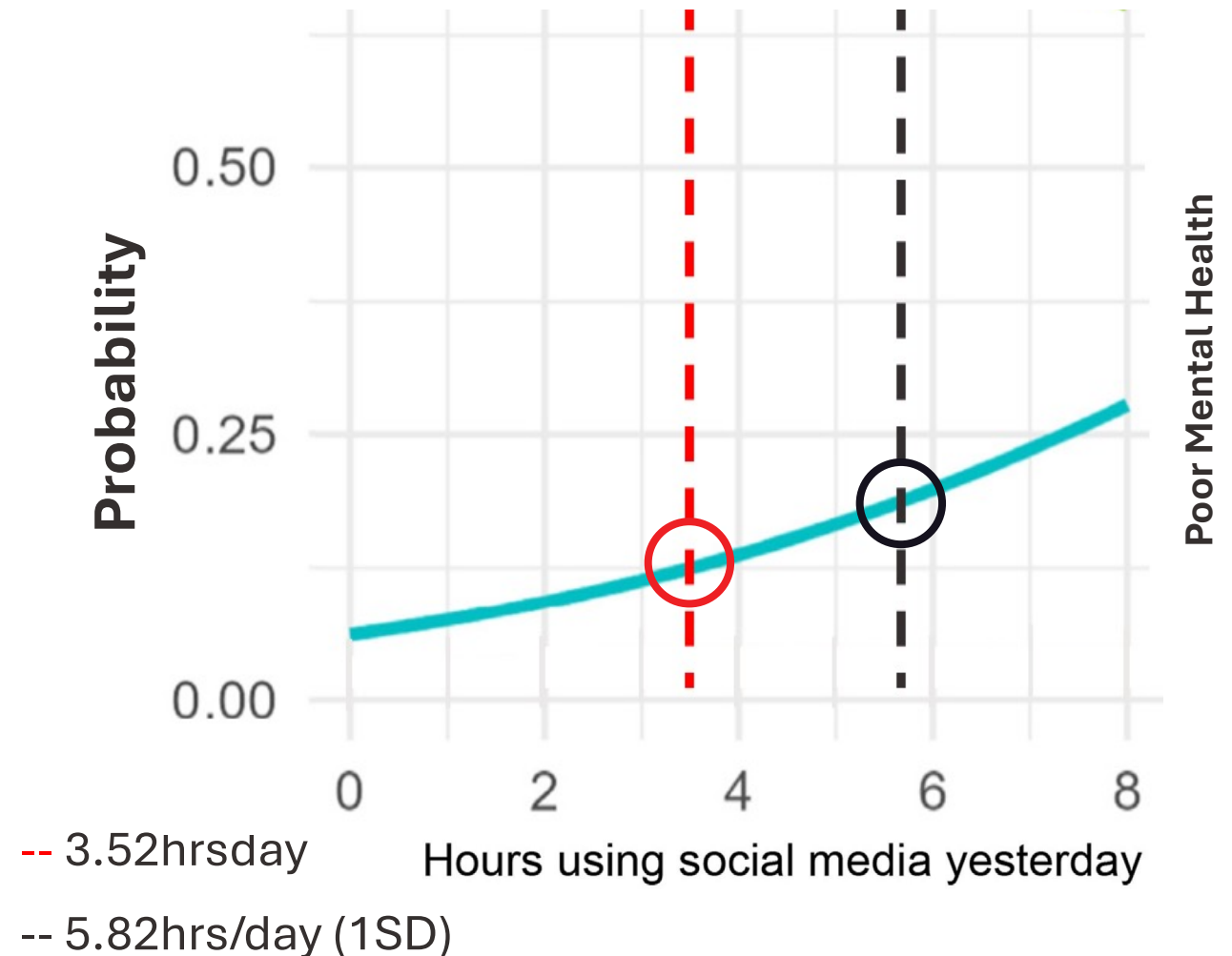


Blackwell et al., 2025²⁸

Key Findings: Weak Associations

Small, statistically significant association between **higher social media use and worse mental health** after adjusting for sociodemographic characteristics and peer relationships

- The “average” 13-18yr old participant (i.e., spent 3.52hrs/day on social media and had average quality peer relationships), had a 0.13 probability of having poor mental health
- Spending 5.82hrs/day (1 SD above average) increased the probability to 0.19



Key Findings: Peer Relationships Matter!

