



**RUTGERS-NEW BRUNSWICK**

**School of Communication  
and Information**

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## **2025 Social Media Impact Survey: Findings and Recommendations from New Jersey Parents and Teens**

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## About the Research Team and Collaboration with the NJDOE

In December 2024, the Rutgers Teens, Family & Tech (TFT) Lab was invited by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) to contribute expertise and research capabilities to the NJDOE and the Commission on the Effects of Social Media Usage on Adolescents (Commission). The research team includes interdisciplinary faculty and doctoral students at Rutgers University in the School of Communication & Information (SC&I) who specialize in teens, family, and technology:

### Faculty

- [Jeffrey Lane](#), Associate Professor of Communication
- [Amy Jordan](#), Distinguished Professor of Journalism and Media Studies
- [Joyce Valenza](#), Associate Teaching Professor of Library and Information Science

### Doctoral Students

- [Nikhila Natarajan](#), Journalism and Media Studies
- [Kayla Wentzel](#), Journalism and Media Studies

The research team provided NJDOE and the Commission with a comprehensive literature review, survey design and administration, data analysis and interpretation, and data-informed recommendations that are discussed in this report.

## Acknowledgments

The research team would like to thank the NJDOE and the Commission for the opportunity to collaborate in service of students, families, and educators in New Jersey.

We would also like to acknowledge our collaboration with Rutgers-Eagleton/Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS) on survey design and administration.

We thank the School of Communication & Information at Rutgers University for supporting this project.

# Executive Summary

## Overview of Methods

In the spring and summer of 2025, the Rutgers University research team and Rutgers-Eagleton/SSRS conducted an online survey of 923 New Jersey parents and 202 teens. Participants were drawn from the [Rutgers-Eagleton/SSRS Garden State Panel](#) and the SSRS Opinion Panel. Conducted in both English and Spanish, the surveys took an average of 10-12 minutes to complete. Thirty-three percent of invited parents and 55 percent of invited teens completed the survey. Results were adjusted (weighted) so that findings would reflect the demographics of New Jersey's population.

Using both closed questions and a single open-ended question, the survey was designed to offer insights into how New Jersey teens and their parents navigate social media and smartphone use. Respondents were instructed to

consider *social media* as online platforms where users connect by creating profiles, sharing content, news and information, and commenting on or “liking” posts, and socializing. Some examples of social media platforms are: YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, TikTok, Discord, Reddit, and X (formerly Twitter).

Parents of teen social media users were asked about their child's usage patterns, while parents of children who do not use social media were invited to offer their views about teens' social media use in general. Both parents and teens were asked about their views on school cell phone policies and the age at which children should adopt smartphones and social media. The survey's final open-ended question asked parents and teens to share advice they would offer related to teens' social media use. Further details relating to survey methodology appear in the Appendix A: Methods Report.

It is our hope the findings might help guide family discussions on the role of social media in teen well-being and in the development of school policies around social media and smartphones.

## Overview of Contributions and Findings

This survey-based study is novel in two ways:

- Given intense national dialogue around social media policies in K-12 schools, the survey centers the perspectives of parents and their teens in **New Jersey** in the broader conversation.
- At a time when contemporary research emphasizes division between adult and teen points of view regarding social media, this study engages **dyads** of New Jersey parents and their teens, revealing critical points of convergence.

The ubiquitous integration of social media into the daily lives of adolescents raises significant concerns among parents, educators, and public health officials. As K-12 schools debate and consider restrictions around personal devices and social media use during the school day, focusing on children’s learning, safety, and well-being, it is incumbent upon youth and media researchers to listen carefully to the voices of the core stakeholders in the debate: teens and their families. In fact, one 13-year-old shared a common covert student response to school rules, “At school phones are commonly used in class secretly, despite the teachers’ efforts, so the whole system of banning phones doesn't really work.”

Our survey finds that **parents whose children do not use social media** express broad concerns about its **physical, cognitive, and behavioral impacts on teens**. In contrast, New Jersey **parents whose children use social media** are primarily concerned with more specific issues: **their children’s sleep quality, attention span, and their reduced physical activity**.

When examining parents and their teen children who use social media, we observe a **relative alignment in their perceived impacts of social media, suggesting families may share similar priorities for teenagers’ well-being**. Parents of teen social media users generally appear confident in their ability to manage their teens’ social media use. However, this confidence declines if their teens experience more negative emotions while on social media or if they experience, as a family, increased conflict related to social media.

The parents and teens we surveyed were generally eager to share advice about social media. Parents emphasized strategies falling into six broad, and sometimes overlapping, categories: prohibit, delay, monitor, moderate, model, engage. **Parents’ advice centered on constant vigilance and monitoring, delaying social media access, and staying involved and in conversation with teens**. Meanwhile, the **teens emphasized protecting time and boundaries**. They recognized the addictive design of social media platforms, the presence of scammers and predators, and the permanence of potentially negative digital footprints.

## Other Key Findings from the Survey

- Compared to parents of social media users, parents of non-social media users generally favor more restrictive policies regarding both cell phone use in school and the age at which young people should join social media.
- Conflicts between parents and their teen children regarding social media are primarily about time spent online. More than 4 in 10 teens report spending four or more hours on social media and many are using social media in school, during class, and late at night. Parents are often unaware of how much and when teens use social media.
- Teens reap the benefits of creativity, inspiration, and connectivity on social media, and use platforms for homework and information about school events. Their parents generally acknowledge these beneficial and scholastic aspects of social media.
- Teens have negative experiences on social media, including feeling that they have wasted their time, encountered inappropriate content and misinformation, experienced relationship drama and body shaming, and been bullied and stalked. Parents recognize these problems but are under-aware of the extent to which their teens are impacted.
- Only a small minority of parents and teens feel that unrestricted cell phone use should be allowed in school. Many more parents and teens feel there should be a policy that does not allow devices to be used during instructional time. Parents are more likely than teens to favor a policy that prohibits cell phone use during the entire school day, and teens are more likely than parents to favor a policy that says cell phones should be allowed at the teacher's discretion. A minority of teens and parents favor a policy that allows use during the entire school day. In terms of storage, a majority of parents and teens favor a policy that allows students to store cell phones in their bags.

## Overview of Conclusions and Recommendations

The report findings point to key takeaways and next steps for families, educators, and policymakers to better support healthier teen social media use:

- **Bridging Awareness and Communication Gaps:** Parents and teenagers share many of the same concerns about social media, but parents need greater awareness of out-of-sight usage times, and the negative emotions and experiences teens have on social media. Raising awareness of these gaps can inform how parents monitor their teens and foster meaningful family conversations.
- **Empowering Teen Agency:** Teens demonstrate self-awareness about their social media use and recognize its risks and benefits. Supporting their agency through open discussions about addictive platform design and demanding transparency from social media companies, along with peer-to-peer initiatives, can foster more intentional engagement with digital platforms.
- **Focusing Interventions on Well-Being:** Future campaigns and school-based programs should prioritize improving teens' sleep, attention span, and physical activity—areas most affected by heavy social media use that parents and teens both identify as primary concerns. Leveraging peer influence and family participation may make these interventions more effective.
- **Collaborative Policy and Future Research:** Policymakers, educators, families, and youth should discuss and, whenever possible, co-design policies that affect technology use that is ingrained in teenagers' lives. We also recommend future research to examine evolving patterns and impacts of social media use on teens in New Jersey.

## **Findings: Parents of Social Media Users and Non-Social Media Users**

We conducted an online survey of 914 New Jersey parents who have a child between the ages of 0 and 18. Parents who reported having more than one child were asked to focus on their teenage child between the ages of 13 and 18 who had the most recent birthday. If they did not have a teen, but had more than one child, they were asked to think of the child with the most recent birthday in answering the survey questions.

### **Parent Sample Description**

Five hundred eighty-nine parents reported that their child uses social media, which we will refer to as *parents of social media users*. Most parents in this group reported their gender as female (66.4%), their age as between 30 and 49 (67%), and being college educated (59%). Sixty percent of the sample was white, 10% Black non-Hispanic, 15% Hispanic, 9% Asian, and 6% other. The average age of the children for these parents was 13.6. Thirty percent of the social media users were 12 and under.

