2020

Parental Monitoring of Adolescent Social Media Use and Emotional Regulation

Ronde Walch
Brigham Young University, rondewalch@gmail.com

Alyssa Sabey
alyssapickering23@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/familyperspectives

Part of the Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation

Parental Monitoring of Adolescent Social Media Use and Emotional Regulation

Ronde Walch and Alyssa Sabey
Brigham Young University

Today's children have been described as "digital natives," raised amid advances in technology that allow them to use media anytime and anywhere. Parents may feel pressure to restrict their children's screen time as too much media usage frequently is associated with negative developmental outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and relational and physical aggression. However, studies suggest screen time restrictions alone could be inadequate as adolescents develop independence. Parent–child communication about media content helps children become "critical consumers of media" (Padilla–Walker, Coyne, & Collier, 2016) so they can develop skills to better evaluate content in the media. As adolescents develop these critical thinking skills, they become more capable of determining whether to discard or keep information being presented in media. Such skills can protect children from negative but compelling messages from media, increasing positive effects and decreasing long–term negative effects such as aggression, depression, and anxiety (Coyne, Padilla–Walker, Holmgren, & Stockdale, 2018b). Involved parents can use active media monitoring to assist their teen to have positive experiences with social media that can enhance adolescent development.

Half of all adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18 connect daily with friends and family on various social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Coyne et al., 2018b; Lenhart, Anderson, & Smith, 2015). Research has found that moderate social media use (30-60 minutes per day) is considered a normal part of adolescents' development as it helps them interact with friends, investigate their social environment, and establish their independence (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Holmgren, & Stockdale, 2018a; Coyne et al., 2018b; Lenhart et al., 2015). During mid-adolescence, children may use both social media and texting as a tool to augment and take part in social and emotional transitions, including making friends of the opposite sex, commencing romantic and sexual relationships, and increasing social status (Allen, Ryan, Gray, McInerney, & Waters, 2014; Coyne et al., 2018b; Lenhart et al., 2015). Adolescents can create, express, and affirm their social and sexual identities and be validated by peers on social networking sites (Allen et al., 2014). Additionally, social media can also be a vehicle for self-branding and a way to reframe stigmas that may be misunderstood by others (Allen et al., 2014; Blumberg, Rice, & Dickmeis, 2016).

Due to the integral nature of social media in the lives of adolescents, parents should seek to inform themselves about their teenager's digital habits. Because more than half of children's media exposure happens at home, should they choose to do so, parents have ample opportunity to monitor children's media use (Padilla-Walker, Coyne, Kroff, & Memmott-Elison, 2018). Although conventional wisdom suggests parental restriction of screen time alone is the most effective way to help adolescents avoid negative emotional outcomes from social media use, recent studies suggest that parent-child discussions of sensitive media content help adolescents develop self-regulation skills (Coyne et al., 2018a; Padilla-Walker et al., 2016). These studies also suggest such discussions play a significant role in positive outcomes in the emotional well-being of these adolescents, including their ability to navigate their social world, both online and off. When teens are given tools to enhance emotional regulation, they are more likely to develop the ability to govern themselves and may naturally reduce excessive social media use, lowering their risk of problematic behaviors. Parents who focus on positive ways to engage with their children, build relationships, and improve communication while navigating their social needs through social media increase positive adolescent outcomes (Coyne et al., 2014).

Media Use and Emotional Regulation

Studies suggest positive outcomes of social media use are associated with emotional regulation, or the way "we control, experience, and express our emotions as they unfold over a very brief period of time, usually on the order of a few seconds" (Blumberg, Rice, & Dickmeis, 2016 p. 107). Researchers have connected the ability to self-regulate emotions and behavior to those adolescents who are able to use social media and texting in moderation (Coyne et al., 2018a, b; James et al., 2017). In contrast, research suggests that high levels of media use during early adolescence is

associated with both physical and relational aggression, depression, and anxiety (Coyne et al., 2018a, b; Hormes, Kearns, & Timko, 2014; Lenhart et al., 2015). Additionally, adolescents who initially begin using social media moderately but then steadily increase their use to high levels in early adulthood may lack the ability to regulate emotionally and demonstrate the most negative outcomes, including physical and relational aggression, cyberbullying, delinquency, and depression (Coyne et al., 2018b). Due to indications that emotional dysregulation appears to be at the root of negative behavioral outcomes, research suggests that the development of emotion regulation skills could have a positive effect on adolescents' navigation of texting and social media (Coyne et al., 2018a, b) and internet use (Mo et al., 2018).