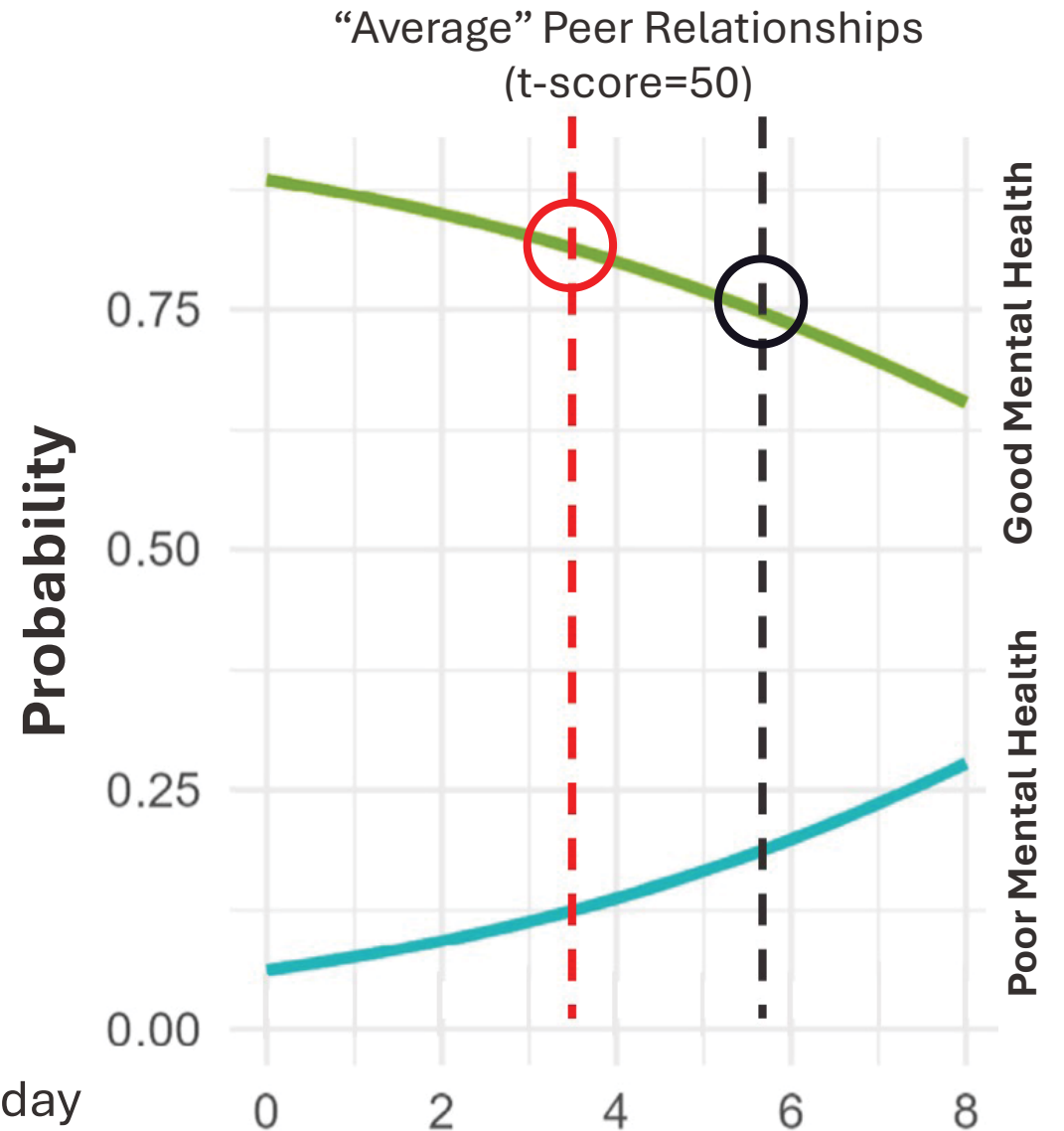
Peer relationships were the **strongest predictor** of well-being, *regardless of social media use*, with a magnitude **nearly 3 times as large** as the association between social media use and poor mental health

○ The “average” 13-18yr old participant had a 0.8 probability of having positive mental health

