“Having open, frequent, non-judgmental conversations about what kids encounter on social media can help them become critical consumers of media.”

—Sarah Coyne

BY BAILEY DUCE

M any parents worry that their child spends too much time on social media, they will develop mental health issues and other problems. These parents may try to control their child’s social media use, and they often focus solely on limiting screen time, usually by demanding, “Give me your phone.” But researchers from the BYU School of Family, Home, and Social Sciences have questioned that approach. Several independent studies have found that the healthiest and most positive parents incorporate child input when parents create individualized media plans incorporating child input. For example, Sarah Coyne, a BYU professor of family life, conducted an eight-year longitudinal study and found that time spent on social media does not directly affect depression and anxiety in adolescents. Coyne found that it’s more important to monitor content and context.

When Coyne was asked what inspired her study, she said, “I’ve been studying the impact of media on child development for 20 years. But I decided to dig out this data when I was in a packed junior high school auditorium listening to advice about social media that didn’t fit current social media literature, which left me feeling really uncomfortable.” Coyne said that the results were surprising because they went against the general hypothesis and public debate. Coyne said that every person uses their time on social media in different ways. “It makes total sense because there are so many things you can do on a screen,” she said. “You can build people up, and you can tear people down. You can connect, and you can disconnect.”

As a result of her groundbreaking study, Coyne hopes the conversation moves beyond the breaking study, Coyne hopes the conversation moves beyond the 

Encourage Active Use

BYU human development graduate student McCall Booth said parents should encourage active rather than passive use of media. “Adolescents should avoid going on social media out of boredom, which results in passively scrolling and lurking,” she said. In order for media to be a beneficial tool rather than an emotional hindrance, she said, adolescents need to actively like, comment, share, and be a participant on social media. Studies show that adolescents who use social media passively as outside observers can feel more anxious than those who are actively engaging in online conversations. Parents can teach children to be active users and use social media as a productive tool to connect with friends and family.

Establish Bedtimes

Sleep is very important for mental, health, and screen time can interfere with that. Together, parents and children should set boundaries for media use at night. A child who uses social media right before bed can lose sleep, which negatively affects their physical and mental health. Booth said that families should create screen-free spaces like bedrooms, which “allows for media use in a way that’s connective and avoids isolated media use.”

Be Open Discussions

The first step is to talk with adolescents about the content they are viewing, a process that researchers call active media monitoring. BYU family life professor Laura Stockdale said, “Ideally you’re sitting with your child actively engaging with them.” She recommended asking them to reflect on what they see. For example, parents could ask, “Just saw a lot of violence. What do you think would happen in real life if someone behaved like that?” Stockdale admitted that these kinds of conversations can be difficult for parents, especially by the time kids reach the teenage years, but it’s extremely helpful in early adolescence. Coyne said, “Having open, frequent, nonjudgmental conversations about what kids encounter on social media can help them become critical consumers of media.”

Be Flexible

When creating social media plans, parents should constantly monitor and update their plans based on their child’s maturity level. Stockdale encouraged parents to be friends with their child on social media and to monitor their use over time. “As children get older, more mature, and show you that they can handle more freedom, you can loosen the reins,” she said.

Adolescents are often looking for their own social identity and don’t want a parent telling them what to do. When making media plans, both parents and children should be involved in setting boundaries. BYU professor of family life Laura Padilla-Walker has researched how parents can promote an environment or relationship in which teens feel comfortable sharing what they’re doing with media. One of the papers stated, “If parents restrict their child’s media use but do this in a way that maximizes the child’s autonomy and input, then the child was more disclosing (or honest) about their media use and kept fewer secrets.”

Be Really Flexible

Stockdale encouraged parents to create different plans for different children based on age level. “Every child and every relationship is different,” she said. She explained that if one child has a parent’s trust more than another child, parents can adjust their rules. Adding to this idea, Booth said, “Parents should explain to their children that different rules do not mean different love.” Booth encouraged parents to evaluate the needs of each of their children and determine what they can realistically handle. “If one child has a lot of issues with social comparison, parents should navigate his or her social media use a little differently than a child who doesn’t have those issues,” she said. Padilla-Walker stressed the importance of open communication with the parent and child, saying, “It is okay to have limits, but the child needs to understand the reasons behind those limits.”

One of the main takeaways from this research is that parents should feel confident in navigating the world of media and their children’s media use. Parents should initiate open conversations to determine a child’s strengths and weaknesses in order to create a plan that maintains online safety and builds social skills.

ENDNOTES