While the development of self-regulation appears to help adolescents use social media in moderation, studies suggest that poor emotional regulation skills are related to the onset of anxiety, depression, relational aggression, and internet addiction (Coyne et al., 2018a; Holmgren & Coyne, 2017; Mo et al., 2018). While adolescents may use social media to downregulate anxious or depressive emotions in times of stress or loneliness through their social media usage (Blumberg et al., 2016; Mo et al., 2018), they may also experience cyber-ostracism or cyberbullying, contextualized as exclusion from social sites through unfriending or being blocked (Allen et al., 2014; Coyne et al., 2018b). Even though these are digital actions, they are perceived to be just as hurtful and real as face-to-face ostracism, if not more so (Allen et al., 2014).

Additionally, establishing a social and sexual identity online can have significant consequences for adolescents who are still developing impulse control and emotion regulation as they are rendered vulnerable to online predators (Allen et al., 2014; Hormes et al., 2014; Lenhart et al., 2015). Similarly, it has been noted that adolescents who struggle with self-regulation may use social media to be relationally aggressive within a romantic relationship (Coyne et al., 2018b; Lenhart et al., 2015). Research has shown that once a relationship concludes, 15% to 22% of teens experience defamation and verbal abuse from their former partner through social media outlets (Lenhart et al., 2015). Social media may also be used as a crutch for adolescents to avoid meaningful, face-to-face opportunities that are necessary for the development of social skills, especially in those teenagers who would like to escape reality through inappropriate, addictive internet use (Hormes et al., 2014; James et al., 2017; Mo et al., 2018).

Since high levels of media use and lack of emotional regulation are associated with varying negative outcomes, researchers have suggested that both limiting the amount of time spent on media and discussing media content can aid development of self-regulation and avoid harmful social media usage (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Fraser, Fellows, & Day, 2014; Coyne et al., 2018a; Padilla-Walker et al., 2016). However, current studies are suggesting that parents are merely imposing screen time regulations without discussing appropriate consumption and usage (Padilla-Walker et al., 2016; Padilla-Walker, et al., 2018; Ruh Linder & Werner, 2012). While simply restricting the amount of time children spend on media is associated with lower levels of media use, research has shown that limiting screen time without proactive discussion could be inadequate and even harmful for the development of adolescent prosocial behavior (Padilla-Walker et al., 2018).

Restrictive Media Monitoring

In addition to merely limiting social media use, studies suggest that completely restricting social media use during adolescent years is not effective in promoting positive outcomes (Coyne et al., 2014; Padilla-Walker et al., 2016). While parents may view restrictive monitoring as an effective mechanism to help their child thrive in a digital society, adolescents may interpret their parent's actions negatively. Restrictive monitoring may make teenagers feel that their parent does not trust them to make good media choices or is acting in an unnecessarily controlling manner (Coyne et al., 2014; Padilla-Walker et al., 2016). While the former assumption could lead teenagers to view content unsupervised at a friend's home, the latter could inhibit their ability to learn to self-regulate (Padilla-Walker et al., 2016). Parents may need to realize that adolescents may adopt certain behavioral strategies independently, such as limiting the use of social media to fewer devices, thereby restricting the amount of information they have to consume (Hübner Barcelos, & Alberto Vargas Rossi, 2014). In addition, restrictive monitoring can cause adolescents to become rule-focused rather than growth-focused, to the detriment of their developing crucial emotional behavioral skills (Padilla-Walker et al., 2016). Thus, screen time restrictions alone could be inadequate and even harmful for the development of adolescent prosocial behavior during this critical time of their assertion of independence over their own actions, emotions, and value systems (Padilla-Walker et al., 2016; Padilla-Walker et al., 2018).

In contrast, proactive monitoring and appropriate discussion of social media usage can lead to positive emotional outcomes. For example, connecting and feeling validated about their own ideas and identity through social media usage helps prevent feelings of adolescent loneliness (Allen et al., 2014; Blumberg et al., 2016). Studies have demonstrated that adolescents who are allowed appropriate social media time to develop trust and mutual respect with

their friends online have a clearer understanding of their own identity and value systems and are consistent with this self-concept across different social media networks (Allen et al., 2014; James et al., 2017). When children are focused on the parental restrictions of media rather than the growth that can be made through social media interactions, they may miss the opportunity to learn sympathetic social skills and appropriately engage in the online community around them.