○ Spending 5.82hrs/day decreased the probability to 0.75

-- 3.52hrs/day

-- 5.82hrs/day (1SD)

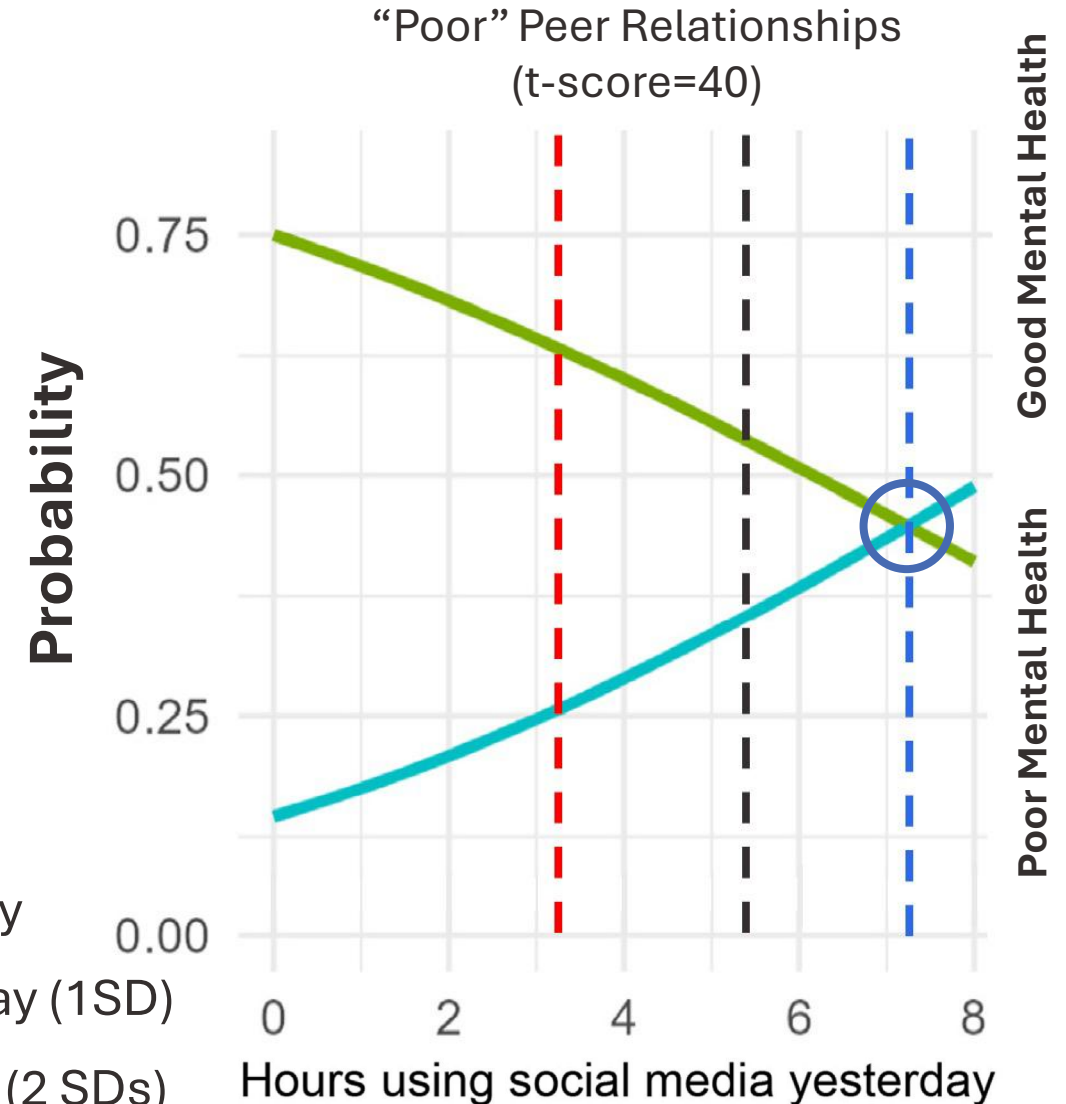


Key Findings: Peer Relationships Matter!

