

Digital Media Use in Adolescence

What is the Digital Ecosystem? Digital media – television, the internet, social media, video games, and interactive assistants – forms the digital ecosystem (AAP, 2026). This January, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a policy statement related to digital media. The digital ecosystem has been a part of today's teenagers' lives since birth. This reality allows research and resulting understandings of impacts on adolescents.

Digital media & development in adolescence: Impacts are challenging related to the developing brain:

- Impulse control is still developing in adolescence (our frontal lobes aren't fully developed until our 20s) which can result in an inability to set limits with devices.
- As a result of cognitive development, adolescents engage in higher risk-taking behavior compared to other age groups. Applied to digital media, this can result in teens susceptible to oversharing information and accessing harmful content.
- Sleep is crucial for healthy development and digital media interferes with sleep - especially when used the hour before bed because it interferes with the body's natural production of melatonin.

When accessible during sleep, digital media commonly interrupts otherwise quality sleep.

These impacts help give context to positive correlations between time spent using digital media and reports of mental health challenges (both increase together).

What does digital media replace? While digital media can provide connections, teens using it means something else is not taking place - in person connection, time with family, physical activity, time outdoors, etc. Engagement in life results in connection and happiness while disengagement through digital media can result in feelings of isolation and loneliness- especially when harmful content is accessed.

What can parents do to help? While teens report knowing too much digital media use has negative impacts, this does not equate to an ability to set limits. Parents should talk with their teens about safety and set limits for use of digital media. They can model healthy use of and breaks from digital media. That said, in their policy statement, the American Academy of Pediatrics shares that digital media use can no longer be simply/solely viewed as screentime needing to be limited. Today's digital ecosystem is purposefully made for engagement (often in the form of encouraging endless scrolling) and commercialization (focusing on data collection and receiving revenue through ads) – it's a business. Digital media with these goals includes higher amounts of negative content compared to approaches that respect privacy and focus on developmentally appropriate content. The latter is unfortunately not as common in the current digital ecosystem. These unfolding understandings and knowledge can feel overwhelming for parents when combined with requests for digital media use at younger ages. Navigating its use is different than navigating other things in life as it doesn't come with safety tests or assurances or prohibit teens from accessing harmful content or oversharing information. As a resource and spring board to more information... the American Academy of Pediatrics suggests 5 C's when considering kids and digital media use ([How to Use the 5 C's of Media Guidance](#)).

I hope this information is helpful! It comes from a variety of sources (American Academy of Pediatrics, psychology today, National Institute of Health, and my experience teaching psychology, especially child and human development).

Sincerely,
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