Active Media Monitoring

In order to combat the potential negative outcomes discussed above, researchers suggest that the best way parents can help adolescents develop these emotional regulation skills is through parent-child discussions of sensitive topics that their teenagers may encounter in their media usage (Padilla-Walker et al., 2018). This parental monitoring style, referred to as active media monitoring, helps teens develop self-regulation. Parental attempts to teach and clarify values about social media usage rather than simply controlling the adolescent's habits promotes positive behavior rather than demanding a blind conformity to rules (Padilla-Walker et al., 2016). Active media monitoring helps teens develop internally regulated values and behavior and paves the way for open-style communication that can ultimately protect their children from the otherwise destructive subject matter that can be found on the internet (Padilla-Walker et al., 2016).

In this modern age, adolescents can connect with friends anytime and anywhere through texting and social media, frequently discussing almost any topic (Allen, 2014; Avalone, 2017). Some of these topics that adolescents discuss with their peers may warrant parental discussion including self-harm, eating disorders, teen pregnancy, under-age drinking, juvenile delinquency, and more. Parents may profitably choose to discuss these topics with their teenagers in a non-threatening manner, beginning a dialogue that encourages adolescents to express concerns to their parents about numerous issues and process their feelings, all of which encourages the inherent development of self-regulation (Padilla-Walker et al., 2016).

Additionally, parents may take advantage of the ideas and emotions adolescents may feel about a topic they have discovered on social media to broach topics they normally would avoid. For example, boys (who are often socialized to refrain from showing emotion) tend to be more open about topics while viewing media. Parents may use content viewed on social media as a springboard for discussions about sensitive topics with their sons. Parents should also discuss violent or other graphic media content and other serious issues with their adolescents in order to reduce harmful,

long-term effects (Coyne et al., 2014). Parent-child communication about media content helps children become "critical consumers of media" and can "inoculate" children from negative but compelling messages from media, increasing positive adolescent outcomes and decreasing negative effects such as aggression, depression, and anxiety (Padilla-Walker et al., 2016).

Even though social media use is often portrayed negatively, some studies indicate adolescents who have positive emotion regulation skills may use texting and social media in positive ways to create social connections (Coyne et al., 2014; Lenhart et al., 2015). For example, adolescents have a more positive perception of their own integration in social groups when they bond with friends in those groups and come to feel accepted and valued (Allen et al., 2014; Blumberg et al., 2016). Also, adolescents can use social media to keep up family traditions that foster and encourage feelings of belonging, security, and commitment (Coyne et al., 2014).

Additionally, adolescents who experience emotional or physical difficulties may use social media to connect with others or seek healing (Allen et al., 2014; James et al., 2017). In sum, casual social media exchanges with friends and family members can promote positive social connectedness through bonding and developing relationships in other social groups (Allen et al., 2014; Blumberg et al., 2016). Staying in touch fulfills the need to belong through expanding opportunities to develop and nurture new friendships and maintain established relationships (Allen et al., 2014; Blumberg et al., 2016; Coyne et al., 2018b). Parents can be effective advocates for these and other positive uses of social media.

Parent-child discussions surrounding social media content can also encourage the development of healthy relationships for those teens who may suffer with social anxiety. Adolescents who experience loneliness as a result of social anxiety may be more capable of fostering stronger friendships online because they do not need to interpret or create social cues that may complicate forming relationships during face-to-face interactions (Allen et al., 2014; Hormes et al., 2014). Adolescents may also seek help through online life coaches or mental health services in online communities that support healthy behaviors and habits (James et al., 2017). The social needs of adolescents motivate their emotional sharing; however, social problems may occur when adolescents have not acquired appropriate emotional regulation skills (Allen et al., 2014; Blumberg et al., 2016). Thus, active parental monitoring can help adolescents with social anxiety build emotional regulation skills to navigate their online and offline world.

Conclusion

When adolescents turn to social media to entertain, connect, nurture, validate, normalize, create, and interact, and do so with a foundation of emotion regulation, they have the potential for more positive outcomes. In contrast, when they have deficits in expressing or perceiving emotional feelings, they may have more negative outcomes. An adolescent's ability to self-regulate may act as a protective factor against the negative outcomes of problematic social media use (Holmgren & Coyne, 2017). When parents choose to restrict screen time alone, researchers suggest they may "hinder the development of self-regulation as parents take control of adolescent media intake and withhold opportunities for adolescents to become critics of their own media choices and to have their behavior internally regulated" (Padilla-Walker et al., 2016). Adolescents who use texting and social media in moderation tend to have greater abilities to regulate their emotions and fewer negative behavioral outcomes (Coyne et al., 2018a; Padilla-Walker et al., 2018). By contrast, poor self-regulation skills are associated with high levels of social media use and problematic behaviors such as higher levels of delinquency, anxiety, and depression (Coyne et. al., 2018a; Mo, Chan, Chan, & Lau, 2018).