Three hundred twenty-five parents in this survey reported that their child does not use social media (*parents of non-social media users*). Like the social media user group, most of the respondents were female (68%), aged between 30-49 (85%), college educated (68%) and white (62%). Seven percent of parents were Black, 19% were Hispanic, 8% were Asian, and 5% identified as other. The average age of the children for these parents was 7.2. Less than 10% of the parents of non-social media users had a child who was a teenager.

We asked parents of social media users to report on their child's experiences with social media. For the parents of non-social media users, we designed parallel questions that asked them to share their perceptions of young people's experiences with social media. In our analysis, we first compare parents of social media users with parents of non-social media users, and we report parent age/gender and child age/gender differences when they are significant.

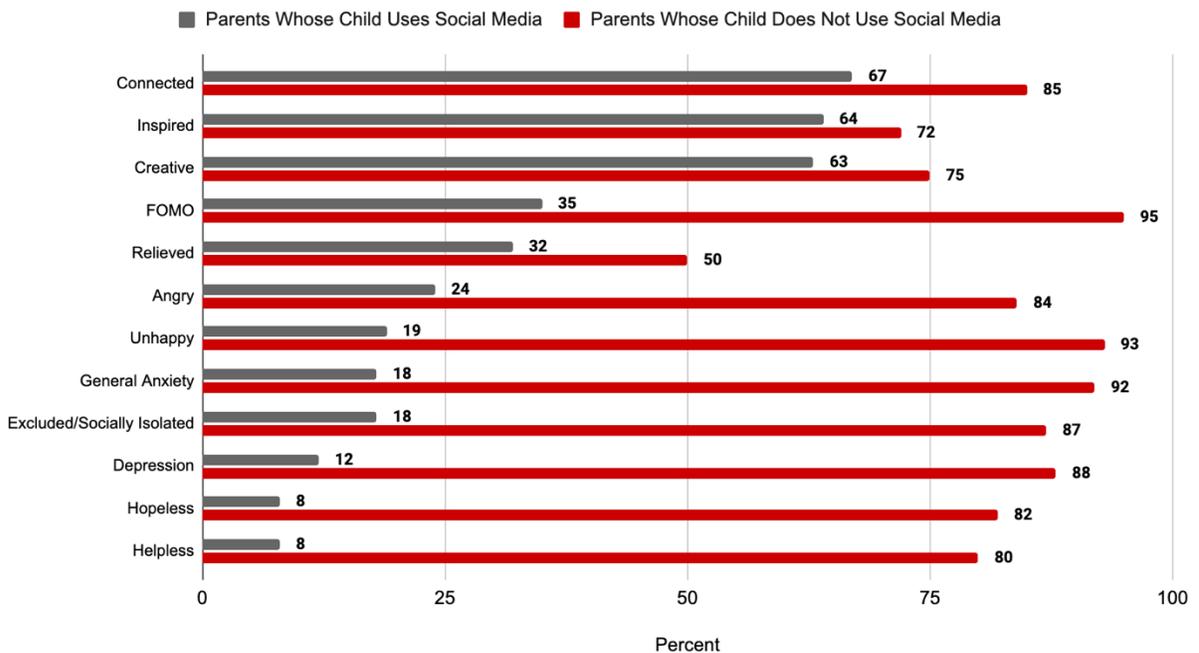
### **Perceptions of Effects: Emotional**

We presented parents with a list of emotions that young people might feel during social media use. Parents of social media users were asked to reflect on their child's experiences, parents of non-social media users were asked what they thought young people in general might feel.

Parents of social media users and non-social media users alike believed young people experience positive emotions while on social media, including feeling connected (67% and 85%, respectively), creative (63% and 75%), and inspired (64% and 72%). The percentage of parents

of social media users who indicated that their child experiences these positive emotions was far greater than the percentage who indicated their child experiences any of the other negative emotions, such as fear of missing out or FOMO (35%) or anger (24%). Conversely, the percentage of parents of non-social media users who perceived that teens experience positive emotions was smaller than the percentage for negative emotions. For example, while 72% of parents of non-social media users said they thought teens feel inspired while on social media, a greater number of these parents—92%—believed teens would experience general anxiety.

**Percent of Parents Who Report Teens Feeling the Following on Social Media**



Overall, parents of social media users tended to report that their child experienced fewer negative than positive emotions, whereas parents of non-social media users tended to report that young people experienced fewer positive than negative emotions on social media. In fact, almost across the board, the vast majority of parents of non-social media users—significantly more than parents of social media users—felt that young people would experience a myriad of negative impacts to their emotional well-being.

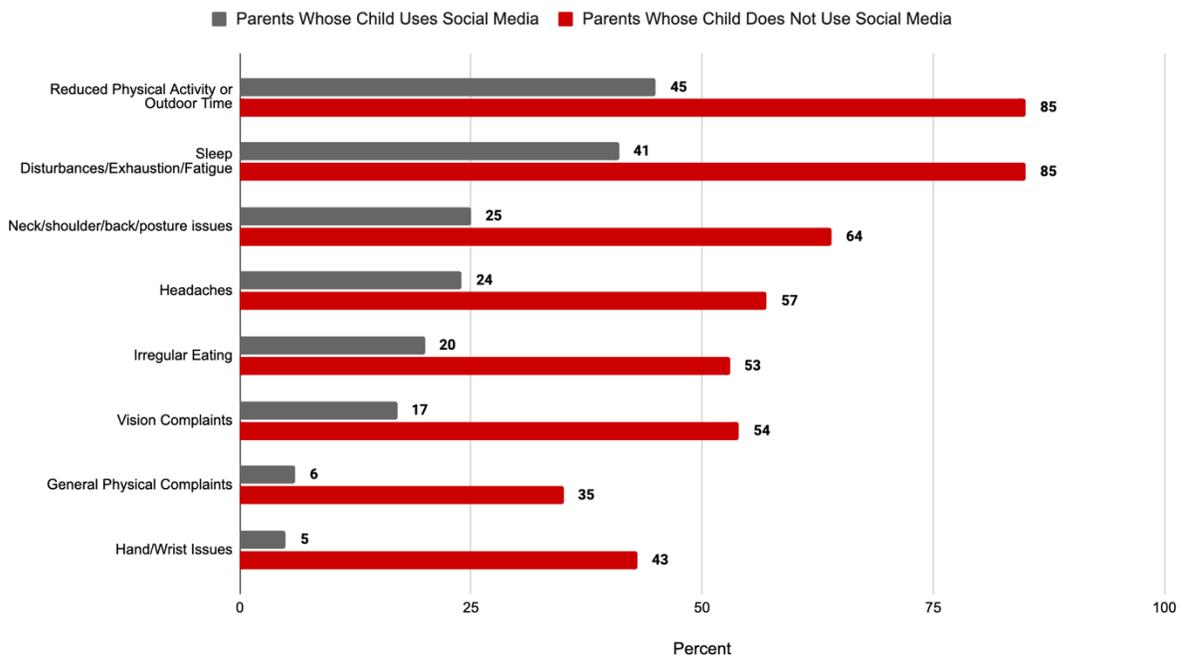
### Perceptions of Effects: Physical

We observe a similar trend among parents of social and non-social media users in their responses to questions about the physical consequences of teens’ heavy social media use. Parents of both social and non-social media users are most concerned about impacts on sleep

(41% and 85%, respectively) and physical activity (45% and 85%). These outcomes have been identified as significant issues for teens in several other studies (Lee et al. 2016; Nagata et al. 2023; Sancho-Domingo et al. 2024; Orben and Przybylski 2020; Scott et al. 2019).

Parents of social media users also said their child experienced headaches (24%), neck/shoulder problems (25%) and irregular eating (20%) as a consequence of heavy social media use. There were somewhat fewer concerns about vision (17%) and hand/wrist issues (5%). As with the trends outlined in relation to negative emotional responses, parents of non-social media users expressed significantly greater concerns about physical consequences of teen social media use, and their concerns, though amplified, mirrored those of parents of social media users.

