



GROWING UP ONLINE

Findings and Recommendations from the New Jersey Commission on the Effects of Social Media Usage on Adolescents

September 2025

Executive Summary

Social media promised connection, creativity, and a new marketplace of ideas. For adolescents, the rise of smartphone platforms delivered that promise with an unprecedented intensity, offering new ways to build friendships, express themselves, and engage with the world.

But alongside those benefits came troubling realities: increasing generalized anxiety, depression, sleepless nights, fractured attention, social isolation and the often-unseen toll on family members trying to make sense of it all.

Recognizing the urgent need to better understand and address these dual realities, the State of New Jersey established the Commission on the Effects of Social Media Usage in Adolescents. The Commission's charge: to investigate the effects of social media on young people and to develop evidence-based recommendations for stakeholders at all levels.

The Commission's work draws from peer-reviewed research, international case studies, testimony from experts and parents, and original survey data from Rutgers University School of Communication and Information. The Rutgers team surveyed 923 parents and 202 adolescents across New Jersey, revealing what teens are doing online, how they feel about it, and how their families are responding.

The evidence is clear. While social media offers opportunities for connection and expression, it also poses serious risks, from cyberbullying and addictive use patterns to privacy threats, sleep disruption, and mental health decline. The following recommendations aim to mitigate harm, preserve benefits, and safeguard the well-being of New Jersey's youth.

25% of Adolescents Spend Over 2 Hours on Phones During the School Day

Christakis et al., 2025

Reveals a significant challenge for educators and raises questions about how this impacts focus, learning, and classroom engagement.

Adolescents Who Use Social Media for More Than 3 Hours Per Day Have Double the Risk of Depression and Anxiety

Riehm et al., 2019

Teens aged 12–15 who spend more than 3 hours daily on social media are twice as likely to experience symptoms of depression and anxiety compared to those who use it less. This finding emphasizes the importance of monitoring screen time to support adolescent mental health.

77% of High School Students Do Not Get Enough Sleep.

CDC's National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)

Chronic sleep deprivation interferes with neurological development & emotional stability. Excessive nighttime screen use is a key contributor.

Recommendations

A. For Policymakers

1. Encourage Federal lawmakers to support and pass the Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA 2.0) and the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA).
2. The New Jersey Legislature should pass legislation to address social media platform functions and features that may cause harm.
3. The New Jersey Legislature should pass legislation to require transparency and reporting from social media platforms.
4. The New Jersey Legislature should pass legislation to establish a public awareness campaign based on the findings of the Commission.
5. The New Jersey legislature should pass S1982 to prohibit social media companies from allowing New Jersey residents under 18 to create accounts without parental consent.

B. For Education & Community Organizations

6. School districts should adopt and implement policies on student cell phone use by instituting a bell-to-bell ban on the use of cell phones and social media in school.
7. The New Jersey Department of Education, in collaboration with all education associations, should review and revise the standards related to digital citizenship and information and media literacy to reflect the findings of the Commission.
8. The New Jersey Department of Education, in collaboration with all education associations, should increase awareness of the above academic standards and share resources with schools to support their implementation of these key skills.
9. School districts should continue to focus their efforts to provide students with instruction on digital citizenship and information on media literacy across grades and content areas.
10. Community organizations should promote resources to support teens' healthy use of social media and develop any supplemental resources that would be most helpful and relevant to their stakeholders (e.g., Managing Screen time for Neurodivergent Youth, Supporting Teen Volunteers to Appropriately Use Social Media).

C. For Healthcare Providers

11. Convey the importance of age-appropriate social media engagement and encourage parents to actively monitor and guide their children's online activity to help ensure safe and healthy digital experiences.
12. Routinely screen adolescents for signs of "problematic social media use" to identify potential risks and intervene early.

D. For Parents and Caregivers

13. Delay youth access to social media.
14. When teens gain access to social media, parents and caregivers should monitor their use and include limitations and boundaries relative to their teens' needs.

15. When teens gain access to social media, parents and caregivers should model healthy social media use and teach them how to be responsible social media users.

E. For Social Media Companies

16. Ensure each social media company's mission prioritizes the health and safety of teens in the design and development of the social media platform and all features.
17. Restrict access to social media platforms for any users younger than 16 years old.
18. Develop and continuously improve tools to foster safe and healthy online environments for teens that prevent cyberbullying, bias, discrimination, and child exploitation.
19. Provide information and resources to support parents and caregivers on how to navigate social media use with their children.
20. Assume responsibility for regularly conducting independent assessments of the impact of the social media platform's use on children and adolescents.

To view the full report prepared by the New Jersey Commission on the Effects of Social Media Usage on Adolescents, visit the New Jersey Department of Education's [Student Digital Wellness webpage](#).

