

SCROLLSAFE: SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

A GUIDE FOR MENTAL HEALTH CLINICIANS
WORKING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

FOR CLINICAL
MENTAL HEALTH
PROFESSIONALS
IN SECONDARY
SCHOOLS

This guide will help you:

- Understand how social media can impact a young person's mental health and wellbeing.
- Recognise the signs of problematic social media use.
- Identify practical strategies to support healthy social media use, from whole-school mental health promotion to one-on-one counselling.



Social media and youth mental health

Social media is a big part of everyone's life – it provides a place for connection, creativity, and access to information. Many young people will find a sense of community and belonging in the online world, connecting with likeminded people, sharing ideas, and feeling comfortable to explore their own identity. This is especially the case for isolated young people who are vulnerable to experiencing mental health challenges.(1,2) Social media can provide a safe space, 73% of young Australians using social media for mental health support.(3)

However, social media doesn't come without challenges and there is increasing evidence linking high social media use to poor mental health outcomes and social functioning.(4,5) This includes the type of content young people engage with and the impact this has on body image, self-esteem, anxiety, and depression.(6)

A changing landscape: social media minimum age legislation

The Australian Government has introduced world-first legislation to age-restrict social media for young people under the age of 16 years old. Young people under 16 may feel relief about the age restriction, taking away the social pressure of being online. Others may feel anxious or even lose their closest networks and social connections. The age restrictions provide a new opportunity for mental health professionals to support the digital wellbeing of young people.



The impact of social media use on mental health and wellbeing

Not all young people will use social media the same way, and therefore not all young people will have their mental health impacted in the same way. Research suggests that social media use is not all bad, and moderate users can experience similar or even better wellbeing outcomes to low users.(5) Of Australian young people:

- 44% report having negative online experiences in the past 6 months, with almost one-third of these related to bullying that occurred at school.(7)
- 24% report feeling anxious if they are stopped from using social media.(4)
- 34% report feeling like they need to continually post and use social media more.(4)

Different levels of social media use

High users

Young people who use social media for **three or more hours** per day report:

- higher levels of distress,
- feeling less control over their lives, and
- a greater likelihood of going online when feeling lonely.(5)

Low and moderate users

Young people who use social media for **up to three hours** per day report:

- lower levels of distress,
- feeling more control over their lives, and
- a greater likelihood to engage in hobbies or reach out to family and friends when feeling lonely.(5)

Higher social media use is reported among female, gender diverse, multicultural, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.(4,5) Similarly, neurodivergent young people may engage with social media uniquely – experiencing benefits such as social connection and inclusion, but also increased risks of bullying and exploitation.(8–10) Considering both intersectional experiences and differing levels of social media use is important to ensure support is tailored to each young person's individual needs.

Problematic social media use

Problematic social media use is the excessive and uncontrollable use of social media, which can interfere with cognition and everyday functioning. This can affect a young person's attention, academic performance, interpersonal relationships, social activities, hobbies, and general health and wellbeing.(11–13)

Problematic social media use (sometimes referred to as “social media addiction”) is not an official diagnosable condition.(13,14) However, several signs can indicate a young person is experiencing challenges with their social media use, including:

- Social media is their highest priority.
- Thinking about social media and planning to use it consumes their thoughts.
- Social media use negatively impacts their mood (e.g. anxiety, low mood, or irritability).
- They experience anxiety if they are stopped from using social media when they want to.
- They experience negative impacts to their offline life and responsibilities.
- Their worldview is overly informed by social media, including inaccurate information.
- They engage in harmful behaviour or content online, such as illegal content or harassment. (13–16)



A note on screening tools

Several screening tools are emerging for problematic social media use (e.g. the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale,(16,17) and Social Media Use Disorder Scale for Adolescents (15)). These tools could be used to guide discussions when exploring the young person's challenges with social media use, focusing on functional impact, wellbeing, and the individual's context.

