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Is My Child Ready for Social Media? What Columbus Parents Need to Know

copbh.org/blog/kids-social-media-mental-health-columbus-ohio

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It's one of the most common conversations happening at dinner tables across Central Ohio right now: *When is my kid old enough for social media? And how much is too much?*

There's no easy answer — and anyone who tells you there is probably isn't accounting for your specific child. But the research is clear enough that every Columbus-area parent deserves to understand it before making the call.

The Kids Mental Health Foundation — the community education arm of Nationwide Children's Hospital — recently updated their comprehensive guide: **Kids and Social Media**. We're summarizing the key points here, because this is a topic that comes up constantly in our Westerville practice — and the science has real implications for children's mental health.

How much social media is actually healthy?

While social media can offer some benefits, research shows it can increase the risk of mental health concerns in children. The Foundation's age-by-age framework gives parents a useful starting point: infants should avoid screens entirely; preschoolers should have very limited, co-watched exposure; elementary-age children should have social media limited with ongoing

media literacy conversations; tweens should have access only after a careful readiness assessment; and teens still need active monitoring and ongoing conversation — not a free pass.

The threshold that parents should know: research shows that kids who spend more than three hours a day on social media face a higher risk of mental health concerns like anxiety and depression. The risks are even greater for children already diagnosed with ADHD, depression, anxiety, or eating disorders.

Four signs your child may be ready — and what to watch for.

The Foundation is clear that there are currently no universal guidelines indicating what age is safe for social media use — the decision depends on each child and their environment. That said, these are the signals that a child may be developmentally ready:

An open, trusting relationship with you. Your child comes to you for help when they have a problem, and you can depend on them to tell you the truth — both are good signs they'll keep you updated about what's happening in their social media spaces. If that trust isn't firmly in place yet, it's okay to wait.

Confidence in who they are. Social media opens the door to bullying and FOMO — fear of missing out. Children who care less about what peers think, know how to resist peer pressure, and can stand up for themselves and their friends are better positioned to handle it.

Consistent respect for family boundaries. If your child follows the rules of your household and steers clear of secretive behavior, they're more likely to do the same online. If they're not willing to agree to a social media plan, they may not be ready.

Online safety awareness. Children need to recognize when online behavior crosses a line — like being asked for contact information, photos, or to do something they wouldn't do in real life — and feel confident enough to push back and tell a trusted adult.

The real risks parents often underestimate.

Beyond screen time limits and age minimums, there are subtler risks in the Foundation's research that deserve more attention than they typically get:

Social media is deliberately designed to engage the brain's reward system — and brains that are still developing are at risk for lasting changes in how rewards are perceived and sought. This isn't a parenting failure. It's a product design feature that billion-dollar companies spend enormous resources perfecting. Your child's brain is the target.

Spending too much time on social media can also prevent children from developing the real-life interaction skills they'll need throughout their lives — things like reading body language, starting and maintaining conversations, and understanding social context. For children who are already navigating social anxiety or ADHD, this gap can widen quickly and quietly.

And then there's the permanence problem: social media posts and interactions never truly disappear — the mistakes children make as they grow and learn online don't go away either, and can affect peer relationships, mental health, and even future employment prospects.

Social media can also genuinely help — when used well.

To be fair to the full picture: social media can help children strengthen real-life relationships, explore their identity, pursue creative interests, and find community with peers who share their experiences — which can be especially valuable for teenagers who can't easily connect with similar peers in their immediate environment. Communities organized around shared identity, health challenges, or interests can be genuinely supportive spaces.

The goal isn't to eliminate social media. It's to introduce it intentionally, monitor it actively, and know your specific child well enough to recognize when it's helping versus when it's hurting.

When social media becomes part of a bigger mental health picture

For many of the families we see at COPBH, social media isn't the root problem — it's the amplifier. A child who is already managing anxiety may find that social comparison on Instagram makes it significantly worse. A child with ADHD may struggle with the dopamine loop of notifications and endless scrolling in ways that compound their existing attention challenges. A child who feels isolated at school may retreat into online relationships in ways that deepen, rather than resolve, their sense of disconnection.

If you've noticed your child's mood, sleep, or behavior shifting alongside their social media use, that's worth taking seriously — and it's worth talking to someone about.

At COPBH, our Westerville team specializes in anxiety, ADHD, OCD, and behavioral health in children and adolescents. We help families understand what's driving the patterns they're seeing, build practical strategies at home, and — when needed — provide evidence-based therapy that gets to the root of the problem, not just the screen time.

We currently have availability. If you've been waiting on a long list elsewhere, or aren't sure where to start, we'd encourage you to reach out.

Contact COPBH to schedule a consultation →

For the full Kids Mental Health Foundation resource — including age-by-age guidance, readiness checklists, and a Family Social Media Plan template — visit the original article at kidsmentalhealthfoundation.org.