

Why Social Media is Not Smart for Middle School Kids

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Tweens' brains are simply too immature to use social media appropriately.

Posted Mar 26, 2017 by Melanie Hempe, founder of [Families Managing Media](#).



I really love middle school kids. I have two of them! If you have been through middle-school parenting, you may have noticed what I see: Strange things seem to happen to a tween's brain the first day they walk into middle school. One might sum up their main goals in life this way:

- To be funny at all costs. (Hence, the silly bathroom jokes, talking at inappropriate times in class, and the “anything it takes to be popular” attitude.)
- To focus on SELF — their clothes, their nose, their body, and their hair.
- To try new things. They are playing “dress up” with their identity, trying on things

to see what fits. They are impulsive and scattered, they are up and they are down, and it even seems that they have regressed in their development on their quest for independence.

As the parent, you are changing, too, as you enter the stage of parenting when you quickly depart from the naïve platform of “My child would never...” to the realization that, “I’m sure my child did that. I’m sorry, and please excuse his behavior, he is going through a phase.”

Your list of daily parenting instruction may include statements like:

- "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all!"
- "How many times do I have to tell you not the use that word?"
- "Stop flipping that bottle!"
- "Stop burping the ABC's!"
- "You're acting like a 2-year-old."
- "What were you thinking?"

Then it happens: Maybe because we are exhausted from their constant begging for a phone, or because we think that all their friends have one, or because we want to upgrade ours to the latest model...we cave. We act on impulse. Our brain seems to regress like theirs, and we give them our old smartphone.

And with that *one little decision* comes the world of social media access—something we haven't thought about and something none of us is prepared for. Because the midbrain is reorganizing itself and risk-taking is high and impulse control is low, I can't imagine a worse time in a child's life to have access to social media than middle school. Here are just a few reasons why:

1. **Social media was not designed for them.** A tween's underdeveloped frontal cortex can't manage the distraction nor the temptations that come with social media use. While you start teaching responsible use of tech now, *know that you will not be able to teach the maturity that social media requires*. Like trying to make clothes fit that are way too big, they *will* use social media inappropriately until they are older and it fits them better.
2. **Social media is an entertainment technology.** It does not make your child smarter or more prepared for real life or a future job; nor is it necessary for healthy social development. It is pure entertainment attached to a marketing platform extracting bits and pieces of personal information and preferences from your child every time they use it, not to mention hours of their time and attention.
3. **A tween's “more is better” mentality is a dangerous match for social media.** Do they really have 1,456 friends? Do they really need to be on it nine hours a day? Social media allows (and encourages) them to overdo their friend connections like they tend to overdo other things in their lives.
4. **Social media is an addictive form of screen entertainment.** And, like [video game addiction](#), early use can set up future addiction patterns and habits.

5. **Social media replaces learning the hard social "work" of dealing face-to-face with peers**, a skill that they will need to practice to be successful in real life.
6. **Social media can cause teens to lose connection with family and instead view "friends" as their foundation.** Since the cognitive brain is still being formed, the need for your teen to be attached to your family is just as important now as when they were younger. Make sure that attachment is strong. While they need attachments to their friends, they need healthy family attachment more.
7. **Social media use represents lost potential for teens.** While one can argue that there are certain benefits of social media for teens, the costs are very high during the teen years when their brain development is operating at peak performance for learning new things. It is easy for teens to waste too much of their time and too much of their brain in a digital world. We know from many studies that it is nearly impossible for them to balance it all.

How Can Kids Slow Down?

First, we need to *slow down* and rethink what we are allowing our kids to do. We need to understand the world of social media and how teens use it differently from adults. Here are a few tips that work well for many parents.

1. **Delay access.** The longer parents delay access, the more time a child will have to mature so that he or she can use technology more wisely as a young adult. Delaying access also places a greater importance on developing personal authentic relationships first.
2. **Follow their accounts.** Social media privacy is a lie: Nothing is private in the digital world, and so it should not be private to parents. Make sure privacy settings are in place but know that those settings can give you a false sense of security. Encourage your teen to have private conversations in person or via a verbal phone call instead if they don't want you to read it on social media.
3. **Create family accounts.** Create family accounts instead of individual teen accounts. This allows kids to keep up with friends in a safer social media environment.
4. **Allow social media only on large screens.** Allow your teens to only use their social media accounts on home computers or laptops in plain view, this way they will use it less. When it is used on a small private phone screen they can put in their pocket there are more potential problems with reckless use. The more secret the access, the more potential for bad choices.
5. **Keep a sharp eye on the clock; they will not.** Do you know how much time your child spends on social media a day? Be aware of this, and reduce the amount of time your child is on social media across all platforms. The average teen spends nine hours a day connected to social media. Instead, set one time each day for three days a week for your child to check their social media. Do they benefit from more time than that?
6. **Plan face-to-face time with their friends.** Remember that they don't need 842 friends; four-to-six close friends are enough for healthy social development. Help them learn how to plan real, in-person, social get-togethers such as a leave-phones-at-the-door party, a home movie night, bowling, board games, cooking pizza, or hosting a bonfire. They crave these social gatherings so encourage them to invite friends over and help them (as needed) to organize the event.
7. **Spend more real non-tech time together.** Teens who are strongly attached to their parents and family show more overall happiness and success in life. They still need us now more than ever. It is easy to detach from them: Teens can be annoying! But attaching to family allows them to detach from the social media drama. Your child needs to feel like they can come home and leave the drama of their social world behind for a few hours. They want you to help them say no to social media and yes to more time with the family. They are craving those moments to disconnect, so make plans and encourage this at home.

Don't give that smartphone all the power in your home; help tweens choose healthier forms of entertainment. They have the rest of their life to be entertained by social media, but only a limited time with you.

For more help balancing social media use from Melanie Hempe of Families Managing Media go to www.FamiliesManagingMedia.com