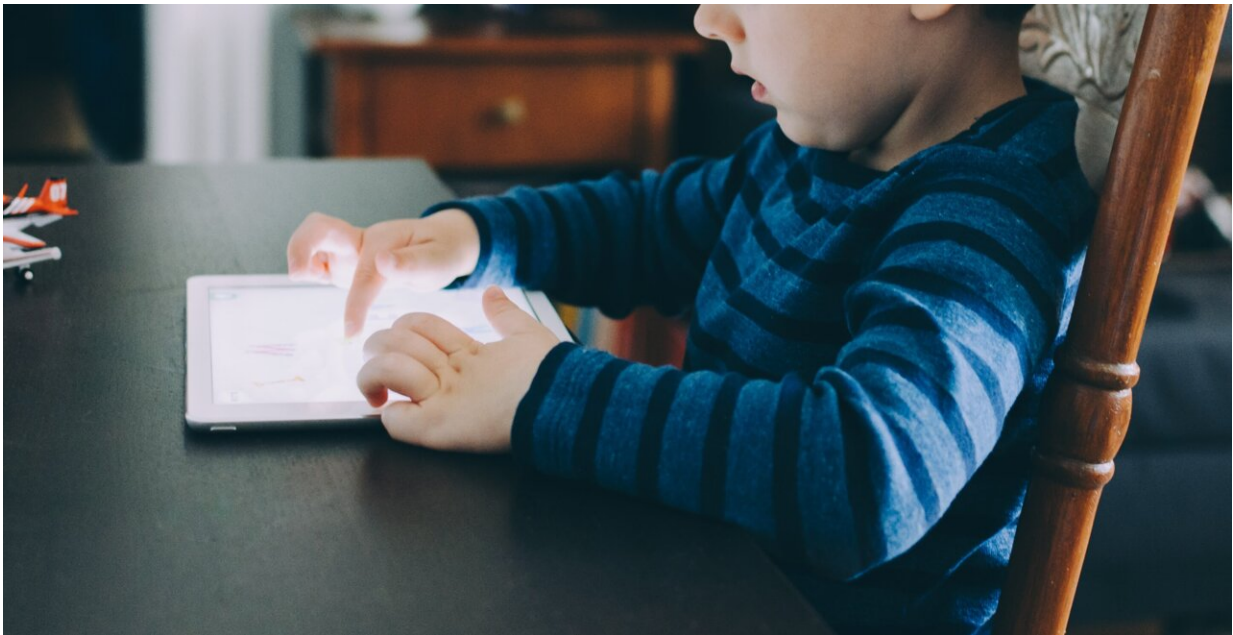


# How the pandemic changed children's relationships with social media

January 18 2022, by Greg Glasgow

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Responding to concerns over increased screen time for teenagers during the pandemic and the potential negative effects of social media use, CU School of Medicine psychology faculty members Jenna Glover, Ph.D., Sandra Fritsch, MD, and Merlin Ariefdjohan, Ph.D., reviewed recent studies on children and digital technology, synthesizing their findings in a paper published this month in the journal *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*.

We spoke with Glover—a psychologist and director of psychology training at Children's Hospital Colorado—about the study and the team's findings.

**Q: What were some of your primary findings when it comes to the ways children are using social media during the pandemic?**

A: Both in the United States and in other countries, [children](#)'s rates of anxiety and depression doubled—and in some places tripled—during the pandemic. So we knew the pandemic was having a big impact on mental health. What was interesting to me is that initially, social media was an important source of connection and information-finding for children. Because this was so new, and it was rapidly evolving, it was a great place for people to connect, share information and frustrations, and get support.

I know a lot of parents were very worried about, "Oh, my gosh, my kid has so much screen time now," but what the research was finding is that children being online a lot was not the important thing. It was the way that they were engaging with being online. For example, we know that active use can be helpful for a child's mental health, and it certainly was during the pandemic. If you are creating content, like creating YouTube videos, or if you're gaming with a friend, and talking with them while you're doing it, you're doing something active. That's super helpful. If you're passively scrolling TikTok or passively viewing YouTube videos for three or four hours, that's toxic for your mental health.

