

How could students' use of social media be affecting their mental health?

Social networking sites such as Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram have changed the way students engage with each other and the world around them. A 2013 survey conducted in Ontario by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) found that 80% of students in grades 7-12 visit social media sites on a daily basis. While we need more research to determine how social media and mental health are related, 47% of students who reported using social media for two or more hours per day were also more likely to:

- Describe themselves as lonely and depressed, and experience 'fear of missing out' on social events, the latest trends and achieving personal goals
- Feel anxious when comparing themselves to idealized messages and photos of their friends', peers' and celebrities' social lives, and describe unrealistic expectations about beauty and body image
- Experience or witness cyberbullying and online harassment
- Experience serious disturbances in quantity and quality of sleep, which is crucial to healthy development and well-being

Replace Zero Tolerance Policies with Teaching Safety and Responsibility

Helping children and teenagers build a safe and healthy relationship with social media means guiding responsible use of these powerful social media tools. Threatening to take away or ban mobile phones and devices has proven ineffective in helping students deal with online conflict and stress, and achieve a healthy online/offline balance. Instead, encourage critical thinking and moderation using the following strategies:

1. Model self-control by putting your own devices away during conversations and meal times, and practice taking 'social media breaks' as a family or school community.
2. Treat students' interactions on social media seriously, as their actions and experiences have offline implications. Ask questions, reserve judgment and listen carefully.
3. Encourage critical thinking by asking questions such as, "What don't people post about?" "What do they crop out of the frame?" "Are people exactly as they present themselves online?" and "What makes getting 'likes' or 'followers' so satisfying?"
4. For parents, expect children, tweens and young teenagers to share their account information with you. Let them earn their online privacy in increments by showing consistent, responsible behaviour.

For online resources as well as the research references that inform this issue, please visit:
www.edcan.ca/facts-on-education