Associations were **most pronounced** for youth with **poor-quality peer relationships** and at **very high social media use**

○ Youth had a higher probability of poor mental health and lower probability of well-being if they spent >7hrs/day using social media and had poor peer relationships

- 3.52hrs/day
- 5.82hrs/day (1SD)
- 7+hrs/day (2 SDs)



Key Take Aways

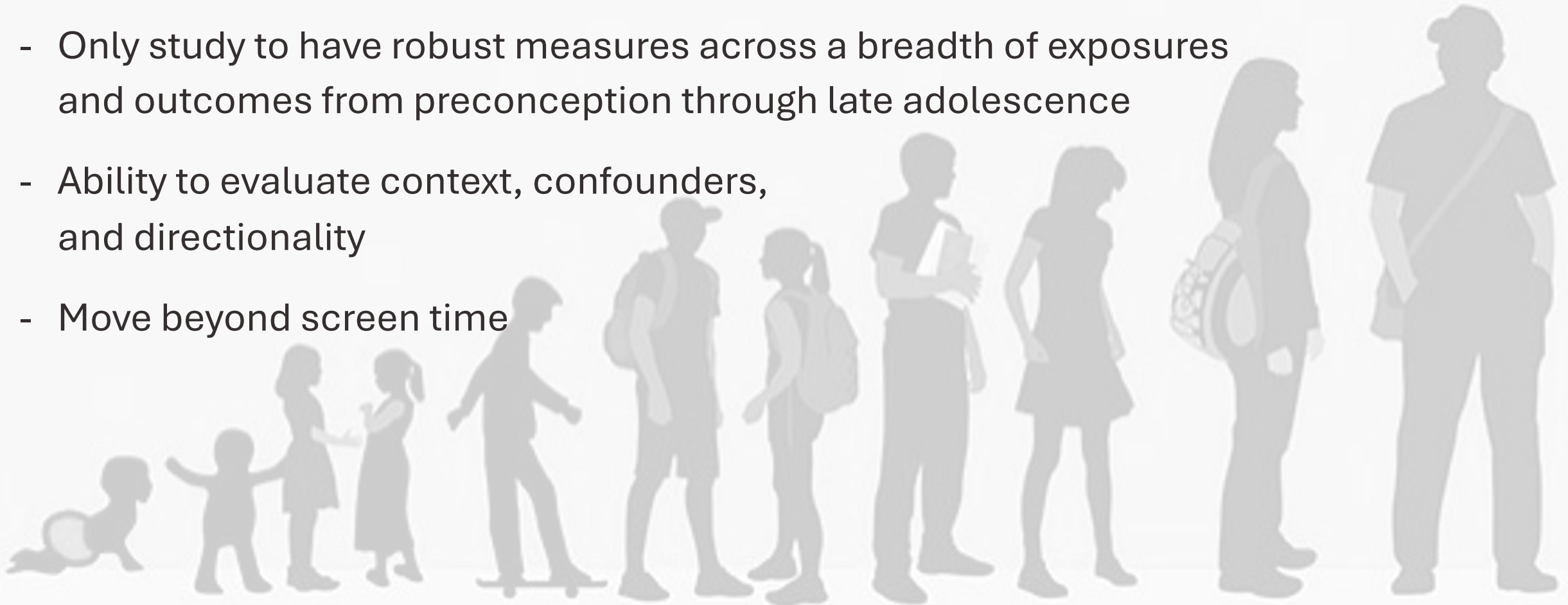
- Social media **is one possible contributing factor** to youth mental health, but not necessarily a large factor
- **Context** (e.g., peer relationships) matters!
- Limitations: cross-sectional; self-report; only time use



Future Opportunities with ECHO Data

Largest sample of children ages 0-20yrs with media use data, including growing longitudinal data

- Only study to have robust measures across a breadth of exposures and outcomes from preconception through late adolescence
- Ability to evaluate context, confounders, and directionality
- Move beyond screen time



Moving Beyond Screen Time

Richly characterized media use beyond time spent, including validated scales and harmonized data

- Younger children (0-7yrs): media content (e.g., educational, entertainment), joint media engagement, parental media use, media rules, problematic media use
- Older children and adolescence (8-20yrs): social media use, digital technology interactions and importance, media rules, problematic social media use, social media social support, online discrimination and bullying

How often do you use **screen media** (including mobile devices, streaming videos, video games, or TV shows)...