Supporting young people with their social media use

When discussing social media, use open-ended questions and encourage dialogue in a safe and comfortable environment. This will help young people to explore the potential impacts of social media on their own mental health and wellbeing (both positive and negative).

Orygen's [ScrollSafe for teens](#) can support young people to build digital literacy skills, healthy habits and use social media in a safe and positive way. Download and print the ScrollSafe for teens guide for your school.

Supporting young people under 16 years old

Be mindful that many young people under 16 years old will still be accessing online spaces. Below are key tips to support them through this transition period:

- Acknowledge the reality that they may still be in online spaces, even if they are not on age-restricted social media platforms.
- Support positive overall digital wellbeing, building digital literacy skills and healthy habits.
- Support understanding of why the age restriction may be helpful.
- Encourage strong privacy and safety settings.
- Encourage healthy boundaries and "screen free" time.
- Support critical engagement with online content, including recognising concerning interactions, misinformation, and unrealistic portrayals of life.
- Support finding alternative, safe digital spaces.

Responding to suicide-related content

Young people may come across or share concerns about online posts that discuss self-harm or suicidality. These situations should be treated as potential indicators of risk and responded to in line with your school's safety and reporting procedures. To support this work, explore:

[#chatsafe: A young person's guide to communicating safely online about self-harm and suicide](#)

[#chatsafe for educators: How educators can support safe online communication about self-harm and suicide](#)

Practical tips

Using a multi-tiered approach is a great way to promote positive mental health and digital wellbeing across the school community.

Tier 1. Positive mental health promotion

Whole-school programs to support young people to use social media positively and promote wellbeing. (See table below)

Strategy	Examples
Support digital literacy and skill development in students	• Include digital literacy in mental health literacy programs. • Print Orygen's ScrollSafe for teens guide and place in shared spaces or use it when working with students. • Run education and awareness raising sessions on topics such as: – Healthy boundary setting (e.g. screen time, sleep, relationships). – Being a "mindful" social media user. – How to critically engage with online content and identify misinformation. – The mechanisms that underpin social media platforms to keep you on them for longer. – How algorithms can perpetuate negative self-beliefs and influence mental health by design.

Table continued

Strategy	Examples
Promote digital wellbeing in the school culture	• Ensure school policy is aligned with positive social media use messaging. • Deliver whole-school campaigns through messaging and posters.
Build awareness among the adults who support young people	• Deliver information sessions or provide information in newsletters to parents, carers, and supporters. – Explore topics such as healthy social media habits, boundary setting, and online safety strategies. – See Orygen’s ScrollSafe for parents for more information. • Encourage teachers to integrate social media and digital literacy conversations within the classroom. – See Orygen’s: ScrollSafe for teachers for more information.
Promote help-seeking behaviour	• Ensure students know where to go for support if they require it or if they want to support their friends.

Tier 2. Early intervention and cohort specific support

Interventions targeting specific cohorts of young people who are more at-risk of experiencing harms from social media use.

Strategy	Examples
Support digital literacy skill development in at-risk groups	• Run targeted programs to build digital literacy skills and readiness to engage in the online world • Integrate inclusive language and strategies in all digital literacy programs, to address the needs of at-risk young people
Short-term programs or workshops	• Facilitate small group workshops on the challenges young people may face. • Explore topics such as: – Managing online conflict with friends. – How to set digital boundaries (e.g. using screen time limits in settings or applications like <i>Opal</i> or <i>Flora</i> – subscription fees may apply). – Coping with social media-related anxiety. – Building confidence and skill to interact and connect with people offline (e.g. through community groups, sporting groups, libraries). • Distribute messaging about where to go for more serious concerns – ensuring students know what to do if they experience more critical challenges. This includes the eSafety Commissioner’s reporting tool.