**Percent of Parents Who Report Physical Symptoms After Teens' Heavy Social Media Use**

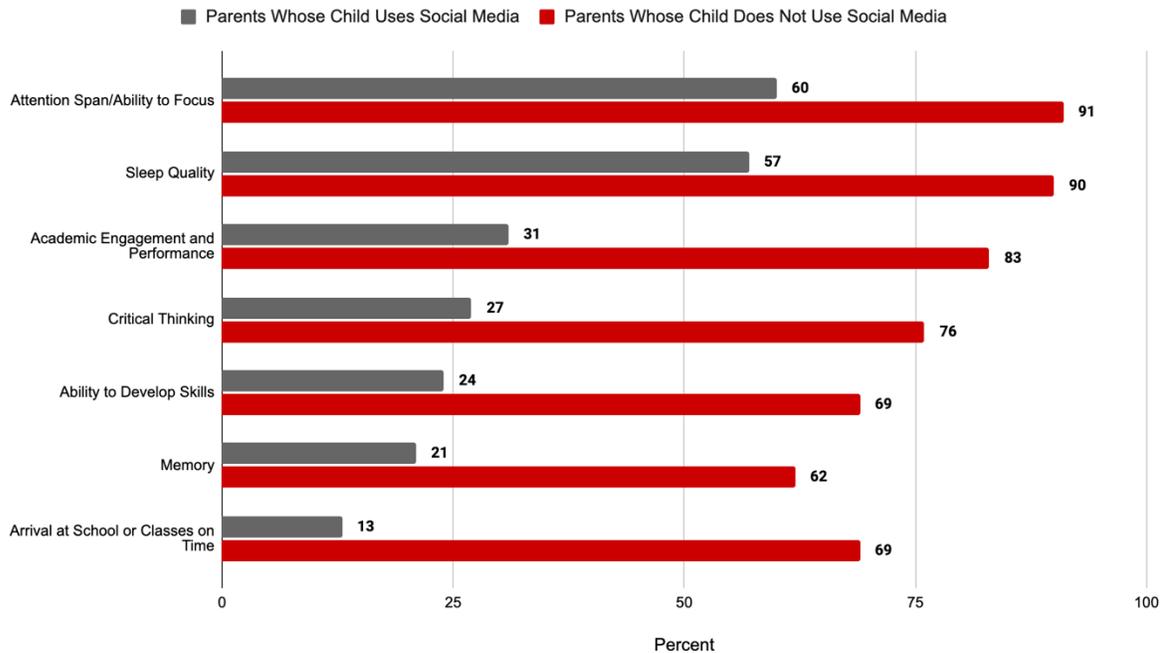


### Perceptions of Effects: Academic

We asked parents about a variety of impacts social media use might have on school success, ranging from arriving at school on time to ability to focus. More than half of parents whose children use social media felt that their child’s use affects their attention span/ability to focus (60%) and their sleep quality (57%). Many parents were also concerned that their child’s social media use negatively impacts their academic engagement (31%), critical thinking (27%), ability to develop skills (24%), and memory (21%). Each of these concerns was also held to a significantly greater degree by parents of non-social media users; their top concerns tracked

alongside those of parents of social media users: attention span (91%), sleep quality (90%), and academic engagement (83%).

**Percent of Parents Who Report that Social Media Affects Teen Behavior Very or Somewhat Negatively**



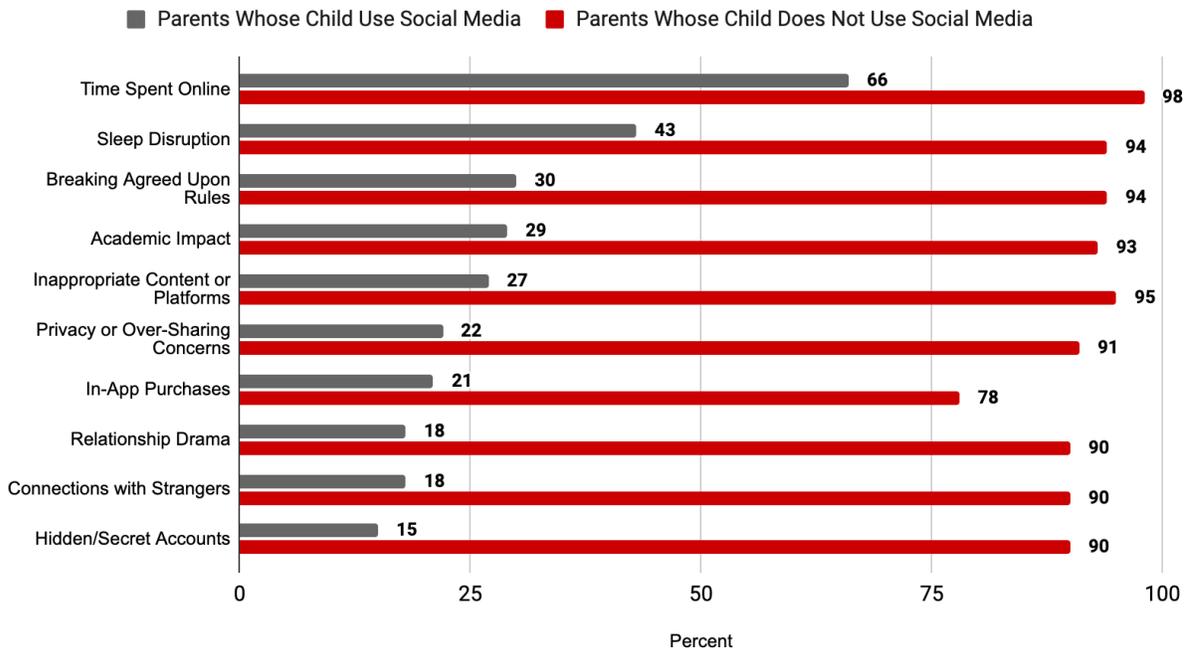
These findings suggest that parents of non-social media users have absorbed the message about the potentially harmful effects of social media use on young users' emotional and physical well-being and their academic success. This may open an opportunity to work closely to leverage parents' concerns before their children join the world of social media to encourage the kinds of familial structures that help children foster healthy social media habits. While parents of social media users also observe negative outcomes in their children, the actual effects were reports far less frequently than those imagined by parents of nonusers. What is perhaps most interesting about the data is the close alignment of the specific negative and positive impacts among both sets of parents. Both worry about social media's impact on sleep, physical activity, and attention span. However, both also see the potential of social media to help teens feel connected, inspired, and creative.

### **Family Conflict over Social Media**

Parents were presented with ten scenarios in which parents and children might experience conflict over social media, ranging from time spent online to hidden or secret accounts. More

than 90% of parents of non-social media users perceived that parents and children would have conflicts in literally every scenario except in-app purchases (78%). Among parents of social media users, at least 15% reported experiencing conflict in each scenario, with the most common issues being time spent online (66%), sleep disruption (43%), breaking agreed upon rules (30%), and academic impact (29%).

**Percent of Parents Who Report the Following Familial Conflicts around Social Media Use**



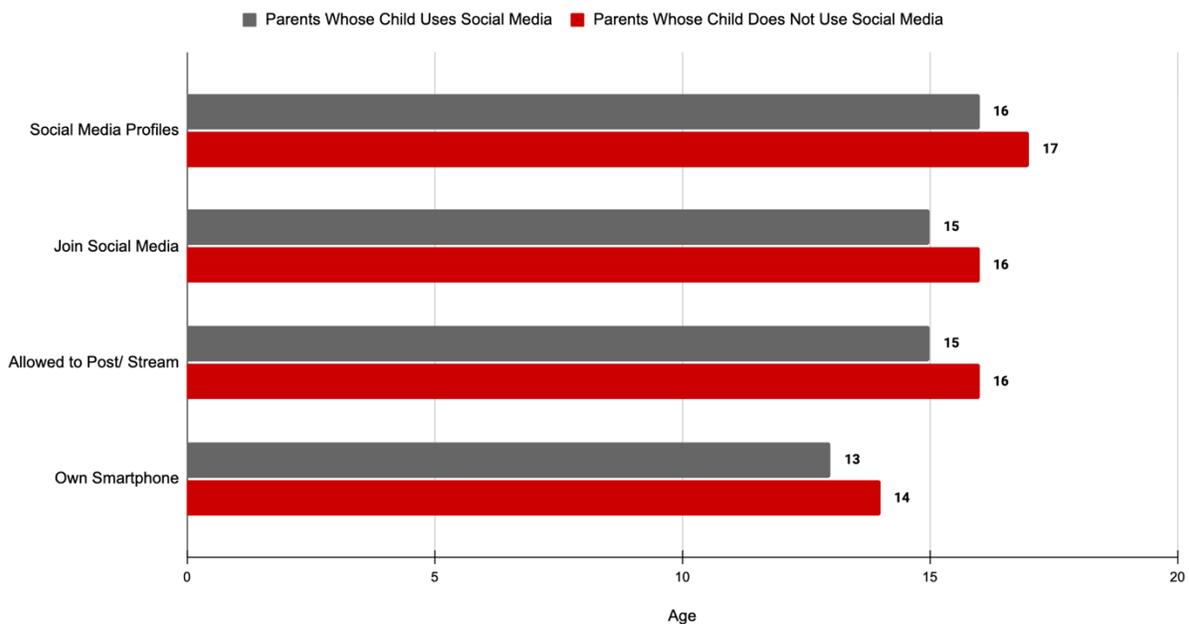
Social media use is seen as a potentially creating conflict within the parent-child relationship, especially by parents whose children do not yet use social media. For parents of social media users, conflicts with their teens center on how their children spend their time, how social media use affects their sleep, and how it affects their school success. While it is normal for a developing adolescent to want to challenge their parents’ restrictions, these data indicate that teens breaking agreed upon social media rules is a source of conflict that three in ten families with social media users experience.

