

The Invisible Users:

Adult Perceptions of Social Media's Use and Impact on Children Under 13





Table of Contents

3

Overview of Social Media Usage Among Children

Discusses the gap between official social media age restrictions and actual usage by children under 13, evaluating the effectiveness of current policies.

5

Prevalence of Social Media Usage Among Children Under 13

Analyzes survey results to reveal how adults perceive children's interaction with social media platforms, including the most popular platforms among young users.

10

Insights on Social Media Supervision

Summarizes the community's consensus on the necessity of monitoring underage users on social media and the perceived adequacy of existing parental controls.

15

Strategic Actions for Digital Safety

Provides targeted recommendations for communities, educators, and policymakers to enhance digital safety measures for children and adolescents.

4

Survey Overview: Assessing Social Media Usage Among Children

Outlines the methodology and demographic reach of a detailed survey designed to gauge underage social media usage within Northern Virginia.

8

Balancing Risks and Rewards for Youth Social Media Use

Explores the dual effects of social media on young users.

12

Perceptions of Social Media's Impact on Children Under 13

Explores adult perceptions on both the positive and negative impacts of social media on children's social behavior and mental health.

18

Conclusion and Looking Forward

Reflects on the key insights from the report, emphasizing strategic actions and the ongoing need for vigilance in digital parenting and policy formulation.



Overview of Social Media Usage Among Children

As digital technologies permeate every aspect of our lives, the engagement of children under 13 with social media platforms remains a contentious and growing concern. Official policies prohibit this age group from creating accounts to shield them from the myriad risks associated with early online exposure. **Despite the regulations, a notable [discrepancy exists between the rules and real-life practices](#), as many children circumvent age restrictions with relative ease.**

This investigation by Sogolytics aims to understand how adults perceive the online activities of children in their communities and the potential adverse effects recognized by these observers. Acknowledging the significant [developmental and psychological risks](#) highlighted by the *American Academy of Pediatrics*, this study provides insights into the community's views on underage social media engagement. Recent findings from a study published in *JAMA Pediatrics* reveal a concerning [increase in mental health issues](#) among children ages 3–17 from 2016 to 2020, with diagnoses of anxiety and depression rising by 27% even before the pandemic's influence. By exploring adult perceptions and concerns, this report contributes to the broader dialogue on effective strategies and policies needed to protect young digital citizens from potential harm while navigating online spaces.



Survey Overview: Assessing Social Media Usage Among Children

To delve into the trends of social media use among children under 13, a comprehensive survey was conducted by Sogolytics involving 1,190 participants from the Northern Virginia (NoVA) region. The participant pool included both parents and non-parents, providing a broad perspective on the community's views regarding underage social media use. The demographic distribution of the survey respondents was based off the racial composition outlined in the latest US census data, ensuring a representative sample.

Survey Design

The survey comprised a mixture of question types, including multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended responses, to capture nuanced insights into the community's opinions and experiences. The questions were designed to gather detailed information on the following aspects:

- **Perceptions of Social Media Use and Impact:**

Assessing the respondents' views on the potential benefits and risks associated with social media use by children.

- **Policy Effectiveness:** Querying perceptions on the effectiveness of age restrictions and other policies intended to safeguard younger users.

- **Awareness and Monitoring:** Evaluating how aware respondents are of the children's social media activities and what measures, if any, are taken to monitor and guide these interactions.

The findings from this survey aim to provide a picture of the perception of the current landscape of underage social media usage and the community's stance on its regulation and impact.



Prevalence of Social Media Usage Among Children Under 13

The survey, involving 1,190 participants from Northern Virginia, revealed that a majority—1,000 respondents—either have children aged 8 to 12 or are aware of children in this age range who actively use social media platforms.

78%

of children use YouTube

YouTube: YouTube is seen as the most popular, with 78% of adults indicating that children in their surroundings use this platform.

64%

of children use TikTok

TikTok: TikTok follows, perceived by 64% of adults as a platform commonly used by younger audiences.