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
a. With the child?	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₄	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₅
b. To stop the child from moving around too much when too active or hyper?	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₄	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₅
c. To help the child learn or experience something new?	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₄	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₅
d. To keep the child occupied when in public (e.g., doctor's office, grocery store, restaurant)?	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₄	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₅
e. To help the child sleep?	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₄	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₅
f. To calm the child down when upset (crying, yelling, showing big emotions)?	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₄	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₅
g. To keep the child occupied when you need to get things done or need some time to yourself?	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₄	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₅
h. To prevent the child from getting overwhelmed or upset in a new or difficult situation?	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₄	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₅
i. To reward the child for good behavior?	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₄	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₅

People use social media for different reasons. How important, if at all, is it for you to use social media for the following purposes?

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
a. See what people are up to without asking them about it	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₄	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₅
b. Direct message, converse, chat, or talk back and forth with another person (one-on-one)	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₄	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₅
c. Video chat	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₄	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₅
d. Contribute to a private conversation (for example, messaging or in a private group)	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₄	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₅
e. Create a piece of content, such as a text, photo, video, or combination of texts, photos, and videos that will disappear or be impermanent (for example, a story)	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₁	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₂	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₃	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₄	<input type="checkbox"/> ₀₅

Considerations When Using ECHO Data

- **Relies on parent- and self-report questionnaire data**
 - Time estimates known to be inaccurate but still the standard for large scale data collection, with evidence for predictive validity and moderate correlations with objective measures³⁰
 - Enables collection of the “what” and the “why”
 - Objective data (e.g., background apps) have limitations too!
- **Limited longitudinal data (but more is coming!)**
 - Existing “pre-ECHO” data includes data from before 2010 when the iPad came out and before smartphones became ubiquitous
- **Changes to questionnaires overtime poses challenges for longitudinal data analysis**
 - Changes required to stay relevant
 - Better measures with validated scales collected from 2023+ will enable robust longitudinal analyses in the coming years