### **Beliefs about Ownership, Access, and School Policy**

We asked parents about the appropriate age for young people to first own a smartphone and join the world of social media. Parents whose children do not use social media tended to suggest a later age than parents of social media users. However, both groups recommended that teens be older than current research indicates. When asked about the age at which young

people should have their own smartphones, parents said 13 or 14, though Rideout et al. (2022) report that 43% of tweens, ages 8 through 12 have their own smartphone and that about half of U.S. children get their first smartphone by age 11. Similarly, parents would have young people joining social media and having a presence on social media platforms much later than they currently do, preferring they resist being on social media until they are older teens. In 2022, Rideout et al. reported that 38% of tweens were already using social media and indeed nearly one third of the children of parents of social media users in this sample are under 13.

**Mean Age for Media Access**



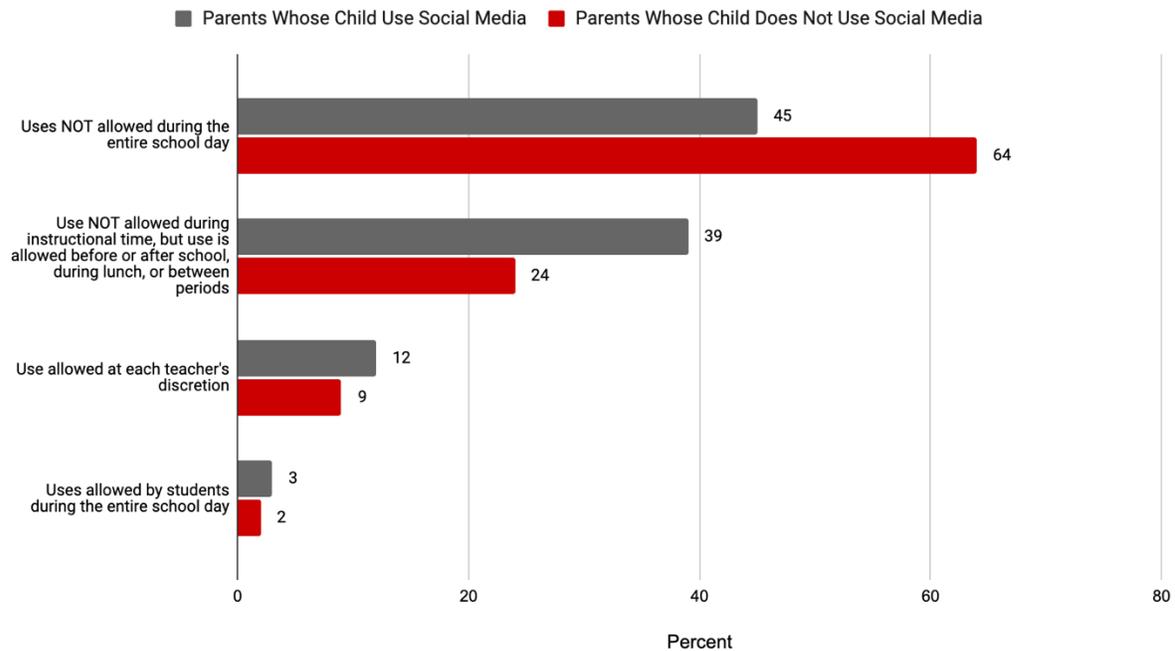
## Beliefs about School Cell Phone Policies

Across the country, states and school districts are debating whether and what they should be doing about young people’s use of cell phones and social media in school. We presented parents with several policies to assess their preferences – from very strict to very lenient – as well as how phones should be stored and what disciplinary action is acceptable.

The New Jersey parents in this survey were most in favor of personal devices not being allowed to be used during the entire school day. Forty-five percent of parents of social media users and 64% of parents of non-social media users favored this policy. Parents were also supportive of a policy that would not allow use during instructional time: 39% of parents whose child uses social media and 24% of parents whose child does not use social media favored this. A small minority of parents favored use being allowed at the teacher’s discretion (12% and 9%,

respectively). Virtually no parents favored no school policy on personal device use.

### Percent Who Favor These Policies for Personal Device Use During School



## Findings: Dyad Parent/Teen Comparisons

### Dyad Sample Description

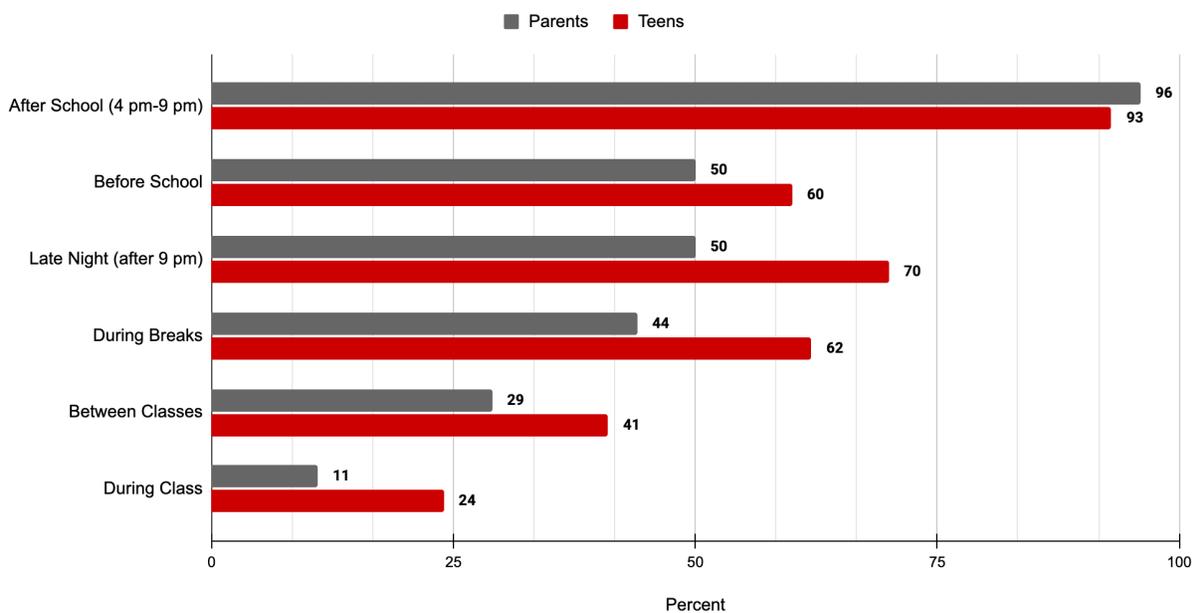
The 202 parent-teen dyads represent a subset drawn from the larger sample of 923 parents which included both social media users and non-users. One hundred and eighty-four out of 202 parents reported that their child uses social media. Most parents in this group reported their gender as female (73%), their age as between 33 and 60 (95%), and being college educated (55%). Fifty-eight percent of the sample was white, 11% Black non-Hispanic, 17% Hispanic, 7% Asian, and 6% other. The average age of the children in the parent-teen dyads was 15. Two hundred teens reported that they use social media and two reported that they do not use social media. The parents and teens in these dyads answered the same questions posed to the larger sample.