Table continued

Strategy	Examples
Strengthen peer modelling of healthy behaviours	- Establish a group of student leaders who can “champion” balanced social media use. - Facilitate student-led campaigns or initiatives to promote healthy social media behaviours.
Ensuring the school can be proactive	- Address emerging social media trends which may manifest in the school setting. See the eSafety Commissioner’s website for more information. - Monitor patterns in student data which may be related to their social media use (e.g. phone confiscations at school). - Train teachers to notice the signs of problematic social media use in the classroom. See ScrollSafe for secondary school teachers for more information.

Tier 3. Targeted support

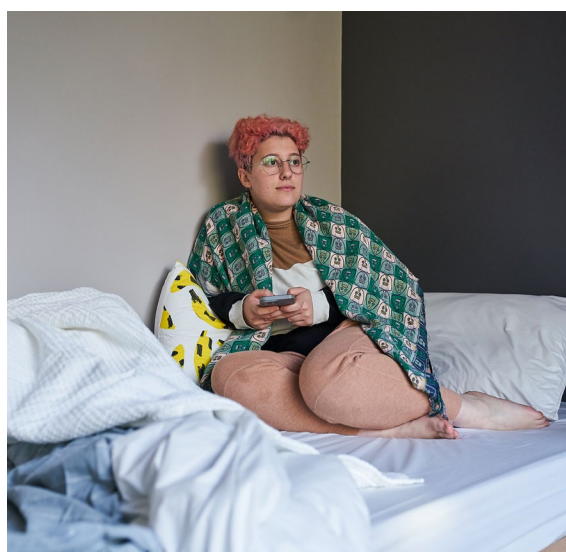
Targeted support involves personalised interventions for young people who are actively seeking help for their social media use or who display signs of problematic use.

Targeted support may include:

- One-on-one counselling with the young person.
- Collaborating with the young person’s families, carers, and supporters so they can better support the young person to achieve their goals and actions.

Strategies for one-on-one counselling

While maintaining a curious stance, you can explore the young person’s social media use and how it may be impacting their mental health and wellbeing.



Strategy	Examples
Explore the young person’s perspectives on their social media use	Questions to ask the young person: - What influences how you use social media? Your friends? Social pressure? Your own values? - What would you like your account to look like? - What does social media do for you? - What do you think the impact of your social media use is? How is it good for you? How is it bad for you? - How can you monitor these impacts and how it makes you feel?
Understand what steps the young person has already taken to limit or change their social media use	Questions to ask the young person: - Have you tried to change how you use social media? - Have you used screen time limits before? - What made this hard or easy? - What habits can we build on?

Table continued

Strategy	Examples
Explore different ways the young person can get their needs met	Questions to ask the young person: • Why do you use social media? • Are there other things in your life that do the same thing for you? • What makes you feel connected or brings enjoyment into your life?
Psychoeducation on the underlying mechanisms of social media platforms and algorithms	Educate the young person on how social media platforms are designed to keep people on for longer. Social media platforms are built to be addictive, and it is not a failure if they spend a lot of time online.
Explore how to identify misinformation	• Encourage the young person to critically analyse the content they engage with. • Teach the young person simple “checks” for credibility. This may be just asking if the post is from a verified source or learning how to do a reverse-image search. • Talk through examples with the young person and ask: – Who made this? – How do we know if this is true?
Work to build the young person’s self-image and confidence beyond their online presence	• Explore the young person’s values and support them to reflect on how these can shape their self-worth. • Ask the young person to name three things they are good at that are unrelated to social media and explore how these show up in daily life.
Undertake behaviour experiments to test out assumptions young people may have about the online world	Explore what the young person finds most challenging and collaboratively design behavioural experiments that feel comfortable for them. Some examples may be: • The young person thinks their friends will react negatively if they don’t respond to messages straight away. Experiment with waiting one hour before replying to a message. • The young person may feel like social media is their only way of connecting with friends. Experiment with taking a break from posting (i.e. one element of social media) and reflect on whether friends still reach out in other ways. • The young person may not want to unfollow an account that is making them feel bad, in fear of missing out on something. Experiment with muting the account to see if they feel like they are missing out.

