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Social Media

Following the introduction of social media platforms in the early 2000's, social media use has quickly become commonplace in the lives of many.¹ Seventy-two percent of all Americans use at least one social media platform.² Usage among teens is higher, with a 2022 survey reporting ninety-five percent of all teens use at least one social media platform.³ One in five teen users report using YouTube or TikTok “almost constantly.”⁴ Despite the ubiquity of social media, legislation regarding its impact on children’s physical and mental health is primarily limited to age verification regulations.

Legislation Regulating Social Media and Access for Children

There has been plenty of movement surrounding legislation on children’s access to social media in 2023. The National Conference of State Legislatures has compiled information from states on bills and resolutions that “[c]reate study commissions and task forces... [r]equire age verification or parental consent to open social media accounts... [a]dd digital and media literacy courses or curriculum for K-12 students... [r]equire age verification to prevent children from accessing explicit or harmful materials from websites.”⁵ According to NCSL, thirty-five states as well as Puerto Rico have legislation pending in one of these categories.⁶ Eleven states have adopted bills or enacted resolutions on the subject.⁷ To find the complete list of enacted, pending, and failed legislation on the subject please see the National Conference of State Legislatures full report titled [“Social Media and Children 2023 Legislation.”](#)

¹ Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, “The Rise of Social Media,” Our World in Data, September 18, 2019, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media>.

² Brooke Auxier and Monica Anderson, “Social Media Use in 2021,” Pew Research Center, April 7, 2021, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>.

³ Emily Vogels, Risa Gelles-Watnick, and Navid Massarat, “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022,” Pew Research Center, August 10, 2022, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/04/24/teens-and-social-media-key-findings-from-pew-research-center-surveys>.

⁴ Vogels et al., “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022.”

⁵ National Conference of State Legislatures, “Social Media and Children 2023 Legislation,” August 10, 2023, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.ncsl.org/technology-and-communication/social-media-and-children-2023-legislation>.

⁶ National Conference of State Legislatures, “Social Media and Children 2023 Legislation.”

⁷ National Conference of State Legislatures, “Social Media and Children 2023 Legislation.”

On the National Level

A bipartisan group of senators introduced a bill in the U.S. Senate in April of 2023 aiming to greatly restrict access to social media for children.⁸ The “Protecting Kids on Social Media Act” aims to require age verification and parental/guardian consent for users under the age of eighteen, prohibit the use of “algorithmic recommendation systems” on minors, and prohibit social media access for those under the age of thirteen altogether.⁹ The most recent action on this bill its referral to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation on March 26, of 2023.¹⁰ According to GovTrack, a legislation tracking website, the bill has a very low chance of passage.¹¹

A group of representatives including Vermont’s own Becca Balint introduced a bill to the U.S. House of Representatives in May of 2023 titled the “Protecting Young Minds Online Act.”¹² The language of the bill aims to “amend Title V of the Public Health Service Act to direct the Center for Mental Health Services to develop and disseminate a strategy to address the effects of new technologies on children’s mental health.”¹³ The most recent action on this bill was its referral to the Subcommittee on Health on May 12, of 2023.¹⁴ GovTrack calculations also estimates this bill will have a low chance of passage.¹⁵

Vermont

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, updated as recently as August 10, 2023, there is no active legislation in Vermont on the access to social media by children.¹⁶

Arkansas

Arkansas enacted legislation in March of 2023 requiring social media companies to verify the age of account holders and prohibit minors from holding accounts without express consent from a parent or legal guardian.¹⁷ If a social media company fails to verify user age or retains any

⁸ Brian Fung, “Senators unveil bipartisan legislation to ban kids under 13 from joining social media platforms,” CNN.com, April 26, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/26/tech/senators-social-media-kids-wellness/index.html>.

⁹ United States Senate, Protecting Kids on Social Media Act, S. 1291, 118th Congress § 1, (2023), https://www.schatz.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/protecting_kids_on_social_media_act_2023.pdf.

¹⁰ United States Senate, “S. 1291: Protecting Kids on Social Media Act,” accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/118/s1291>.

¹¹ United States Senate, “S. 1291: Protecting Kids on Social Media Act.”

¹² WCAX News Team, “Balint bill takes aim at youth social media concerns,” wcax.com, May 10, 2023, <https://www.wcax.com/2023/05/10/rep-balint-focuses-youth-mental-health-social-media-bill/>.