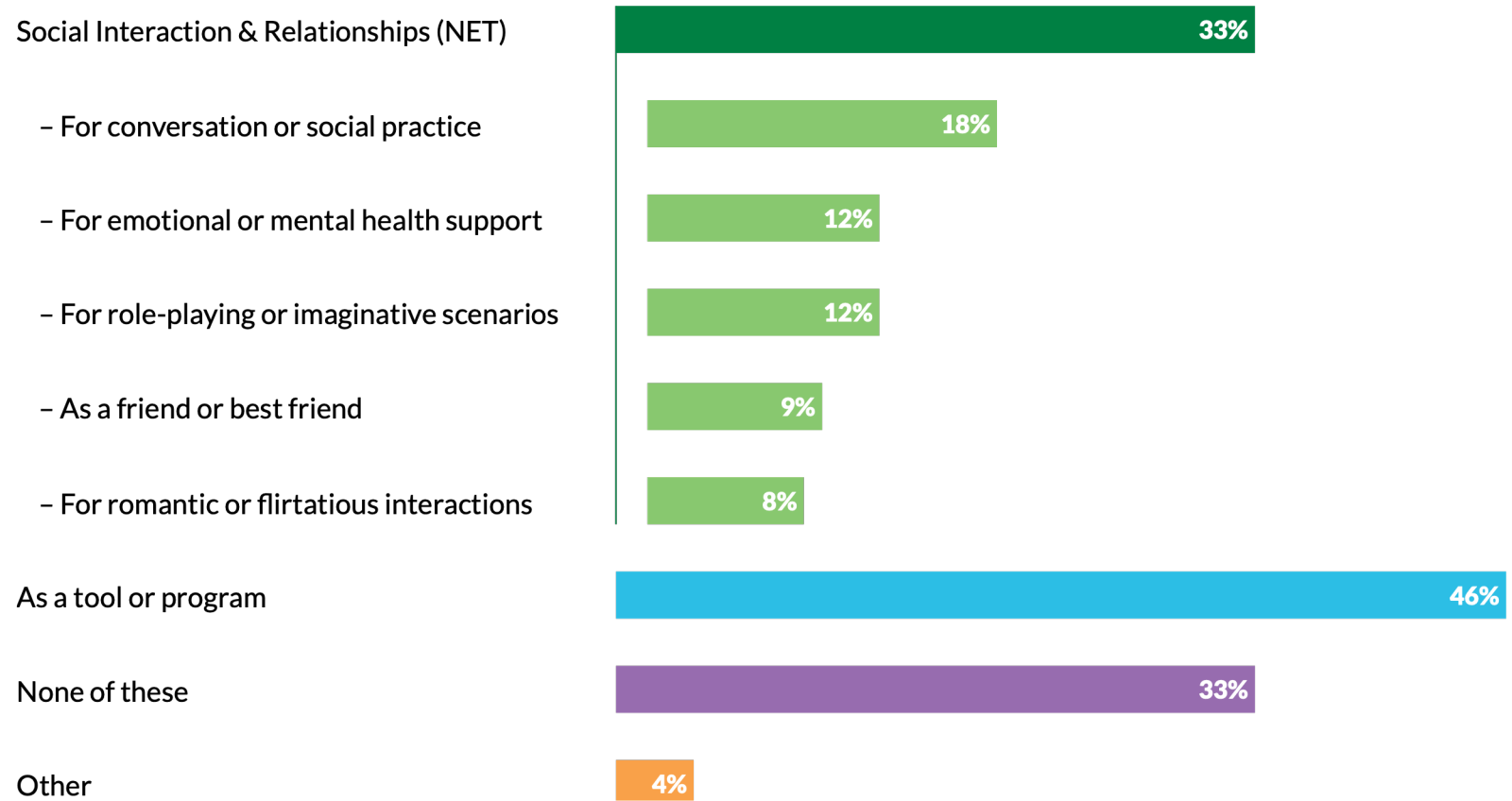
The Future Gener**At**ion

The Rise of Generative AI

- 65%-72% of US teens use AI^{33,34}
- 33% of US teens use AI for social interactions and relationships³⁵
- 30% of US teens use AI for school assignments, with nearly half doing so without teacher permission³⁴

Figure B: How teens use or view AI companions.

Base: All respondents (n=1,060) • Multiple responses allowed



Note: Q: Which of the following describes how you use or view AI companions?

Figure reproduced from Robb & Mann, 2025³⁵

Generative AI and Child Health

- 13% of US 12-21yr olds **use AI for mental health advice** and do so frequently, especially younger adolescents!³⁶
- Little to no research exists on the relationship between generative AI and child health³⁷

