



Mott Poll Report

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Sharing Too Soon? Children and Social Media Apps

Children 7-12 years of age often want to do the same things as teenagers, including using social media apps on their cell phones or tablets to share images and send messages. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children 7-12 years about their child's use of social media apps.

Parents describe different use of apps for older vs younger children. For children 10-12 years, 49% of parents report use of social media apps in the past 6 months, 28% educational apps only, and 23% no apps. For children 7-9 years, 32% of parents report use of social media apps, 50% educational apps only, and 18% no apps. One-third of parents (35%) say their child was taught in school about safe use of social media apps; these parents are more likely to say their child uses social media apps.

In deciding which apps are appropriate and safe for their child, parents consider if the app has parental controls (74%), is rated appropriate for their child's age group (64%) or is needed for school (63%). Most parents are currently using at least one parent control feature, such as parental block on certain sites (66%), parent approval for new contacts (60%), privacy settings (57%), daily time limit (56%), and passcode for certain content (51%).

One in six parents whose child uses social media apps (17%) are not using any parental controls. Parents of children using social media apps say they are not able to find the information they need to set up parental controls (21%), that it is too time-consuming to monitor their child's use of social media apps (39%), and that children find a way to get around parental controls (32%).

Overall, parent concerns about social media apps include their child sharing private information without realizing it (69%), encountering sexual predators (69%), seeing adult images or videos (64%), and not being able to tell what information is true vs false (63%). Among parents of children using social media apps, 47% are not confident their child would be able to tell if another app user was an adult or a kid; 31% are not confident that their child could recognize what information is true vs false on social media apps. Parents whose child has been taught about safe use of social media apps are more confident in both areas.

Parent challenges monitoring children's use of social media apps

Percent of parents of kids 7-12 reporting challenges



- 39% Too time-consuming to monitor use
- 21% Unable to find the info needed to set up parental controls
- 32% Children find ways to get around parental controls

Source: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 2021

Report Highlights

Parents say half of children 10-12 years and one-third of children 7-9 years use social media apps.

1 in 6 parents are not using any parental controls for their child's social media apps.

1 in 3 parents say their child has been taught in school about safe use of social media apps.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in June 2021 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 3-18 years living in their household (n=2,019). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 56% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 1,030 parents with at least one child age 7-12. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±3 to 5 percentage points.

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics, and the University of Michigan Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Center.

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C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health

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Implications

Many parents give their child a cell phone to stay in contact, or a tablet to use for games, entertainment or schoolwork. According to parents in this Mott Poll, half of children 10-12 years and one-third of children 7-9 years are using their devices to engage with others on social media apps. This may include modified versions of apps popular with teens, such as Facebook's Messenger Kids or TikTok's "younger user" section. Other apps, designed specifically for pre-teens, try to limit the online risks by restricting certain activities (e.g., posting photos or using private chats) and offering dashboards or reports for parents to monitor their child's use of the app.

Two-thirds of parents expressed concerns about their child sharing private information through apps. The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) addresses this issue by requiring the operators of apps and other online services to provide parental control over release of private information. However, only 56% of parents reported using privacy settings that limit the collection of data through children's apps.

Another parental concern pertains to their child encountering adult images or content on apps. In deciding whether to let their child use an app, parents may investigate whether the content is curated to allow only youth-friendly programming or whether there is a moderator that weeds out inappropriate content. Parents also should utilize parental blocks or passcodes for certain sites or content.

Parents also expressed concern that their child may encounter adult predators through social media apps. It is difficult to recognize an adult masquerading as a kid on social media. In this poll, half of parents thought their child would be unable to spot an adult user, yet only 60% were requiring their child to get parent approval for new contacts on social media apps.

Among parents of children using social media apps, 1 in 6 are not using any parental control features. Parents offered a variety of reasons including inability or time required to find the information to set up the controls and feeling that it's a waste of time since children can find a way around the parental control. If parents are allowing younger children to engage in social media, they should take responsibility for making the child's online environment as safe as possible, however inconvenient.

Parental controls are only one component of guiding children toward safe use of social media apps. It can be helpful for parents to engage with their child to learn more about their app use. This may include having their child explain how an app works, show them content that is interesting or funny, and identify other users sending them messages. Parents will want to periodically check their child's profiles and posts to get a sense of how their child is interacting with other users.

There is no simple control feature to help children distinguish what is true vs false on their apps. One strategy is to encourage children to rely on sites or information sources recommended by the school; educational apps are helpful in this regard. More challenging for many parents is helping children recognize altered images and videos. The risks in this area are that repeated viewing of altered images may lead to distorted perceptions of body image, while altered videos may prompt children to try to replicate a dangerous action. Recognizing disinformation and altered images is challenging for most adults; it is important to have ongoing conversation with young children about what they read and see on social media apps.

Schools can be a key partner in promoting safe use of social media apps for children. Schools may identify educational apps and sites with appropriate content for grade-level assignments. Some schools offer age-appropriate instruction for students in the safe use of social media apps; this may include training on protecting personal information, recognizing fake images or information, and how to report inappropriate behavior on social media. Finally, schools can offer special programs for parents that explain privacy features and provide hands-on instruction in setting up parental controls.