44%

of children use Snapchat

Snapchat: Snapchat, as noted by 44% of adults, is significantly utilized among this demographic.

Popular Platforms

The survey data provided insights into how adults perceive the social media usage of children under 13. Below are the platforms that adults believe are most frequented by this age group:

Perceived Social Media Platform Usage Among Children Aged 8 to 12

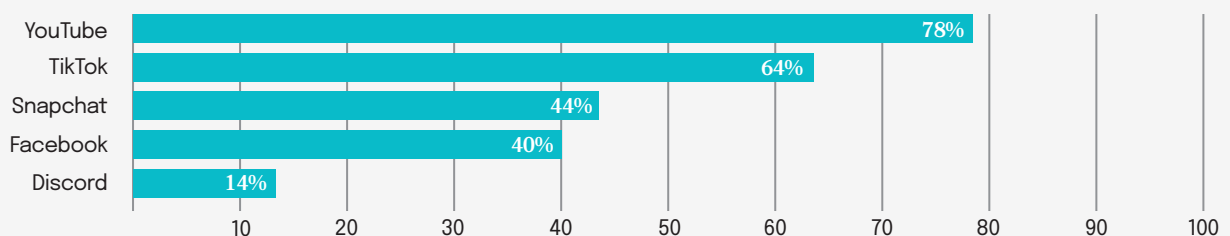


Figure 1: This chart shows the percentage of adults who believe that children aged 8 to 12 use specific social media platforms, sorted from most to least used. Participants could select multiple platforms, so total percentages may exceed 100%.



Access Methods:

In terms of how children gain access to these platforms:

- **Bypassing Age Restrictions:**

The most common method, reported by 49%, involves children creating their own accounts despite age restrictions.

- **Parent or Older Sibling's Account:**

28% of the respondents believe children access social media through a family member's account.

- **Supervised Access:** 22% believe children have supervised access with parental guidance.

- **Other:** 1% shared alternatives including parents creating but not monitoring accounts and children lying about their age or accessing friends' accounts.

Methods of Accessing Social Media by Children Aged 8 to 12

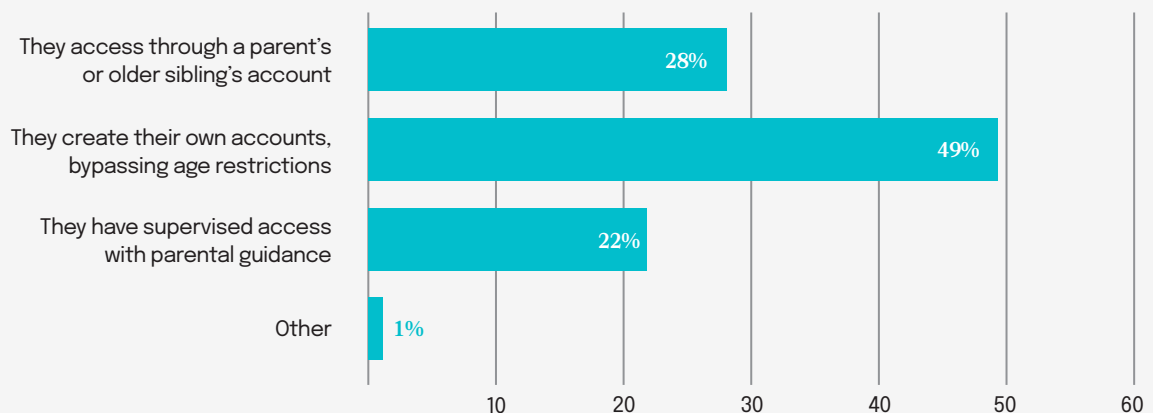


Figure 2: This chart displays the percentage of adults who believe children aged 8 to 12 access social media platforms, categorized by method. Given that respondents could select multiple methods, the total percentage may exceed 100%.

Note: All percentages shown in the graphs throughout this report are derived from the 1,000 survey respondents who are either parents of children aged 8 to 12 or are aware of children in this age range using social media.