### Time Spent on Social Media

Virtually all the teens in our survey reported they use social media, including several whose parents were unaware of their social media activity. Social media-using teens reported being on an average of 7.6 platforms. Boys were more likely than girls to be X (formerly Twitter), Discord,

Twitch and Reddit users, while girls were more likely to be Instagram and Pinterest users. Nearly 41 percent of teens reported that they spend four or more hours on social media daily, an amount of time that has been associated with numerous negative outcomes (Riehm et al. 2019; Boer et al. 2021). Teens who fall into the *heavy social media user* category (4+ hours) were more likely to be older teens. Fewer parents (34%) reported that their teen is a heavy social media user. Additionally, fewer parents, compared to teens, were aware of the amount of time their teens spent on social media before school (50% vs. 60%, respectively), late at night (50% vs.70%), during breaks at school (44% vs. 62%), between classes (29% vs. 41%), and during class (11% vs. 24%).

**Percent of Social Media Use at Different Times**

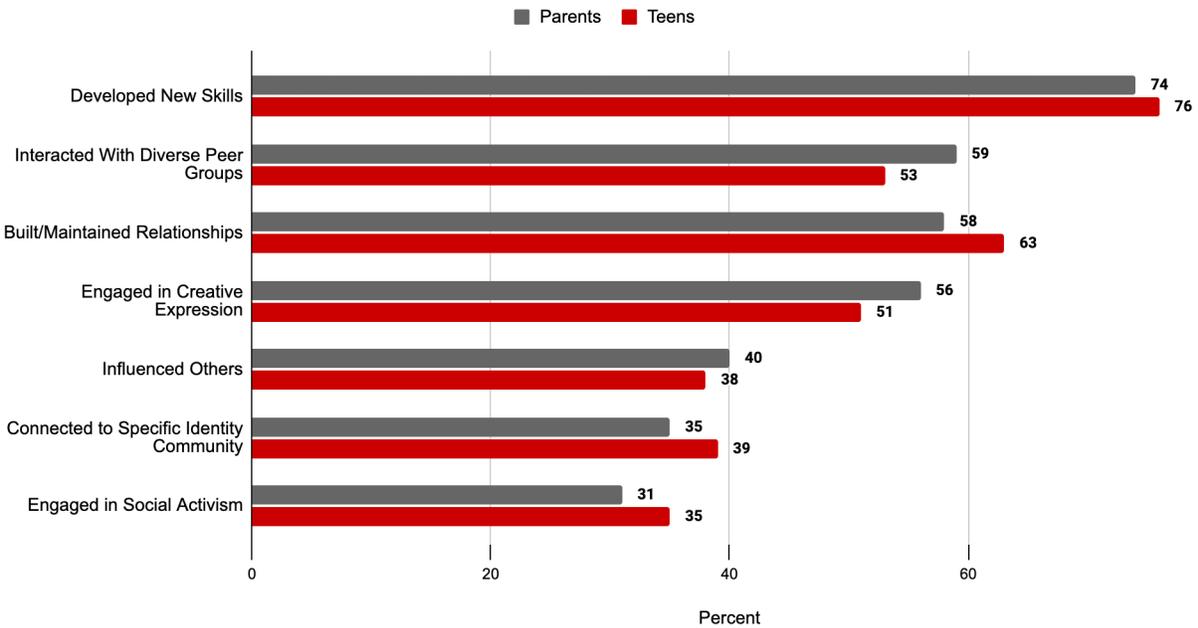


Given that much of teens’ use of social media occurs outside the immediate awareness of parents and shared physical spaces, these significant differences are perhaps not surprising. The findings suggest an opportunity to encourage parents to talk with their teens about when they are using social media, particularly during periods of time that affect their sleep and their learning.

## Types of Social Media Uses

Parents and teens equally recognize the diverse uses of social media. Three-quarters of both groups report that social media is used to develop new skills, and over half use it to interact with diverse peer groups, build or maintain relationships, and engage in creative expressions. Approximately one third of parents and teens also indicate that teens engage with social media to connect to a specific identity community, influence others, and engage in social activism.

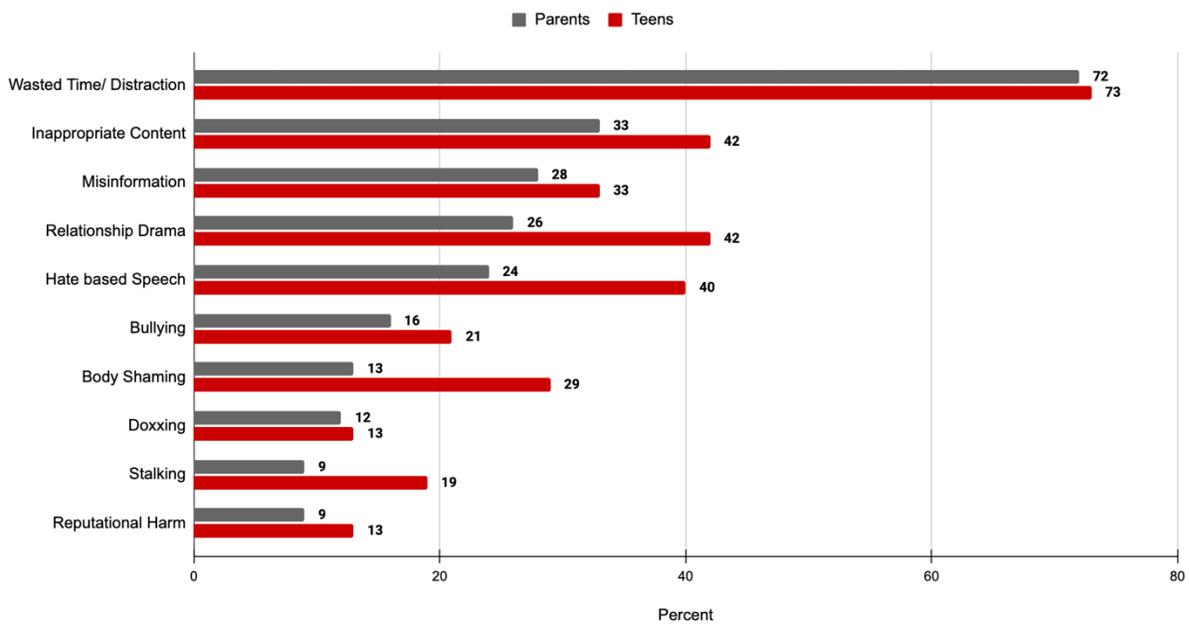
Percent Who Report Often/Sometimes for the Following Uses of Social Media



## Social Media Experiences

We investigate common negative online experiences to determine their prevalence among the teens in this sample and their parents' awareness of them. Of the ten negative social media experiences we listed, teens reported on average, 2.6, with their parents reporting a similar number (2.4). While there were no gender or age differences in the number of negative online experiences, girls were more likely than boys to report experiencing body shaming on social media. The most common negative experience reported by both parents and teens was wasted time/distraction (73% and 72%, respectively). One-third or more of teens reported experiencing inappropriate content (42%), misinformation (33%), relationship drama (43%), and hate-based speech (40%). Fewer teens, but still a concerning number, said they experienced bullying (21%), body shaming (29%), and stalking (19%). The parents in this sample recognized that their teens on social media had negative experiences, but not to the extent reported by the teens themselves. In fact, significantly more teens said they experienced hate-based speech, relationship drama, inappropriate content, stalking, and body shaming than their parents.