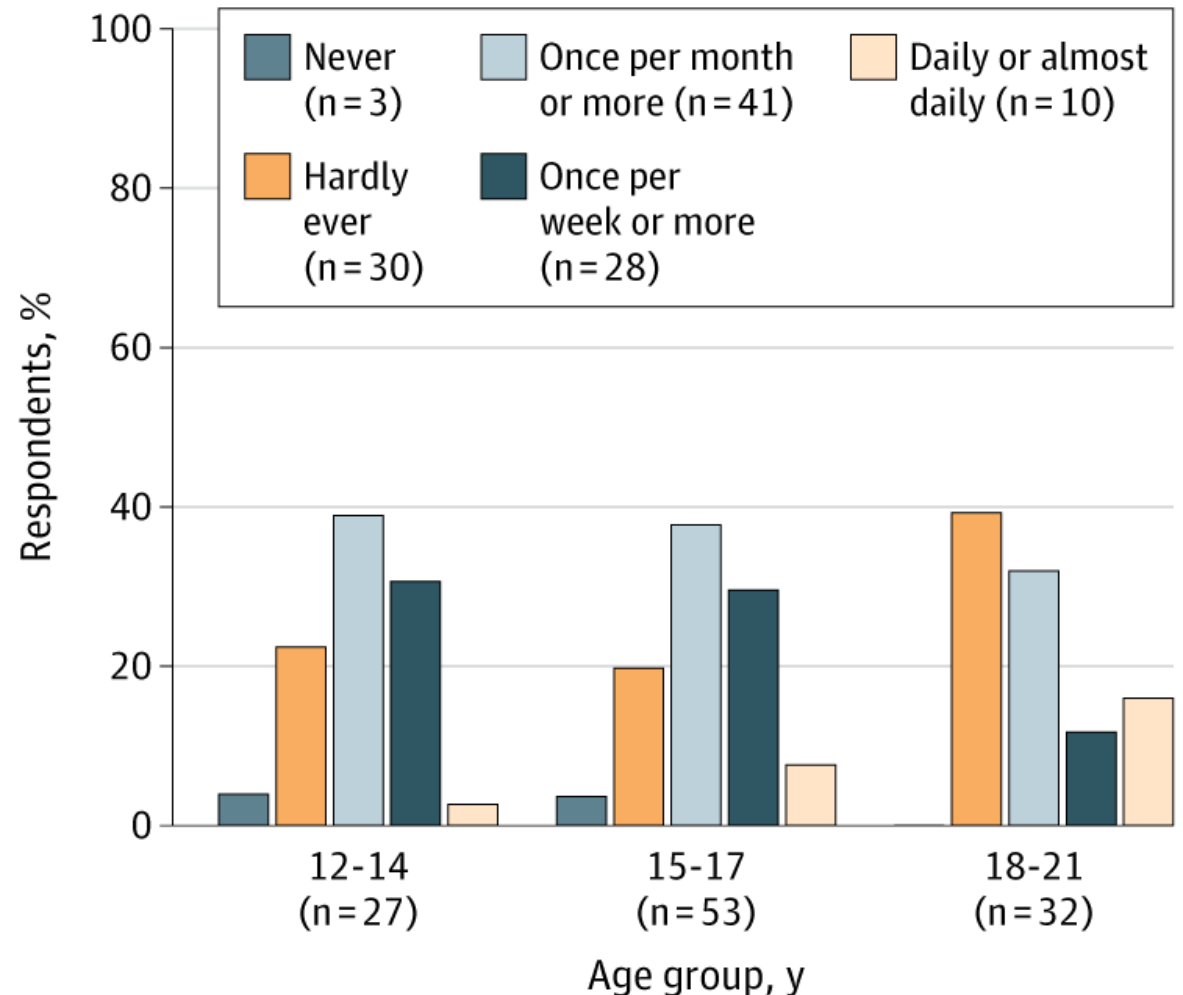


Figure reproduced from McBain et al., 2025³⁴

Maintaining Relevance in the AI Generation

For ECHO to stay relevant, consider asking questions about child AI use

Possible topics include:

- Frequency of use
- Reasons for use, e.g., social support, health information and advice, creative endeavors, schoolwork
- Reactions to use, e.g., cognitive, emotional, and excitative

	Possible Benefits	Possible Harms
Mental Health	Access support Mental health resources and information	Replace traditional therapy Inappropriate responses Miss/ignore red flags
Health Information	Easily accessible Synthesized	Risk inaccuracy Privacy concerns
Cognition	Perform tedious tasks Generate ideas	Cognitive offloading Decreased problem solving
Social Connection	Reduce loneliness 24/7 social support Practice social skills	Displace real human connection

VIEWPOINT

JAMA Pediatrics January 2026 Volume 180, Number 1

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND PEDIATRIC CARE

Adolescent Health and Generative AI—Risks and Benefits

Jason M. Nagata, MD, MSc; Zain Memon; Oliver Huang; Megan A. Moreno, MD, MEd, MPH

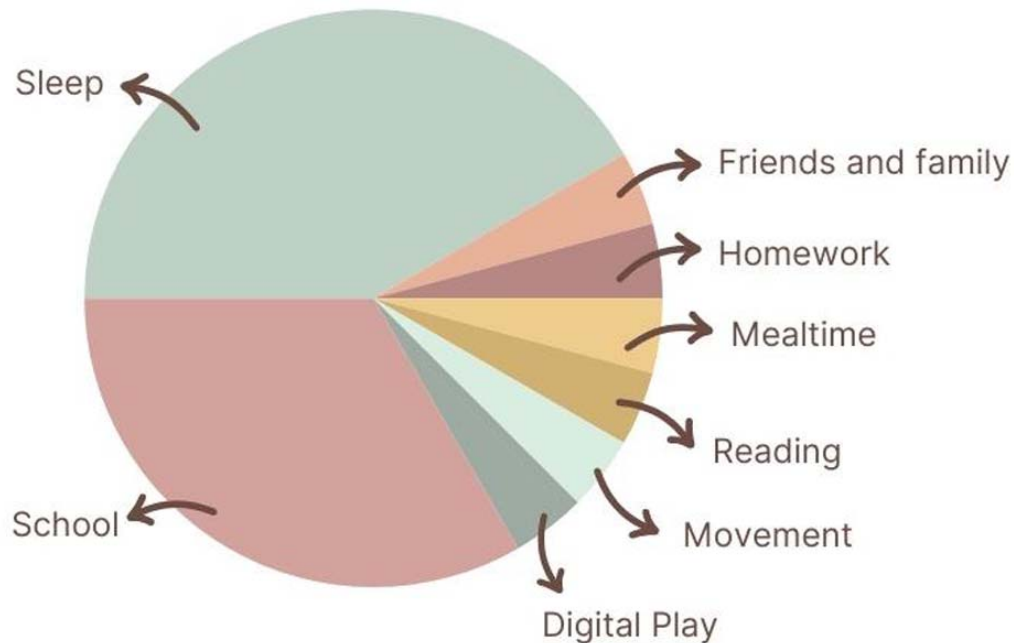
Table modified from Nagata et al., 2026³⁷