Table continued

Strategy	Examples
Explore practical strategies for managing their social media use	- Identify apps or times of day that are most challenging for the young person and brainstorm ways to set limits. - Encourage the uptake of screentime limiter tools or apps (e.g. phone settings or applications like <i>Opal</i> or <i>Flora</i> – subscription fees may apply). - Think through “no-phone” zones or times (e.g. at the dinner table, in the bedroom). - Prompt the young person to engage their parents if they think they will need help at home.
Explore who the young person can recruit as support on their journey	Help the young person find ways of talking with friends and re-setting expectations. This may be supporting them to write a message or plan for having a conversation.

Many young people turn to social media for mental health support, where information can be both helpful and misleading.^(3,5) Mental health professionals should explore what content the young person is engaging with and unpack whether it is evidence-based. They can then address any harmful beliefs and guide the young person towards more reliable information and supports.

Involving parents and carers

It is important to collaborate with families and engage parents and carers in the support of the young person. Be transparent about your duty of care, however, be mindful of respecting their right to confidentiality. Discuss with the young person what information they feel comfortable to share with their family. For example, you can discuss the young person’s social media use, without sharing everything about what they interact with online (e.g. what community groups they are in).

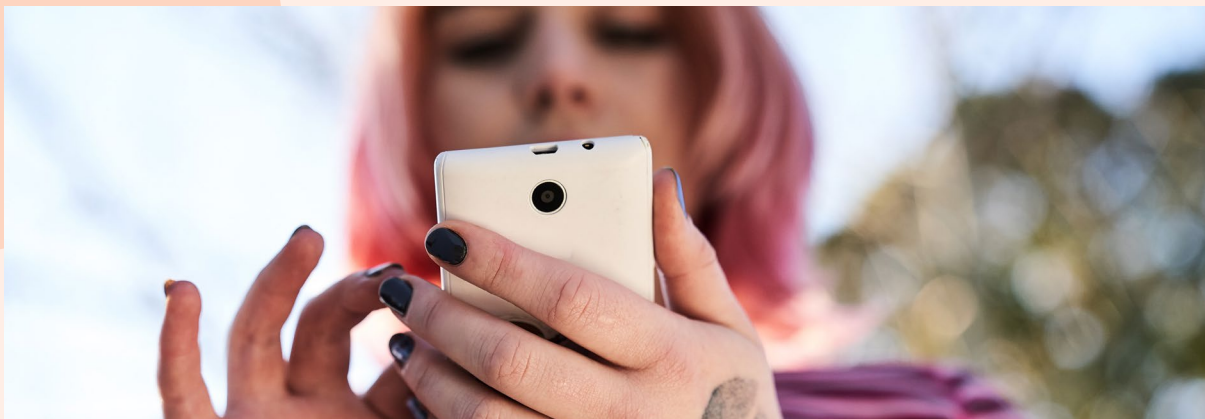


Below are some key points where involving parents may be helpful:

- When the young person is experiencing significant impact on their wellbeing – for example, ongoing impacts on mental health, anxiety, distress, sleep, academic performance, and general functioning.
- If the young person exhibits early signs of school attendance challenges or a decline in academic engagement due to social media use – for example, due to peer-related online issues.
- When attempts to reduce social media use are unsuccessful despite support and guidance.
- If the young person engages in risky or harmful online behaviours.
- In times of crisis, when there are immediate safety concerns, or the young person is experiencing online harassment, ensuring consistency with school policies (see below).

It is always important to frame conversations as supportive and focused on wellbeing, rather than being punitive and restrictive. Some helpful approaches include:

- Normalising concerns and acknowledging that many parents feel uncertain about their child’s social media use.
- Highlighting strengths and any positive steps or habits already being taken by the young person.
- Suggesting practical strategies parents can use at home, such as encouraging open conversations and role modelling healthy social media use.
- Offering resources to support parents if they want more information (e.g. [ScrollSafe for parents](#)).