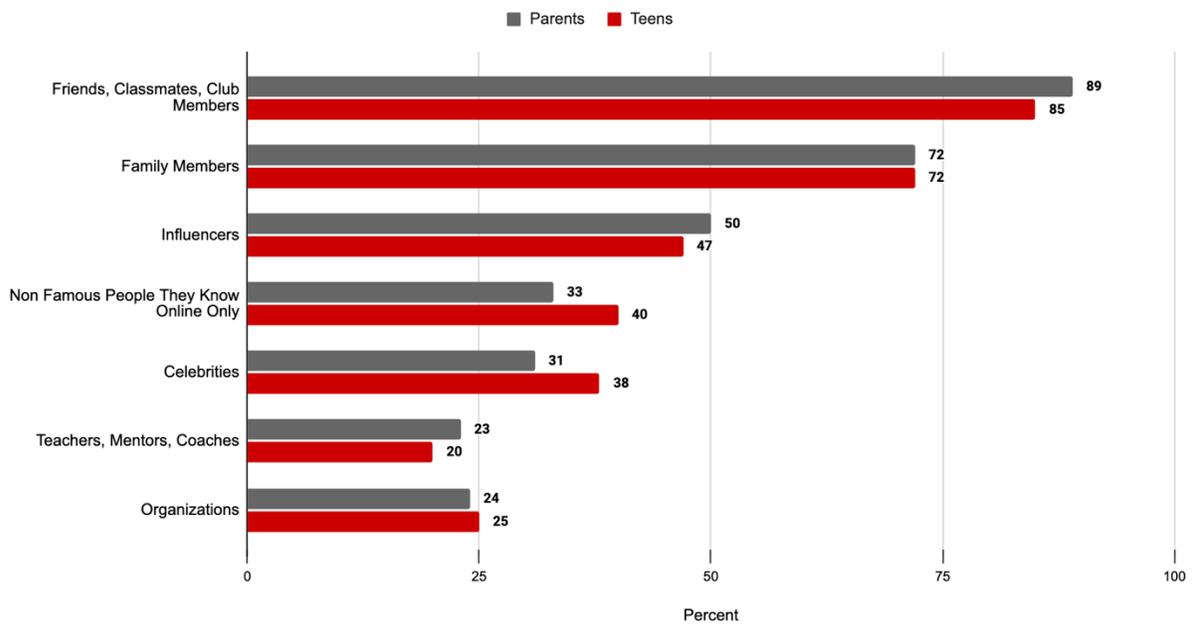
Percent Who Report Experiencing the Following Often/Sometimes on Social Media



## Community Connections on Social Media

Parents and teens shared similar views on the people and groups with whom teens connect on social media. Not surprisingly, more than 85% of both parents and teens listed friends/classmates/club members as the most common category of connections, with family members (more than 70%) listed as the second most common. More surprisingly, there were no significant differences in parents' and teens' reports for other categories, such as influencers, non-famous people, teachers/mentors/coaches, and organizations except in the case of celebrities. Thirty-eight percent of teens listed this as a category they follow, but 7% fewer parents did so.

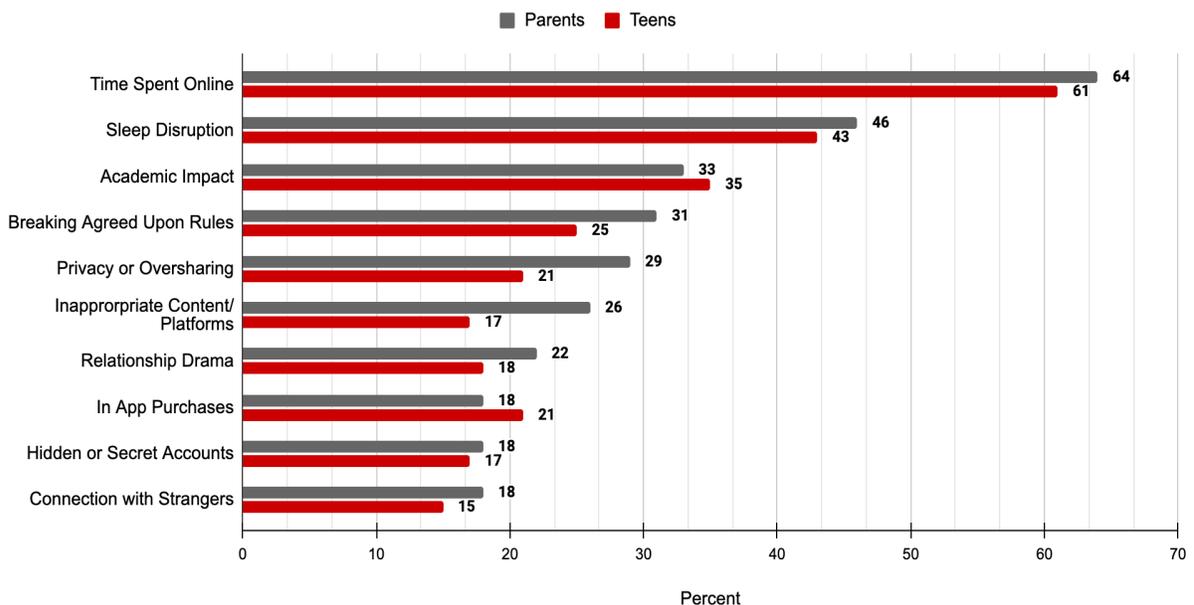
Percent Who Report That Teens Connect with the Following Groups on Social Media



## Parent/Teen Conflicts about Social Media

We asked about ten different types of conflicts parents and teens may have over social media. Teens and parents reported a similar number of conflicts, with no age or gender differences. Both parents and teens report that the most common conflict revolves around the amount of time teens spend online (64% and 61%, respectively). Parents and teens also agree that they have conflict over how social media affects teens' sleep (46% and 43%) and academics (33% and 35%). Other sources less commonly reported of sources of conflict included breaking agreed upon rules, privacy and oversharing, and relationship "drama," among others. The one area in which parents reported more conflict than teens was around teens accessing inappropriate content or platforms (29% vs. 21%).

Percent Who Report the Following Conflicts Relating to Social Media Use

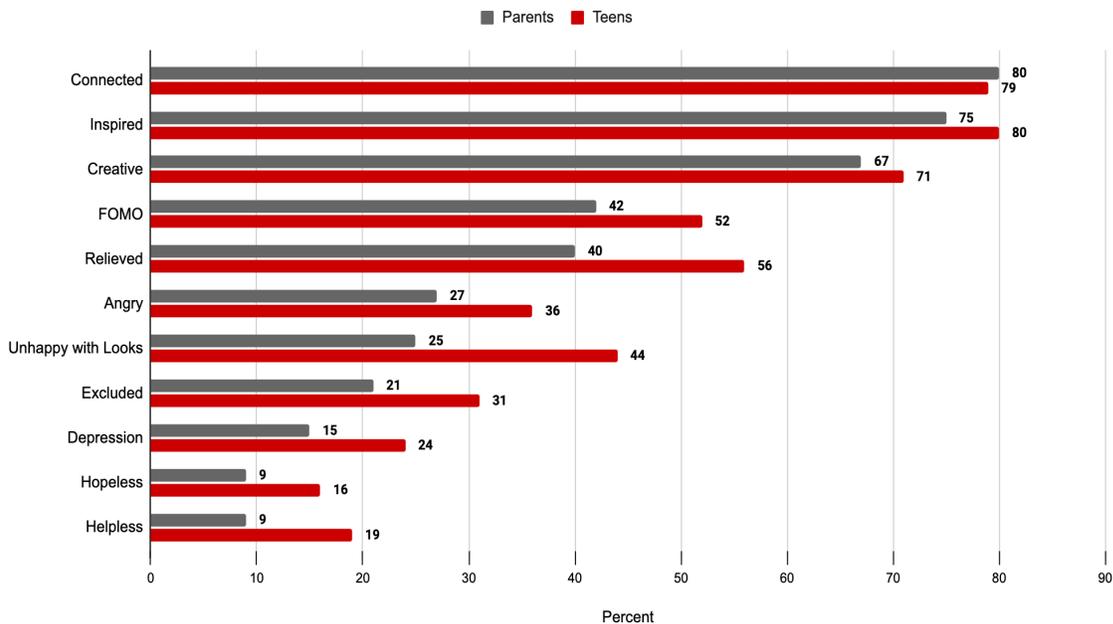


The findings in this section suggest that the parents in this sample are more aware of what their teens do and whom they follow and engage with on social media than one might expect. The findings also show that social media can be a source of conflict within families as parents and teens navigate the social media worlds within which teens live. Having a shared perspective and knowledge of teens' social media practices may offer a strong foundation on which to build clear communication about healthy uses of social media.