¹³ United States House of Representatives, “Protecting Young Minds Online Act,” HR 3164, 118th Congress § 1, (2023), https://steil.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/steil.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/steiwi_008_xml.pdf.

¹⁴ United States House of Representatives, “H.R. 3164: Protecting Young Minds Online,” <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/118/hr3164>.

¹⁵ United States House of Representatives, “H.R. 3164: Protecting Young Minds Online.”

¹⁶ National Conference of State Legislatures, “Social Media and Children 2023 Legislation.”

¹⁷ State of Arkansas, “ An Act To Create the Social Media Safety,” SB 396, 94th General Assembly, Regular Session, (2023), accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Home/FTPDocument?path=%2FBills%2F2023R%2FPublic%2FSB396.pdf>.

identifying information after access to the platform has been granted, the company can be punished with a fine of up to \$2,500 per violation.¹⁸

California

California passed legislation that goes into effect July 1, 2024, entitled “The California Age-Appropriate Design Code Act.” This act states that “[b]usinesses that develop and provide online services, products, or features that children are likely to access should consider the best interests of children when designing, developing, and providing that online service, product, or feature,”¹⁹ and that if it comes to a decision between maximizing profits or protecting children, “companies should prioritize the privacy, safety, and well-being of children over commercial interests.”²⁰

California Senators also introduced a new bill in February of 2023 to further protect children on social media platforms and hold those platforms accountable for any damage they may cause. In the language of the bill, amended as recently of May of 2023, it states that a social media platform can’t “use a design, algorithm, or feature that the platform knows... causes child users to... [p]urchase a controlled substance... [i]nfllict harm on themselves or others... [d]evelop an eating disorder... [c]ommit suicide... [e]xperience addiction to the social media platform,” or purchase an illegal firearm.²¹ Violation of this pending legislation would result in “a civil penalty not to exceed two hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$250,000) per violation, an injunction, and an award of litigation costs and attorney’s fees in an action brought.”²²

Illinois

The Illinois State Senate adopted a resolution in May of 2023 that states “[t]he federal government has a duty to ensure that minors are protected from deceptive and harmful algorithms that are deliberately designed to incite negative reactions and build addictive behavior,” and that social media companies “should be held to the same standard as other companies regarding the utilization of harmful advertising and tactics that target minors.”²³ The resolution ends by urging the federal government to “uphold its duty to create regulations that promote the well-being of minors and to protect them from negative and harmful social media algorithms.”²⁴

Additionally, a representative in the Illinois House introduced the “Children's Privacy Protection and Parental Empowerment Act.” This act, proposed in February of 2023, would require

¹⁸ State of Arkansas, SB 396.

¹⁹ State of California, The California Age-Appropriate Design Code Act, AB-2273, 2021-2022, (2022), https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billCompareClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB2273&showamends=false.

²⁰ State of California, The California Age-Appropriate Design Code Act.

²¹ State of California, An act to add Section 1714.48 to the Civil Code, relating to social media platforms, SB 287, 2023-2024, Regular Session, (2023), https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240SB287.

²² State of California, SB 287.

²³ State of Illinois, Senate Resolution, SR 0249, 103rd General Assembly, (2023), <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/fulltext.asp?DocName=&SessionId=112&GA=103&DocTypeId=SR&DocNum=249&GAID=17&LegID=149928&SpecSess=&Session=>

²⁴ State of Illinois, SR 0249.

businesses and social media platforms to complete a data protection impact assessment. The assessment would be a “systematic survey to assess and mitigate risks that arise from the data management practices of the business to children who are reasonably likely to access the online service, product, or feature at issue that arises from the provision of that online service, product, or feature,” and would be made available to the public.²⁵ Businesses found to violate this act would be punished with “a civil penalty of not more than \$2,500 per affected child for each negligent violation or not more than \$7,500 per affected child for each intentional violation.”²⁶

Social Media Effects on Children’s Mental Health and Behavior

Social Media has been shown to have a variety of indirect and direct effects on children’s mental health. In a hearing before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, Mitch Prinstein, the director of the American Psychological Association, outlined five main issues regarding youth mental health and social media access.²⁷ These included gratification and comparison, isolation and loneliness, negative peer influence, addictive social media use, and exposure to unmonitored content.²⁸

A major component of social media is the gratification system. Users post content and receive “likes” which determines who and how many people have seen said content. Many youth who utilize social media focus specifically on the amount of “likes” they get, comparing the content they post with others, which can lead to issues with appearance perception and self-worth.²⁹ In addition, recent research has suggested that social media use can be linked to brain development.³⁰ The part of the brain responsible for inhibition develops later than the part of the brain responsible for the desire for attention and visibility from others.³¹ The lack of inhibition contributes to excessive social media interaction, as the gratification received from “likes” fulfills the desire for attention and visibility.³²

