

They Grow Up So Fast: Social Media's Impact on Kids and Teens

Ahhhh, kids these days.

You've heard it before— from parents, grandparents, teachers, uncles, coaches— maybe these words leave your own mouth from time to time. It's a common expression, one denoting the absolute discouragement we somehow always find in the generations that come after us.

As a cheer coach at the ripe old age of 21, I find myself side-eyeing my coworkers every time one of my preteen students says something particularly... youthful. If you're someone with a teen or preteen in their life, you probably encounter this interaction often. It's easy to scoff at their mind-numbing expressions and denounce their raging social media addictions, but when you take a step back and look at the big picture, who made them this way?

The main concern I hear from friends regarding teens is that they are growing up way too fast. Eight-year-olds look twelve and twelve-year-olds look fifteen. The "awkward teenager phase" is becoming extinct. And they are right.

Kids are using unrestricted social media at ages as young as eight years old, despite most social media websites age restrictions being set at thirteen. Because of kids' spongy nature, they are taking in everything they see online and regurgitating it into their lives without the cognitive skills to critically analyze what they are viewing. They are subjected to adult beauty influencers, relationship advice, and political commentary, placing unnecessary pressure on our younger generations. It doesn't help that the rest of the kids at their schools are all consuming the same content, perpetuating the race to see who can grow up the fastest.

Kids ages 8-17 are in one of the most pivotal, confusing, and stressful parts of their lives. They are subjected to competitive school culture, bullying, and mature media—a large shift in what they have known up until this point.

This makes them unequipped to face the wild west of the internet without proper precautions. Preteens age 8-12 are especially vulnerable, as they are still in the process of learning to think logically and have not yet developed the cognitive functioning to look at things critically and make informed decisions. They are extremely easy to influence, which makes the generalized dangers of social media that much more palpable to the younger audiences. If they find themselves on the wrong side of the internet, it can be quite complicated to pull themselves out of it.

There are several dangers waiting for kids and teens online. It can start small, within a community with bullying from classmates, unwanted sharing of pictures, and spreading of rumors. These events are stressful for teens because it affects the way their peers interact and perceive them, which is often the most important thing to a kid within this age range. Without peer approval, teens can end up feeling isolated, embarrassed, and discouraged.

Another risk for kids' social media usage is the ever-present existence of scammers. Phishing emails and text messages are on the rise, and kids who don't know any better may be the most susceptible to these scams. These phishing attacks can result in the hacking of an account, mining of personal information, and even stealing of money. Even some of the most intelligent adults I know occasionally fall victim to these tricky messages.

The scariest threat to young teenagers is the possibility of them meeting a predator on the internet. This beast can take many forms, a 50-year-old man disguising himself as an 11-year-old to speak to minors, a coach messaging their underage students inappropriately, or an internet celebrity extorting her relationship with young fans. Predatory behavior exists offline as well, but with internet access there's no bounds to the number of kids an ill-intentioned adult can reach.

So, what now? Should we start snatching up all the teenager's phones we can find? No—we're in too deep at this point.

It's up to you and your family what age your teen has access to social media, but it is up to all of us to bear the responsibility of their usage on these apps. If you are responsible for giving a teen or preteen access to social media, have open conversations about it. Make them aware of the dangers of social media, whether that be online predators, cyberbullies, hackers, etc. Teach them what how to face danger online, set healthy boundaries, and encourage them to have lives outside of Tik Tok dances and Instagram approval.

For those of us who don't have kids of our own, be mindful when interacting with young teens online. Don't hold a 14-year-old posting makeup videos to the same standard of an A-list celebrity. Cyberbullying anyone is never okay, but bullying minors on the internet is inexcusable. Quite frankly, there's no reason to be interacting with minors online unless they are a family member or have a similar close relation to you.

On the other hand, corporations also bear the largest responsibility for protecting kids online, as they are the ones with the power to punish those who pose a threat to young users. It's extremely easy to create fake social media accounts and to lie about your age online, and it shouldn't be. Parents can't protect their kids from the internet 24/7, it's up to companies to regulate who is able to interact with kids online and enforce violations when necessary.

At the end of the day, remember to give these kids grace. It's not their fault they have access to more digital media than any generation has before us. Young teenagers are just doing their best to fit in with their peers and figure out who they are—all while the world around them rapidly embraces the digital age.