Usage Patterns:

According to the survey, adults reported varied perceptions of daily social media usage among children aged 8 to 12. It was observed that 31% of adults believe that children in this age group spend between 3 to 4 hours on social media each day.

The accompanying figure below presents a broader spectrum of adult perceptions regarding how frequently children engage with social media platforms, emphasizing the community's observations of underage children's digital interactions.

Daily Social Media Usage Among Children Aged 8 to 12

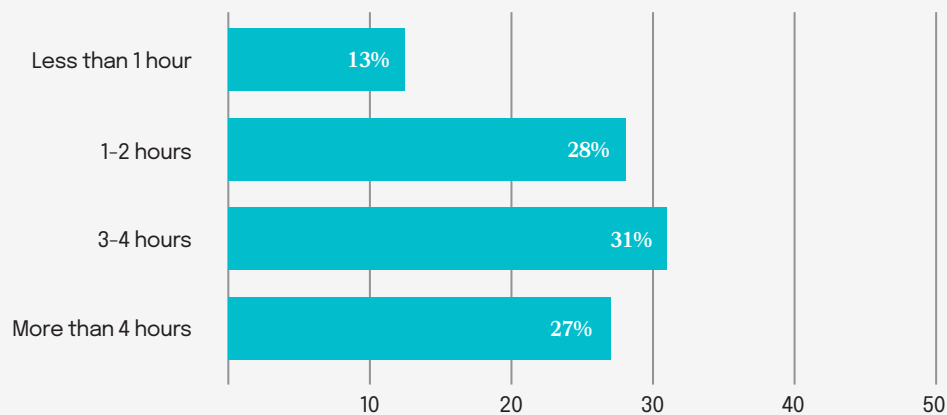


Figure 3: This chart represents the percentage of adults' perceptions of daily social media usage by children aged 8 to 12.

Such extensive exposure at a young age can have profound developmental implications. The adolescent brain is especially vulnerable, making teens more susceptible to the emotional and psychological impacts of social media.



Balancing Risks and Rewards for Young Social Media Users

While social media offers notable educational and social benefits, its usage by children under 13 is fraught with significant risks, increasingly recognized through both anecdotal evidence and systematic research. Survey responses highlight multiple areas of concern as seen below, all of which pose threats to the safety and well-being of young users.

Perceived Risks of Social Media Use Among Children Under 13

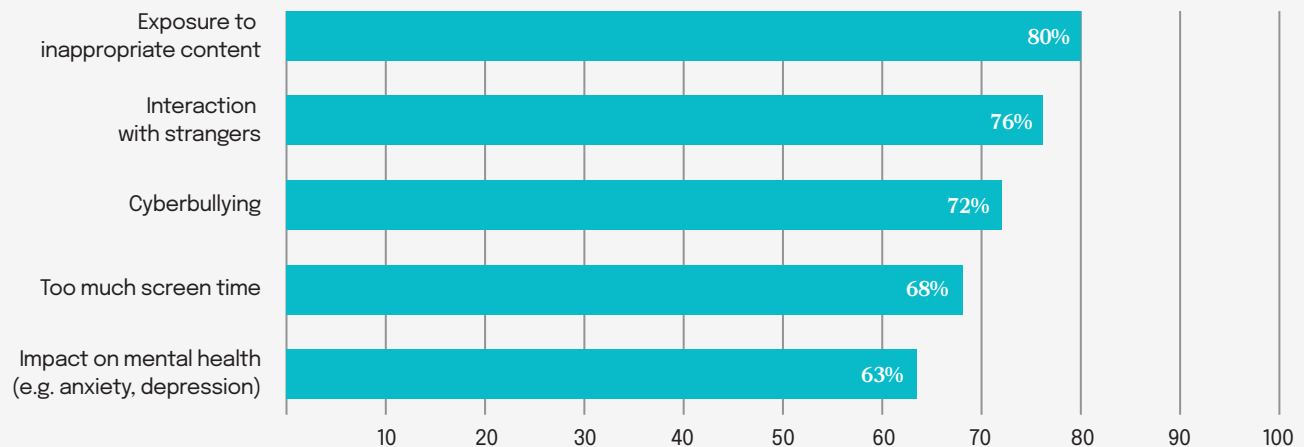


Figure 4: This chart illustrates the percentage of adults who believe various risks are associated with social media use among children under 13. Note that participants could select multiple risks, causing total percentages to exceed 100%.