Social media, according to Prinstein, has been shown to create relationships based on a user’s content and popularity instead of the users themselves, leading to a decrease in meaningful relationships and loneliness.³³ Additionally, he testified that a reliance on social media-based

²⁵ State of Illinois, “Children's Privacy Protection and Parental Empowerment Act,” HB 3880, 103rd General Assembly, 2023-2024, (2023), accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/fulltext.asp?DocName=&SessionId=112&GA=103&DocTypeId=HB&DocNum=3880&GAID=17&LegID=149147&SpecSess=&Session=>

²⁶ State of Illinois, Children's Privacy Protection and Parental Empowerment Act.

²⁷ Mitch Prinstein, “Protecting Our Children Online,” Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Judiciary, 118th Congress (2023), <https://www.apaservices.org/advocacy/news/protect-children-online>.

²⁸ Prinstein, “Protecting Our Children Online.”

²⁹ Sophia Choukas-Bradley, Jacqueline Nesi, Laura Widman, and Brian M. Galla, "The Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale: Development and validation with adolescents," *Body Image* 33 (2020): 164-174, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2020.02.017>.

³⁰ Prinstein, “Protecting Our Children Online.”

³¹ Lauren Sherman, Leanna Hernandez, Patricia Greenfield, Mirella Dapretto, “What the Brain ‘Likes’: Neural Correlates of Providing Feedback on Social Media,” *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 13, no. 7 (2018): 699-707 <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsy051>.

³² Sherman, Hernandez, Greenfield, Dapretto, “What the Brain Likes,” 705

³³ Prinstein, *Protecting Our Children Online*.

relationships can lead to isolation among peers, as children can lose interpersonal skills through heavy online interaction, and experience increased anxiety with in-person interaction.³⁴

Researchers have also found that social media can increase negative peer influence. Exposure to social media portrayals of risky behavior among peers, such as illicit substance use, encourages youth to emulate that behavior.³⁵ Prinstein cited a study that showed that when adolescents were exposed to “liked” photos of alcohol usage, it led to an acceptance of alcohol which predicted these teens early engagement in drinking.³⁶ Peer influence through social media is shown to affect appearance perception as well, leading to body dysmorphia, disordered eating, and increased anxiety and depression.³⁷ Anxiety and depression caused by social media use can be attributed to peer-to-peer interaction.³⁸ Cyberbullying through social media has been found to increase rates of suicide and self-harm.³⁹ Exclusion and drama through media platforms have been shown to increase anxiety and depression rates.⁴⁰

A review article from 2021 demonstrated that there was a significant relationship between poor mental health, poor sleep quality, and excessive social media use.⁴¹ Lack of sleep is shown to affect children’s mental health, with less sleep leading to higher levels of depression and anxiety.⁴²

A study published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* focused on Finnish children who used social media. The study, entitled “Problematic Social Media Use and Health among Adolescents,” assigned the child subjects into three groups varying their social media usage. The adolescents who used social media very often were three times more likely to experience irritability, nervousness, and feeling low than those who had less

³⁴ Lauren E. Sherman, Leanna M. Hernandez, Patricia M. Greenfield, Mirella Dapretto, “What the brain ‘Likes’: neural correlates of providing feedback on social media”, *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 13, 7 (2018): 699–707, <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsy051>.

³⁵ Megan Moreno, Jon D’Angelo, Jennifer Whitehill, “Social Media and Alcohol: Summary of Research, Intervention Ideas and Future Study Directions,” *Media and Communications*, 4(3):50 (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/mac.v4i3.529>.

³⁶ E. Armstrong-Carter, S. L., Garrett, E. A. Nick, M. J. Prinstein, and E. H. Telzer, “Momentary links between adolescents’ social media use and social experiences and motivations: Individual differences by peer susceptibility,” *Developmental Psychology*, 59 no. 4 (2023): 707–719, <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001503>.

³⁷ Tanya Hawes, Melanie J. Zimmer-Gembeck, and Shawna M. Campbell. “Unique associations of social media use and online appearance preoccupation with depression, anxiety, and appearance rejection sensitivity.” *Body Image* 33 (2020): 66-76, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2020.02.010>.

³⁸ Nesi, “The impact of social media,” 116.