## Impact on Emotional Well-Being

Parents and teens largely agree on how social media affects teens’ feelings of connectedness, inspiration, and creativity when on social media. These positive emotions related to teens’ engagement with social media are frequently reported by both groups. However, parents appear somewhat less aware of the negative emotional toll that social media use has on their teens’ emotional well-being. We asked about eight types of negative emotions teens might experience while on social media; teens reported an average of 2.5 negative emotions overall, significantly more than the 1.7 reported by parents (with no gender or age differences). Teens were more likely to report feeling FOMO (52% vs. 42%), angry (36% vs. 27%), unhappy with their looks (44% vs. 25%), and excluded (31% vs. 21%). Less common but still significantly greater than parents’ reports were teens’ reports that, when on social media, they have felt depression (24% vs. 15%), hopeless (16% vs. 9%), and helpless (18% vs. 9%). Girls were more likely than boys to say they felt unhappy with their looks while using social media.

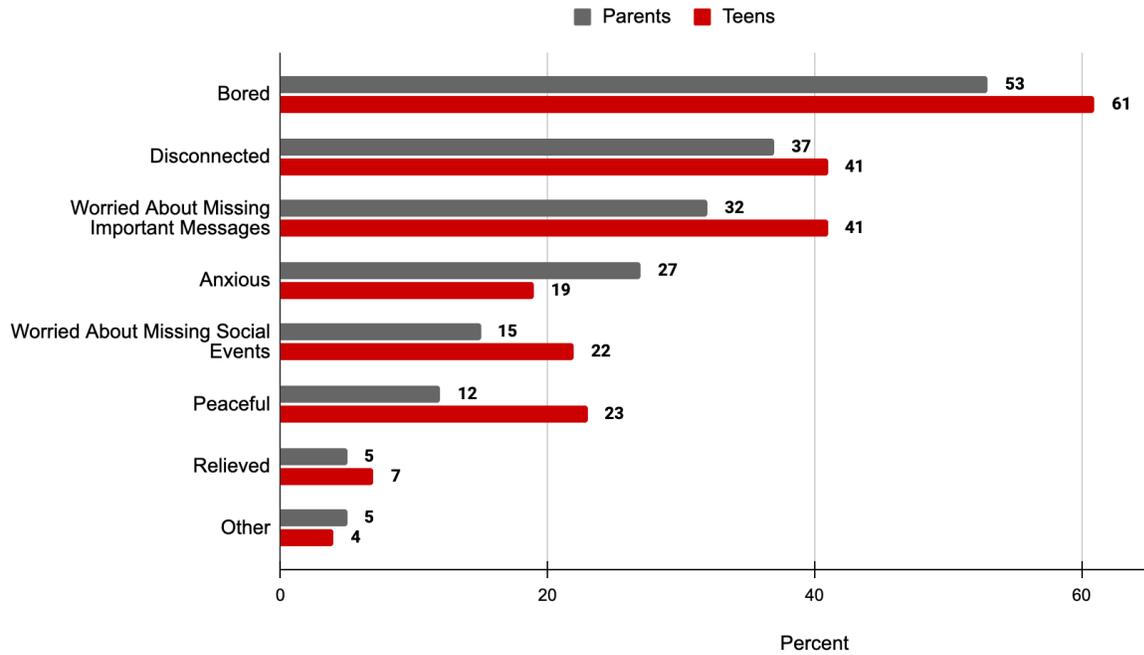
Percent Who Report Teens Feeling the Following Often/Sometimes on Social Media



Similarly, when parents and teens were asked about how teens feel when they do not have access to their phones, a phenomenon known as nomophobia (Terzi and Köse-Kabakcioğlu 2024) teens were more likely to report feeling worried about missing important messages (41% vs. 37%) and social events (22% vs. 15%). Significantly more parents said that their teen feels “anxious” (27%) vs. teens (19%). There was a trend towards girls feeling more “nomophobia” without their phone, but the difference was not significant. On the flip side, nearly one quarter

(23%) of teens reported that they felt peaceful without their phones, a feeling fewer parents recognized (12%). Both parents and teens recognized that without their phones, teens experience boredom (52% and 61%, respectively).

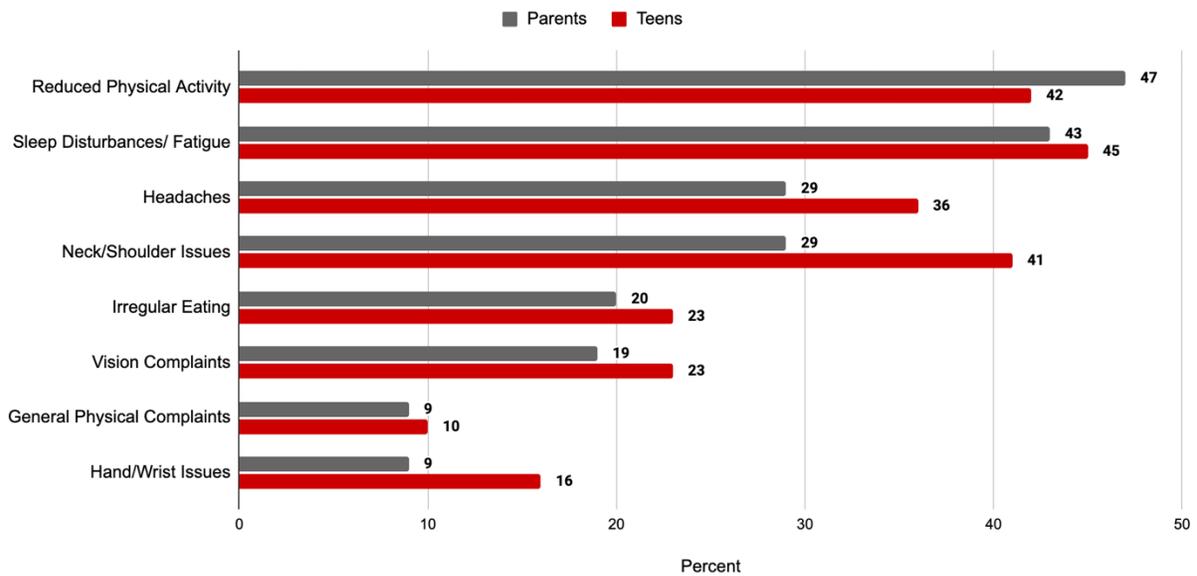
**Percent Who Report The Following Feelings When Teens Don't Have Access To Their Phones**



## Impact on Physical Well-Being

We investigated eight different types of physical symptoms that teens might experience after periods of heavy media use. On average, girls reported 2.6 symptoms and boys reported 2.0, with older teens reporting significantly more symptoms than younger teens. For the most part, parents recognized several ways in which heavy social media use affects teens' physical well-being. More than forty percent of parents and teens felt heavy social media use impacts teens' physical activity (47% and 42% respectively) and sleep (43% and 44%). However, teens were significantly more likely than their parents to say they experienced headaches (36% vs. 29%), and neck and shoulder issues (41% vs. 29%).