Real-life observations from the community amplify these concerns. Survey participants noted, "Children who use social media have increased anxiety in traditional settings." They also reported an "increase in bullying, shorter attention spans, and the need for more instant gratification." Another participant highlighted the issue of "TikTok brain," describing the diminishing attention spans linked to frequent social media use. These accounts suggest that beyond immediate risks, social media can profoundly impact mental health and developmental processes.

Despite the potential for fostering connections and learning, social media's positive impacts can often be overshadowed by these risks. One parent shared, "Both of my children have used social media from a very early age, and are well adjusted, honor roll students who have not exhibited any ill effects", highlighting that with proper guidance and supervision, the negative impacts can be mitigated. Another respondent stated, "Social media can be good or bad just like anything else; it depends on how it's used", suggesting that the tool itself isn't inherently harmful but rather its usage dictates the outcome.

“Children who use social media have increased anxiety in traditional settings.”



Insights on Social Media Supervision

Survey responses indicate a strong consensus among both parents and non-parents on the need for vigilant monitoring of children's social media activities. Specifically, 73% of parents and 75% of non-parents believe that the social media activities of children aged 8 to 12 should be monitored very closely. These findings underscore the community's significant concern for overseeing children's online interactions.

Monitoring of Social Media Activities Among Children Aged 8 to 12

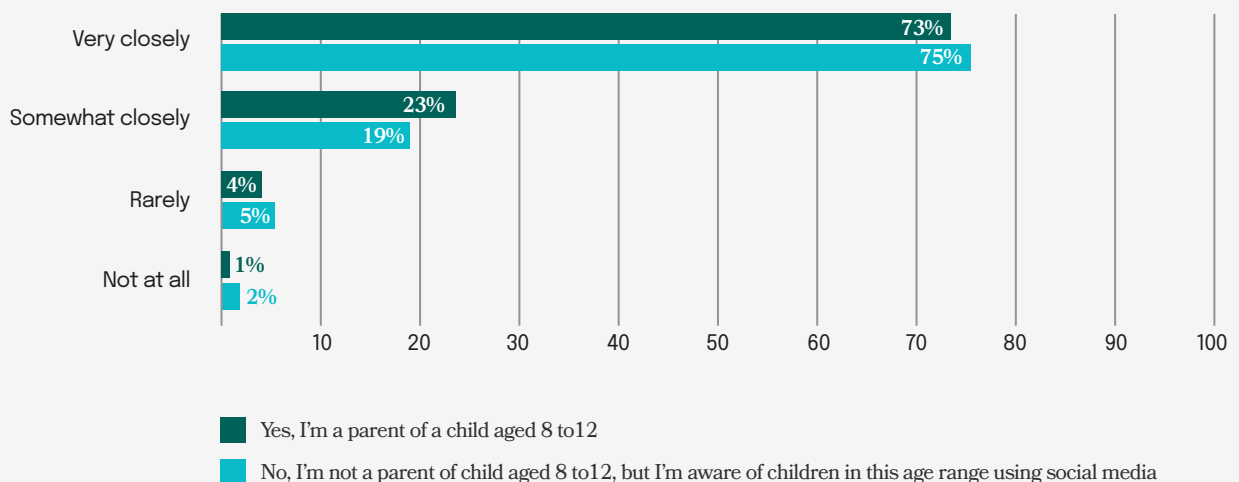


Figure 5: This chart displays the percentage of adults who believe the social media activities of children ages 8-12 should be monitored, divided into responses from parents and adults who are not parents but are aware of children using social media.