³⁹ Nesi, “The impact of social media,” 117.

⁴⁰ Nesi, “The impact of social media,” 117.

⁴¹ Rea Alonzo, Junayd Hussain, Saverio Stranges, and Kelly K. Anderson, “Interplay between Social Media Use, Sleep Quality, and Mental Health in Youth: A Systematic Review,” *Sleep Medicine Reviews* 56 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smrv.2020.101414>.

⁴² Stacey L. Simon, Meredith A. Ware, Anne E. Bowen, Jessica L. Chandrasekhar, Joey A. Lee, Lauren B. Shomaker, Lauren D. Gulley, Erin Heberlein, and Jill L. Kaar, “Sleep Moderates Improvements in Mental Health Outcomes in Youth: Building Resilience for Healthy Kids,” *American Journal of Health Promotion* 36, no. 5 (2022): 772–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08901171211068455>.

exposure to social media.⁴³ They were also more likely to sleep less and feel lonely than adolescents who had less exposure to social media. The American Psychological Association (APA) has issued a “Health Advisory on Social Media use in Adolescence,” based on accumulated body of research on social media. The APA’s work shows that children have greater risks of irritability, nervousness, and psychological issues in early adolescence than in later adolescence and early adulthood.⁴⁴ This advisory notes that social media is not found to be inherently beneficial or harmful to adolescent lives; children’s online behavior reflects and impacts their offline lives. This means that in most cases the effects of social media are dependent upon individual’s own psychological and social circumstances.⁴⁵

Academic Performance

Studies published in the *Journal of Primary Prevention* and the *International Journal of Communication*⁴⁶ concluded that social media usage is associated with poorer academic performance in adolescents.⁴⁷ The researchers cited in *The Journal of Primary Prevention* found that reducing time on social media improves feelings of school connectedness and promotes positive academic performance.⁴⁸ Students who use social media regularly tend to obtain lower scores in math, reading, and science.⁴⁹ Another study included in *Frontiers in Psychology* says that social media may distract students from their work by keeping them attracted to online information instead of their academics. This causes their motivation to decrease, as well as their grades.⁵⁰

In addition, adolescents tend to use social media while participating in other activities. According to testimony by the APA, when using social media alongside doing schoolwork, it creates a phenomenon called “media-multitasking.” Research shows that most humans cannot multitask; instead, they are rapidly task shifting, which leads to poorer memory and comprehension. Multitasking is made worse by media, and leads to less comprehension of schoolwork, which can then decrease academic achievement.⁵¹

⁴³ Leena Paakkari, Jorma Tynjälä, Henri Lahti, Kristiina Ojala, and Nelli Lyyra, "Problematic Social Media Use and Health among Adolescents," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 4: 1885 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18041885>.

⁴⁴ American Psychological Association, “Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence,” May 2023, accessed December 15, 2023,

<https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use>.

⁴⁵ American Psychological Association, “Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence.”

⁴⁶ Alberto Posso, “Internet Usage and Educational Outcomes Among 15-Year-Old Australian Students”, *International Journal of Communication* 10, 3851-3876 (2016), <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5586/1742>.

⁴⁷ Hugues Sampasa-Kanyingga Jean-Philippe Chaput, and Hayley A. Hamilton, “Social Media Use, School Connectedness, and Academic Performance Among Adolescents,” *The Journal of Primary Prevention* 40, 189–211 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10935-019-00543-6>.

⁴⁸ Sampasa-Kanyingga et al., “Social Media Use, School Connectedness, and Academic Performance Among Adolescents.”

⁴⁹ Liana Heitin, “Students who use social media score lower in math, reading, and science,” PBS, August 17, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/social-media-use-linked-low-math-reading-science-performance>.

⁵⁰ Miao Chen and Xin Xiao, "The effect of social media on the development of students’ affective variables," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1010766>.

⁵¹ Prinstein, “Protecting Our Children Online,” 18.

Conclusion

Social media usage in adolescents under eighteen is shown to cause distraction and could lead to anxiety and depression. More usage of social media can cause a lack of sleep which can lead to poor academic performance, worse behavior, and poor mental health. To prevent these issues, some states have passed legislation that increases security on age limits, holds platforms accountable, and increases parental controls.

This report was completed on December 15, 2023, by Fi Barthel, Eva Sanford, and Petra Waterstreet under the supervision of VLRS Director, Professor Anthony “Jack” Gierzynski, in response to a request from Representative Angela Arsenault.

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