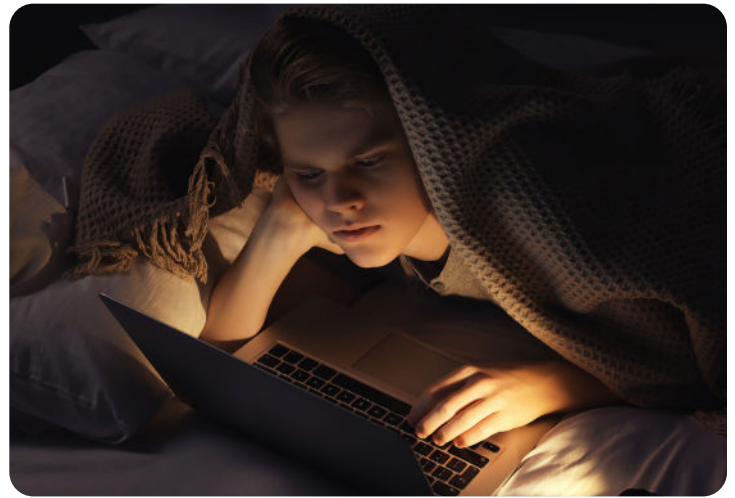


Harmful Algorithms

Social media products are designed to maximize profit by maximizing user engagement. Hateful, sensational, violent, and sexual content get high levels of engagement and often show up in teens' feeds even when they aren't looking for it.

Algorithm: A set of rules that platforms use to decide what content to feed their users (to learn more about manipulative design, see our [Screen Overuse page](#)).



▶ How Harmful Algorithms Exploit Youth Vulnerabilities

Digital media overuse: According to the American Psychiatric Association, excessive and compulsive use of the internet or online activities can lead to negative consequences in an individual's life. Algorithms incorporate a user's behavior to exploit teens' reward systems. This triggers the release of the pleasure hormone dopamine, which reinforces the behavior.

Mental health problems: Technology and social media use can negatively affect children's mental health.

Excessive screen time in youth has been associated with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety. Studies show the association goes both ways. (Lai et al, 2022)

Children with ADHD have a higher risk of developing technology addiction. Excessive screen time can exacerbate their symptoms such as increased impulsivity and inattention. (Wallace et al, 2023)

Tweens spend over 5 hours per day and teens spend over 8 hours per day on digital media, not including time they spend doing homework online.

— Common Sense Media, 2021

Approximately \$11 billion of ad revenue is generated annually on social media platforms based on the viewing habits of children ages 0-17.

— Raffoul et al., 2023-Plos One



64% of teens report seeing hate content online.

— Common Sense Media, 2018

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Online Harms Prevention Action Kit
fairplayforkids.org/onlineharmskit



▶ Tips for Protecting Your Child

- **Delay smartphones/social media** as long as possible.
- **It is an option to not to give your child an internet-connected device or social media.** Some families find this easier than policing time and content on devices. Text-and-call only phones are an alternative.
- **If you have already given your child/teen a smartphone, you can still transition back to a basic phone or no phone** (see tips [here](#)). If your child exhibits significant phone dependency,
 - seek support from a mental health professional. [Reset Your Child's Brain](#) outlines a detailed plan.
 - **Have a plan** with regular check-ins, open communication, and oversight when giving your child a smartphone or access to social media.
 - **Let your child know** they won't get in trouble if they come to you about something they saw or did online.
 - **Educate your child about how algorithms work** and how Big Tech uses manipulative design techniques.
- **Match time spent online with time spent doing offline activities.** Creative expression and time in nature can support emotional regulation and problem-solving.
- **Consider a family screen-free day once a week.** Look for signs of your child withdrawing into the virtual world.
- **Monitor the platforms your children use** and the prevalence of inappropriate content. Even “kids” sites are not necessarily safe.

▶ Start a Conversation

How do you feel when you go online? ”

Why do you think so many people spend more time online than they say they want to? ”

What else can you comment on other than someone's looks? ”

What can you do on a study break rather than jumping on digital media? ”

Do you feel anxious when you are not near your phone? If so, why do you think that is? ”

What do your friends watch, send you, or tag you in? ”

Do you feel pressured to watch what your friends watch? ”

▶ Take Action

- **Have active conversations** with your child about what they do online — be open and curious.
- **Consider coming up with a worry or sadness scale.** For example, on a scale of 1-10, how do you feel before/after being on your device? Using number scales makes it easier for children to communicate their emotions.
- **Co-use digital media together.** For example, watch YouTube or TikTok. Take advantage of teaching moments. Ask your child questions about what the algorithm is feeding them.
- **Use parental controls to monitor their usage.**
- **Practice technology stewardship** as a family:
 - Consider establishing “tech-free zones”
 - Choose one day a week to unplug together.
 - Encourage open conversation about the dangers of technology. Examples:
 - “My notifications are constantly trying to steal my attention.”
 - “I just read something online, but I want to double check and make sure it's true.”