Additionally, a substantial proportion of both parents (76%) and non-parents (61%) report being aware of the current guidelines and parental controls available for monitoring the social media activities of children aged 8 to 12. This indicates a high level of awareness about the measures that can be implemented to ensure children's safety online.



However, opinions vary when it comes to the adequacy of these regulations and controls:

- **Parents:** 46% believe the current measures are adequate, while 36% do not think they are sufficient, and 18% are unsure.

- **Non-parents aware of children using social media:** 28% of the respondents believe children access social media through a family member's account.

Perceptions of Adequacy of Regulations and Parental Controls

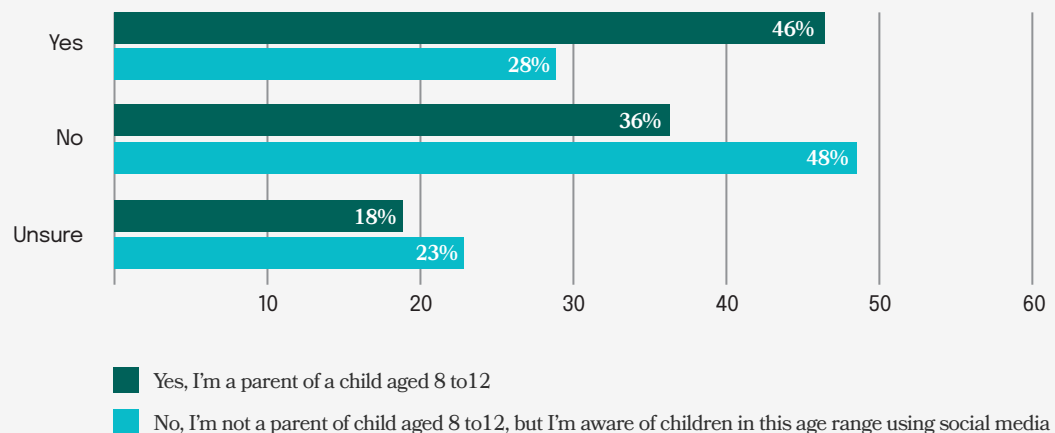


Figure 6: This chart displays the percentage of adults who believe the social media activities of children ages 8-12 should be monitored, divided into responses from parents and adults who are not parents but are aware of children using social media.

The results highlight significant skepticism about the effectiveness of existing controls in safeguarding children's social media activities. The disparity in perceptions between parents and non-parents suggests varying degrees of confidence in the current regulatory framework designed to protect young social media users.



Perceptions of Social Media's Impact on Children Under 13

Survey data reveals that both parents and non-parents hold strong opinions about the impact of social media on the behavior and mental health of children aged 8 to 12. While there is acknowledgment of some positive impacts, the overwhelming majority of responses indicate concern:

- **Negatively:**

60% of parents and 70% of non-parents believe that social media has a negative effect on children.

- **Positively:**

Only 12% of parents and 7% of non-parents view social media's impact as positive.

