

# 1 in 5 US parents worry their teen is addicted to the internet

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American parents fear their teens' internet use could expose them to

cyberbullying, harmful content and set them up for addiction, a new study shows.

A survey of about 1,000 moms and dads found more than 22% were concerned their children might be dependent on the internet. Twice as many were worried about internet addiction as were concerned about addiction to substances like drugs or alcohol.

There are reasons for parents to be concerned, said [Mitchell Prinstein](#), the American Psychological Association's (APA) chief science officer.

Some data has shown that about 50% of kids are reporting at least one symptom of dependency on social media, said Prinstein, who was not involved in the new research.

The new survey, from researchers at the Child Mind Institute in New York City and others, highlights parents' feelings as they navigate teenagers and technology.

While some worry about internet addiction, many also say the internet has brought immediate and extended family closer together.

Study co-author [Dr. Giovanni Salum](#), a program director for the institute, said there is an overall perception that [mental health disorders](#) are increasing over time. Evidence suggests that [internet use](#) and social media may contribute to that.

"The interesting thing about this study, though, is that it looks into both ends—the benefits and the harms," Salum said, citing the family connectedness as a real positive.

The [survey](#) showed that almost two-thirds of parents were worried about harmful internet content and 53% about online bullying.

Yet, almost half appreciated improved connectedness among immediate family members and about 57% liked this for extended families.

In terms of addiction, the internet appeals to the brain's reward system, Salum said.

If the internet is just a small part of a person's life, that's fine, he noted. But if it's interfering with relationships and school, then it's cause for concern.

"There are a lot of benefits. The main thing I think we need to understand still is exactly what's the balance," Salum said.

Surveys were completed online in June and July 2022 among parents of kids aged 9 to 15.

Internet use included web browsing, email and other messaging, mobile phones, connected portable game consoles, digital media, streaming video and internet TV.

A majority of parents felt confident about gauging screen time length and having strategies to manage screen time with healthy alternatives.

More than 7 in 10 thought their kids could use the internet responsibly and over 80% reported they could discuss internet use with their kids and teens.

Parenting style seemed to have an impact on kids' [internet addiction](#) scores. The researchers found associations between those scores and inconsistent discipline, as well as perception of the co-parent.

The study helps to understand the context that contributes to some of the negative parts of internet use in adolescents, including certain parenting

styles and parents' own internet use, Salum said.

It will be important to understand all of this better, he added.

"We need investments in research and to understand exactly the benefits and harms because this is part of our lives," Salum said.

Other research has shown that kids are finding negative content online, said Prinstein.

"A lot of kids are being exposed to cyber hate, whether it's online discrimination or cyber bullying," Prinstein said. "We're finding a lot of kids are getting exposed to [harmful content](#) that teaches them how to engage in maladaptive behaviors, like cutting or anorexia."

Tech companies need to take action to prevent some of these problems, Prinstein noted. He also said parental controls need to be simplified.

Active monitoring by parents is also important, he advised. That doesn't mean looking over their kids' shoulders, but it does mean asking questions.

Ask your kids what they're doing on the internet.

Ask, "Why does it matter to you so much? And what are you seeing? How are you making sense of what you're seeing?" Prinstein said.

"Really be the number one resource for kids when they see stuff online," Prinstein said.

Taking some family screen holidays together can also be helpful, so the kids can see that even if it's hard, their parents are also working on that.

While parents often focus on how much time their [kids](#) spend online, Prinstein suggested that what they're doing on the [internet](#) might be more important.

Watching videos on TikTok with negative content is different than reading the news or texting with friends, he said.

"The question for a lot of parents is, 'What am I doing to make sure that their time is quality time rather than just how much time?'" Prinstein said.

"Are they connecting with friends? Are they enhancing relationships with people that they know are really the people they say they are?" he said. "Or are they just going down a rabbit hole without realizing how long they've been on and then feeling regret, remorse and exhaustion," Prinstein added.

"Monitoring that is really important," he said.

The APA released a health [advisory](#) in the spring with recommendations for teen and preteen social media use. The mental health organization compared training in [social media](#) to getting a driver's license, with value in learning the rules of the road.

The study findings were published online Oct. 26 in *JAMA Network Open*.

**More information:** Nemours TeensHealth has more on [online safety](#) for teens.

Harry Graff Kimball et al, Parent-Perceived Benefits and Harms Associated With Internet Use by Adolescent Offspring, *JAMA Network Open* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.39851](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.39851)

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