Case study: Aisha's story

Aisha is a 16-year-old cisgender female student in Year 10 who was referred to the school mental health professional after teachers noticed she was often tired in class, missing homework deadlines, and becoming increasingly withdrawn from peers.

In her first session, Aisha shared that she was spending 7–9 hours per day on social media, often staying up past 2 a.m. on TikTok and Instagram. She reported feeling “on edge” if she wasn’t checking her phone and often compared herself negatively to influencers online.

Aisha’s parents had noticed changes at home, including irritability, late-night phone use, and a reluctance to attend family activities. They were unsure how to support her without “making things worse” by taking her phone away.

Engagement strategies

The school mental health professional worked with Aisha to build rapport and explore her relationship with social media. They used a strengths-based approach to recognise that while social media was a key part of her social life, it was also contributing to her distress.

Strategies included:

- Identifying Aisha’s strengths and goals in accessing mental health support.
- Exploring Aisha’s understanding of the impact of her social media use.
- Supporting Aisha to understand the importance of sleep hygiene and building a routine.
- Identifying times of day when social media use increased her anxiety and planning alternative activities (e.g. listening to music, brief walks).
- Teaching self-regulation and coping skills to manage the urge to constantly check her phone, including grounding strategies.
- Facilitating a meeting with Aisha’s Year Level Coordinator and a trusted teacher to ensure support was available during the school day.

Collaborating with those around Aisha

The mental health professional met with Aisha and her parents to provide psychoeducation on problematic social media use. Together they agreed to:

- Introduce family-based boundaries such as device-free dinners and a shared charging station outside bedrooms.
- Replace punitive approaches (e.g. confiscating Aisha’s phone) with collaborative boundary setting.
- Identify existing positive offline relationships to engage in more regularly.
- Encourage new offline social opportunities, including joining the school netball team and attending youth group activities.

Outcomes and ongoing support

Over the following term, Aisha’s sleep improved, her mood stabilised, and her engagement in class increased. She began reconnecting with her close friend group at school and attended two netball practices, which boosted her confidence. While she still experienced urges to scroll late at night, she reported feeling more “in control” and better able to notice when social media was affecting her negatively.

Regular check-ins with the school mental health professional continued, alongside family collaboration and support from key school staff.

Take home message

Schools are in a unique position to support positive and appropriate social media use across the school community. Using a multi-tiered approach, mental health professionals can actively support students to use social media safely.

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Department of education resources

- Policy and Advisory Library: <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal?utm=>
- Mental health and wellbeing toolkit: <https://www.vic.gov.au/mental-health-and-wellbeing-toolkit?utm>
- Safe Socials: <https://www.vic.gov.au/safe-socials>
- Support for staff to respond to online incidents: <https://www.vic.gov.au/safe-socials#support-for-staff-to-respond-to-online-incidents>
- Digital technologies policy: <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/digital-technologies-responsible-use/policy>
- Mobile phones – student use policy: <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/students-using-mobile-phones/policy>
- Digital learning policy: <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/digital-learning/policy>
- Acceptable Use Agreement Template: <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/digital-learning/resources>

Related resources

- The ScrollSafe Hub for information targeting students, parents, and teachers: <https://www.orygen.org.au/Training/Resources/digital-technology/ScrollSafe>
- Brief Interventions Toolkit: <https://www.orygen.org.au/Training/Resources/Brief-interventions>
- #chatsafe for educators and wellbeing staff: <https://www.orygen.org.au/chatsafe/Resources/chatsafe-for-educators>

Further information

- eSafety Commissioner: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/>
- eSafety professional learning: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/educators/training-for-professionals/national-student-wellbeing-program>
- Reimagining online safety education through the eyes of young people: <https://researchers.westernsydney.edu.au/en/publications/reimagining-online-safety-education-through-the-eyes-of-young-peo>
- The Social Media Ban: Staying informed: <https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/for-young-people/social-media-ban/>

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Orygen acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to their ancestral lands, which continue to be important to First Nations people living today.



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