Impact of Social Media on Behavior and Mental Health of Children Under 13

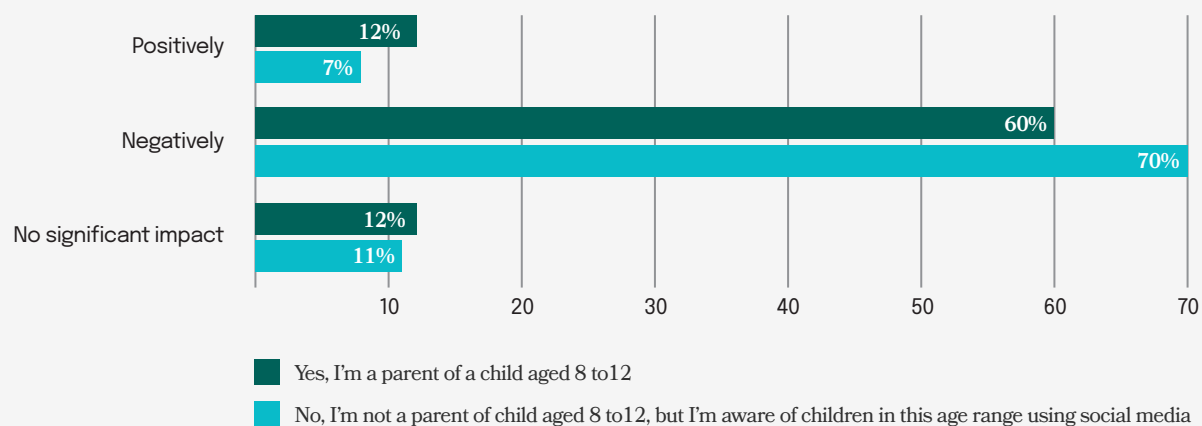


Figure 7: This chart represents adult perceptions of how social media affects the behavior and mental health of children under 13, comparing responses from parents and non-parents. Note that percentages do not add up to 100% due to the exclusion of 'Unsure' and 'Other' responses.



Social Impact of Children's Social Media Use

Both parent and non-parent survey participants highlighted social issues affecting children aged 8 to 12 that they believe may be attributed to social media use:

- **Accelerated Spread of Misinformation:**

52% of survey respondents expressed concerns about the rapid spread of misinformation through social media, noting that children are increasingly exposed to unverified and potentially harmful content.

- **Increased Social Isolation:**

48% of parents and 61% of non-parents reported that social media might be contributing to children feeling more isolated, indicating a concern for the mental and social well-being of the youth.

- **Enhanced Global Awareness and Connectivity:**

26% of survey parents and 25% non-parents acknowledge that social media has expanded children's horizons, enhancing their global awareness and connectivity and providing them with a broader perspective of the world.

- **Reduction in Face-to-Face Interactions:**

Noted by 58% of parents and 66% of non-parents, this concern reflects the belief that social media is significantly replacing traditional interpersonal interactions.

- **Improved Digital Communication Skills:**

Despite concerns, 35% of parents and 32% non-parents noted that children have developed enhanced skills in digital communication, which can be beneficial for their future academic and professional endeavors.