In conclusion, families who focus on the positive ways to use media seem to function better as a family (Coyne et al., 2014). Parental discussion of media content with the intent to help children become critical consumers of media is indirectly associated with more prosocial behaviors and the development of self-regulation (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Fraser, Fellows, & Day, 2014; Coyne et al., 2018a; Padilla-Walker et al., 2016). Parents have the potential to use media in a positive way to engage with their children, build relationships, and improve communication, all of which are important elements for positive adolescent outcomes (Coyne et al., 2014; Padilla-Walker et al., 2016).

References

Allen, K. A., Ryan, T., Gray, D. L., McInerney, D. M., & Waters, L. (2014). Social media use and social connectedness in adolescents: The positives and the potential pitfalls. *The Australian Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, *31*(1), 18-31. doi:10.1017/edp.2014.2

Avalone, J. (2017). Exploring the relationship between adolescent social media behaviors and empathy. *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering*, *77*, 11BE.

Blumberg, F. C., Rice, J. L., & Dickmeis, A. (2016). Social media as a venue for emotion regulation among adolescents. *Emotions, Technology, and Social Media* (pp. 105-116). Elsevier Academic Press: San Diego, CA. doi:10.1016/b978-0-12-801857-6.00006-3

Coyne, S. M., Padilla-Walker, L., Fraser, A. M., Fellows, K., & Day, R. D. (2014). 'Media time = family time': Positive media use in families with adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *29*(5), 663-688. doi:10.1177/0743558414538316

Coyne, S. M., Padilla-Walker, L., & Holmgren, H. G. (2018). A six-year longitudinal study of texting trajectories during adolescence. *Child Development*, *89*(1), 58-65. doi:10.1111/cdev.12823 (a)

Coyne, S. M., Padilla-Walker, L., Holmgren, H. G., & Stockdale, L. A. (2018). Instagrowth: A longitudinal growth mixture model of social media time use across adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*. doi:10.1111/jora.12424 (b)

Holmgren, H. G., & Coyne, S. M. (2017). Can't stop scrolling!: Pathological use of social networking sites in emerging adulthood. *Addiction Research & Theory*, *25*(5), 375–382. doi:10.1080/16066359.2017.1294164

Hormes, J. M., Kearns, B., & Timko, C. A. (2014). Craving Facebook? Behavioral addiction to online social networking and its association with emotion regulation deficits. *Addiction*, *109*(12), 2079–2088. doi:10.1111/add.12713

Hübner Barcelos, R., & Alberto Vargas Rossi, C. (2014). Paradoxes and strategies of social media consumption among adolescents. *Young Consumers*, *15*(4), 275-295. http://doi.org/10.1108/YC-10-2013-00408

James, C., Davis, K., Charmaraman, L., Konrath, S., Slovak, P., Weinstein, E., & Yarosh, L. (2017). Digital life and youth well-being, social connectedness, empathy, and narcissism. *Pediatrics*, *140*(5), S75. doi:10.1542/peds.2016-1758F

Lenhart, A., Anderson, M., & Smith, A. (2015, October 1). Teens, technology and romantic relationships. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/10/01/teens-technology-and-romantic-relationships

Mo, P. K., Chan, V. W., Chan, S. W., & Lau, J. T. (2018). The role of social support on emotion dysregulation and Internet addiction among Chinese adolescents: A structural equation model. *Addictive Behaviors*, *82*, 86-93. doi:10.1016/j.addbeh.2018.01.027

Novak, J. R., Sandberg, J. G., Jeffrey, A. J., & Young-Davis, S. (2016). The impact of texting on perceptions of face-to-face communication in couples in different relationship stages. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, *15*(4), 274-294. doi:10.1080/15332691.2015.1062452

Padilla-Walker, L. M., Coyne, S. M., Kroff, S. L., & Memmott-Elison, M. K. (2018). The protective role of parental media monitoring style from early to late adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *47*(2), 445–459. doi:10.1007/s10964-017-0722-4

Padilla-Walker, L. M., Coyne, S. M., & Collier, K. M. (2016). Longitudinal relations between parental media monitoring and adolescent aggression, prosocial behavior, and externalizing problems. *Journal of Adolescence*, *46*, 86–97. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2015.11.002

Ruh Linder, J. & Werner, N. E. (2012). Relationally aggressive media exposure and children's normative beliefs: Does parental mediation matter? *Family Relations: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, *61*(3), 488–500. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2012.00707.x