The important takeaway was that the pandemic made it so that we're on screens a lot more, but it's not the amount of time that you're on it; it's how you're using it that really is a difference-maker. There was a huge benefit, during the pandemic, to still being able to interact with peers,

see [family members](#), and still have those relationships and build those relationships. There were certainly major benefits of social media that were really helpful for a child's resiliency.

**Q: What accounts for that difference? What is so toxic about scrolling through TikTok videos for hours?**

A: One of the nice things about social media and technology use is that it helps children explore their identity and express their identity, which is a developmental task. Social support is an important aspect of their growth as well, and that active use allows children to meet those two developmental tasks. In contrast, with the passive use, you're not interacting with somebody; you're not exploring aspects of your identity. One of the things we compared it to is calories. Not all calories are created equal. There's [good nutrition](#) and there's bad nutrition, and technology is the same way. That passive use tends to be more like junk food. It fills children up, but there's nothing that's helpful or substantive for their growth in it.

**Q: Were there any other findings around the good or bad effects of increased screen time?**

A: One of the other interesting things that came from the paper is moving away from the idea of specific guidelines in terms of hours that children can be online, and looking more to see if there are core activities in place to support a child's wellness. If children are sleeping, eating, doing chores and homework, and interacting with peers and family, then the amount of screen time is not that important. It's when those things get disrupted that screen time needs to be looked at to see if that's what's disrupting those activities. That's a real shift in the literature. And it's a shift in our social consciousness that it's not about

hours; it's more about healthy activities as the foundation and making sure screen time is supporting those things, not taking away from them.

**Q: In a way, is that just an acknowledgement of how important the online world is to children? That screen time is part of their life, not a distraction from it?**

A: That's exactly right. There is some other interesting research that was recently done that showed that teenagers, in general, see social media as an incredibly vital part of their life. They see it as important in terms of expressing who they are and connecting with other people, whereas parents who were surveyed about social media see it as a waste of time and a distraction. It's really important that we don't minimize the importance of this platform for youth, even if adults don't see the same value in it, because they have grown up in a way that most people who are parenting them—or their caregivers, their physicians, their teachers—haven't. It's part of our life, and you can't take it away from children. Doing so actually could be harmful for their future progress and education and occupations.

**Q: Is that something you see in your patients or the children that you deal with, that they have that same kind of relationship to it?**

A: Most definitely. It's an essential part of their life. There's actually research that shows that when parents try to use taking away a child's phone as a punishment, it can increase depression and suicidal ideation in children. I see it all the time in my clinical work—it is how they experience their world. They need to be taught how to do it in a healthy way, but sometimes I think people look at it as a dichotomy, like it's a good or bad thing. But it's a both thing. And it's an essential part of life

for these children.

**Q: Is there anything you recommend that parents do to communicate with their children about technology use?**

A: Families should have ongoing conversations about media use in general, and what it means to be a responsible digital citizen. In the same way that we teach our children to be good citizens in the world, it's important to talk about how they show up online. It's important for parents have explicit conversations about what is and isn't OK to post, and why that is. And also having conversations about how many different accounts a child has. The more [social media](#) accounts they have, the higher likelihood they have to develop anxiety and depression. Having just one account is better than having three accounts. Parents need to think about how their child can be online in a way that is moderated and healthy.

**Q: Do you think the pandemic is going to permanently alter the amount of screen time these children have, or how they interact with technology and social media?**

A: I think this will permanently alter the course of how we utilize technology and the amount of time we are on screens. I think things like snow days will go away, because there will always be a virtual option. This is going to be embedded in our lives, for children and adults, for a long period of time. I don't think we understand yet the impact this will have on us, positive or negative, but I anticipate that this will change things and that we will have more screen time than we've ever had. And that will persist. So it's important to go back to those foundational

things—do you have those core habits in your life that are essential for physical and mental health? If those are in place, then if increased [screen time](#) turns out to have negative impact, it will be mitigated by that.

**More information:** Jenna Glover et al, #KidsAnxiety and the Digital World, *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America* (2021). DOI: [10.1016/j.chc.2021.06.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2021.06.004)

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