Final Thoughts

Media as Part of Everyday Life

Pie Chart of Play

Ensure ample opportunities for nourishing childhood activities first, then consider digital experiences



TECHNOLOGY AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH: QUESTIONS FOR FAMILIES TO CONSIDER

Time

- How much time is my child spending online? Is it taking away from healthy offline activities, such as exercising, seeing friends, reading, and sleeping?
- Are there healthy limits I can set on my child's use of technology, such as limiting screen time to specific times of the day or week, or limiting certain kinds of uses?

Content

- Am I aware of what devices and content my child has access to?
- Is my child getting something meaningful and constructive out of content they are looking at, creating, or sharing? How do I know?
- Are there healthier ways my child could engage online? (Examples: Finding meal recipes, researching options for a family outing, video chatting with a relative, etc.)
- Is being online riskier for my child than for some other children? For example, does my child have a mental health condition that might make them react more strongly to certain kinds of stressful or emotional content?

Impact

- How does my child feel about the time they spend online?
- Is my child engaging because they want to, or because they feel like they have to?
- How can I create space for open conversations with my child about their experiences online?
- How do I feel about my own use of technology? Can I be a better role model for my child?

Resources for the Real World

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Family Media Plan

Media is everywhere, and managing it all can be tough—especially with technology designed to keep kids and families scrolling and playing. Creating a Family Media Plan can help you and your children set media priorities that matter most to your family, in line with your values and routines. Come back to revise your plan as often as you need to, such as at the beginning of each school year or during summer and holiday breaks.

Here's how it works
Since media habits are different for every household, the AAP Family Media Plan can be customized to meet your family's needs. Make a full plan, or just choose a few parts that matter the most to your family.

The Family Media Plan includes:

- A list of media priorities to choose from
- Practical tips to help make the plan work
- Why it's important
- The ability to print or share your finished plan
- The option to save your plan and return as often as you'd like to make changes

To find this information in Spanish, [click here](#).

Continue 1 of 3 →

Create or Update **Movies TV Books Gaming Social Media Parents' Guides Tips & FAQs Celebrating Community**



Ratings and reviews parents trust



The 5 Cs of Media Use

YOUNG TEENS: 10-14 YEARS

CENTER OF EXCELLENCE Social Media and Youth Mental Health
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The early tween and teen years are a time of growing independence, changing bodies, exploring identity, and building a solid sense of self. During this phase, adolescents begin to place increased importance on relationships with peers, which can feel to parents like they are losing connection. Puberty brings changing bodies and strong emotions, comparisons with other kids, and trying to figure out who they are and where they fit. A central question for the early adolescent age range is "Am I normal?" This phase of development is also one in which adolescents can feel that they are "on stage" and that everyone is looking at them, so small social missteps either online or offline can feel devastating to them. It's an important time to establish regular conversations about their digital lives – who they are and what they interact with online.

ASK YOURSELF THE 5 Cs WHAT YOU CAN DO



5 Cs of Media Use Keep Me Updated Contact Us Request a Speaker Research Corner [Question & Answer Portal](#)

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The American Academy of Pediatrics **Center of Excellence (CoE) on Social Media and Youth Mental Health** is dedicated to creating a healthy digital ecosystem for children and adolescents.

This National Center will serve as a centralized, trusted source for evidence-based education and technical assistance to support the mental health of children and adolescents as they navigate social media.

Thank you

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