Perceived Societal Changes Due to Social Media Use Among Children Aged 8 to 12

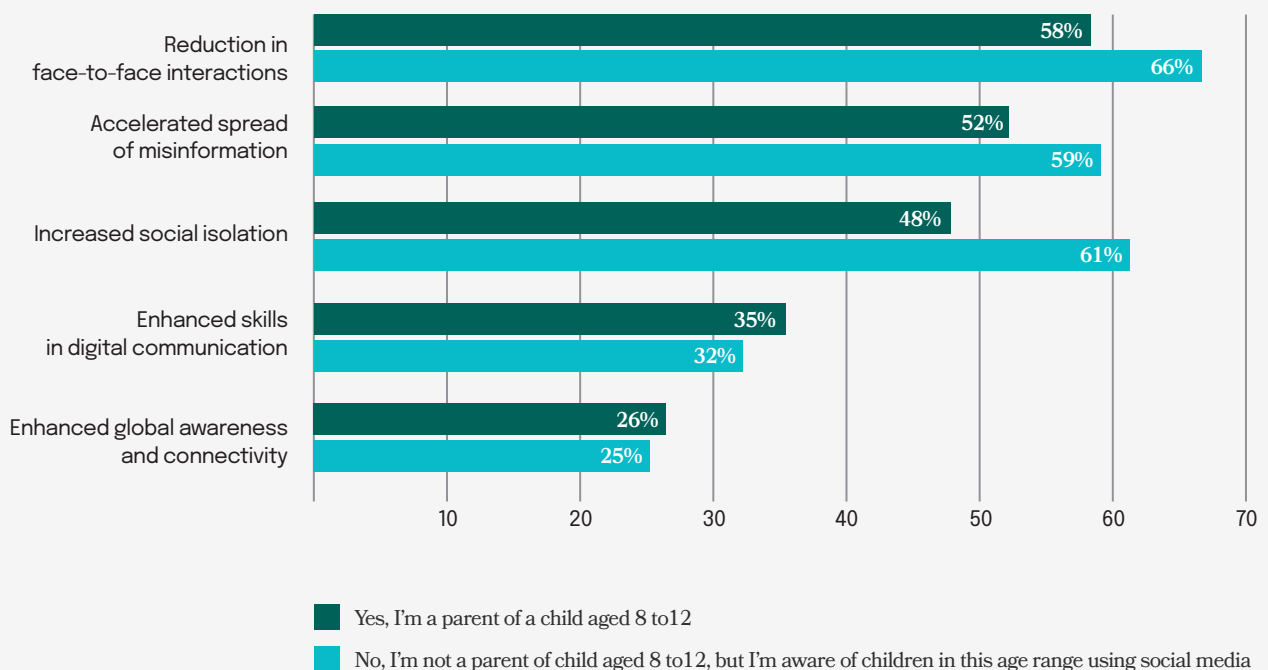


Figure 8: This chart visualizes the percentage of adults who perceive specific societal changes due to social media use among children, comparing responses from parents and non-parents. This chart does not encompass all possible answer options and, because participants could select multiple responses, the total percentage may exceed 100%.

These insights reveal strong concerns about the negative impacts of social media, suggesting that while it offers certain benefits, social media's role in reducing direct social interactions and traditional skills is alarming to many adults.



Strategic Actions for Digital Safety

Given the findings on the rising impact of social media on children's mental health and social behaviors, several actionable steps are recommended. These measures aim to protect and empower children, caregivers, and communities against the potential negative effects of social media use.

Enhancing Digital Literacy and Parental Engagement:

Schools and community centers should host workshops that improve parents' understanding of social media's risks and benefits and encourage active participation in their children's online activities to promote safe digital practices.

“It's so easy for tech-savvy kids to get around most restrictions on social media.”

Implementation of Robust Age Verification Tools by Platforms:

Social media companies should invest in more robust age verification technologies to enforce age restrictions more effectively. This could help limit access by underage users, directly addressing one of the primary concerns about exposure to social media at a young age.

“I think social media platforms should do facial recognition for people 13 and under.”



Schools as Support Systems:

Integrate Media Literacy in Curriculum:

Schools should integrate media literacy into the curriculum to teach children critical thinking skills about the content they consume and create online.

“I think it lowers their self-esteem and gives them a false hope of what they should value in other people and in themselves.”

Counseling and Support Services:

Increase the availability of counseling services in schools to provide support for children showing signs of mental health distress possibly exacerbated by social media use.

“My sons’ anger issues have gotten worse due to cyberbullying. They do not want to interact with people anymore or go outside.”



Advocate for Stricter Regulations:

Child welfare advocates and policymakers should work together to push for stricter regulations on how social media platforms engage with children, focusing on privacy, data usage, and exposure to harmful content.

“I think parents need more options when it comes to protecting children on social media platforms.”

Monitor Trends and Adapt Strategies:

Regularly monitor the effectiveness of implemented strategies and adapt them based on new research and emerging trends in social media use and technology.

“I think there’s better ways to regulate all media platforms if they have all these different platforms then protect the kids from them.”



Conclusion and Looking Forward

In conclusion, as seen in this report, the topic of children's social media use is a complex landscape which provides for a nuanced discussion among adults, parents and non-parents alike, on what the impacts of early social media exposure might entail. While digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for connectivity and learning, they also pose substantial risks, particularly in the realms of misinformation, social isolation, and the erosion of traditional social skills.

The data underscores a pressing need for effective regulatory measures and proactive parental involvement to navigate these challenges. As we move forward, it will be essential to balance the benefits of digital connectivity with strategic actions to safeguard the mental and social well-being of our youngest digital citizens, ensuring they thrive in both virtual and real-world environments.



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