Percent Who Report the Following Physical Symptoms After Heavy Social Media Use

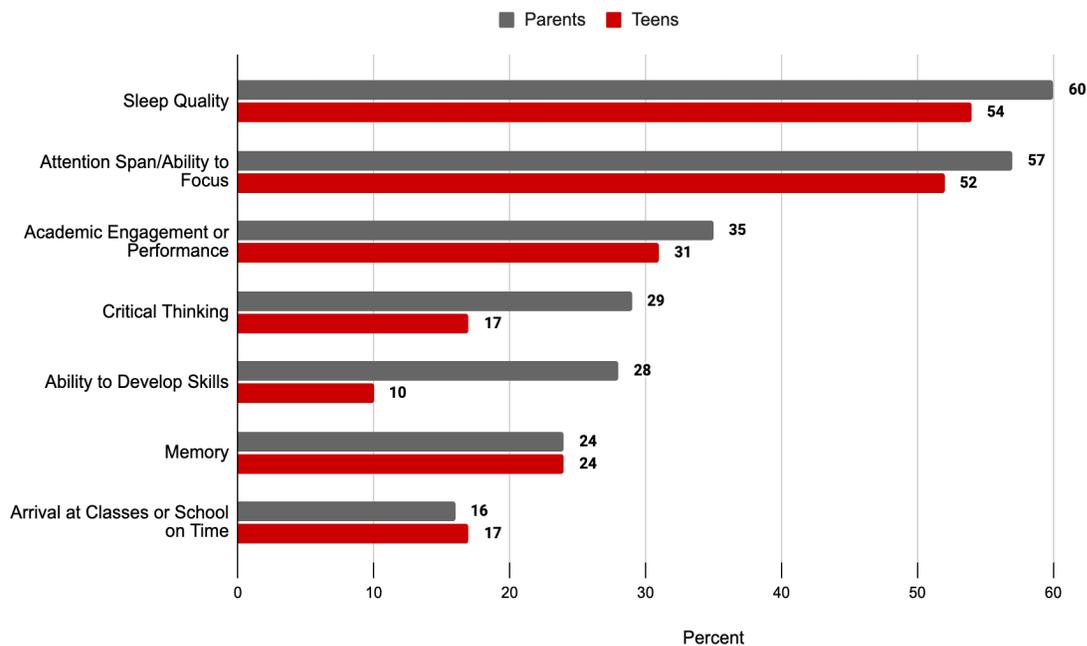


Taken together, the findings on emotional and physical well-being highlight gaps in parents' understanding of teens' social media experiences. Parents are less aware of the negative emotions teens sometimes experience on social media and while they are without their phones. While these emotions seem to be on parents' radar, they appear to be much more salient to the teens and more prevalent in their experiences than parents realize. Additionally, parents may be under-aware of the negative impacts that heavy social media use may have on teens' health, particularly its effect on headaches and neck/shoulder issues.

## Impact on Academic Behaviors

When asked about various ways in which social media affects teens' academic-related behaviors, both parents and teens reported that the greatest negative impacts are on teens' attention span/ability to focus (57% and 52% respectively) and sleep quality (60% and 54%). They also agreed on social media's negative effects on academic engagement or performance (35% and 31%), memory (24% each), and arrival at classes or school on time (15%, 17%). In this domain, parents were more likely to report negative effects than teens. More parents than teens said social media had a negative impact on skill development (27% vs. 10%) and critical thinking (29% vs. 17%).

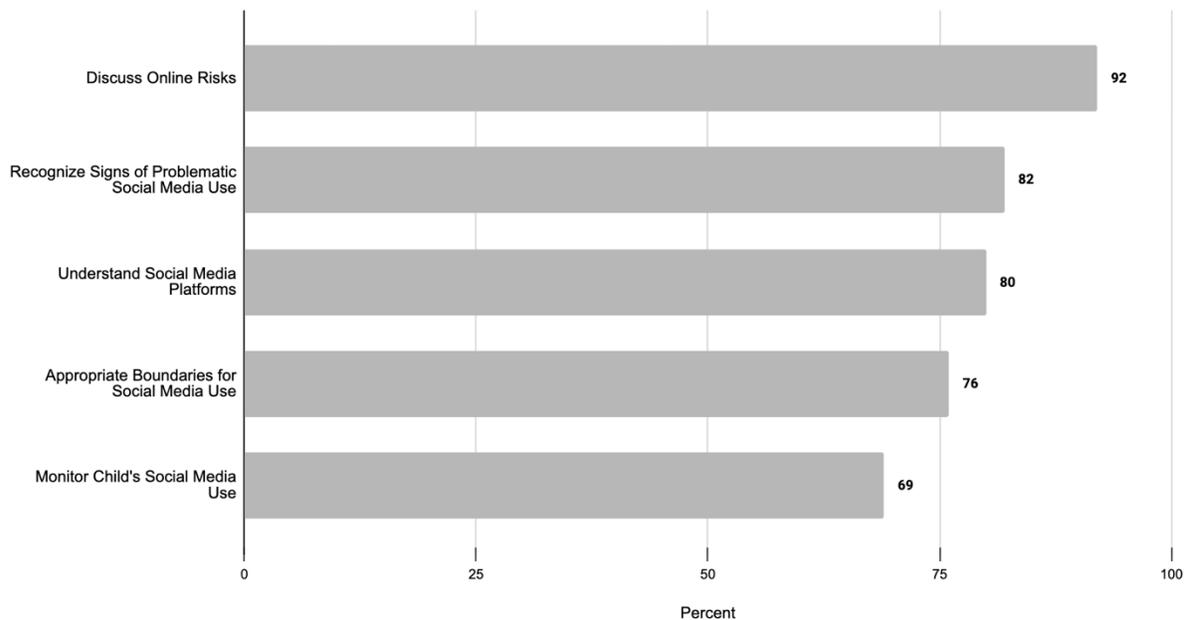
**Percent Who Report That Social Media Affects The Following Behaviors Very or Somewhat Negatively**



## Parents' Confidence in Managing Teens' Social Media Use

The majority of the dyad parents in this sample expressed confidence in their ability to manage their teens' social media use, with 92% feeling they can discuss online risks with their teens. While most parents reported confidence in various aspects of managing their teens' social media use, approximately two in ten parents were not confident in their understanding of social media, that they could recognize signs of problematic social media use, or that they knew how to set appropriate boundaries for their teen's social media use. Furthermore, three in ten parents reported a lack of confidence in their ability to monitor their child's social media use. Parents who reported lower confidence in this domain also reported that they have more conflicts with their child over social media and observed their child experiencing more negative emotions when using social media.

Percent of Parents Reporting Their Ability to Manage Their Child's Social Media Use

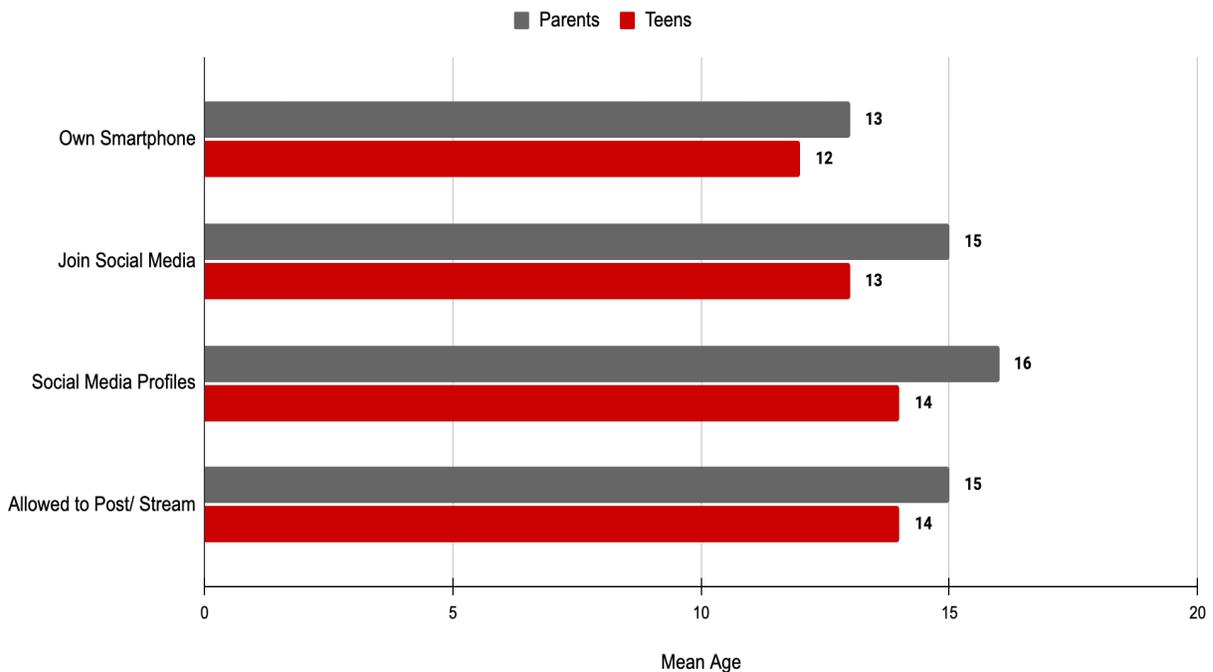


These findings suggest that there may be a sizable group of parents who could benefit from increased knowledge and tools to feel they can be effective in parenting their teens through the landscape of social media, including knowing when and how to intervene if a child's social media use has become detrimental to their well-being.

## Beliefs about Ownership, Access, and School Policy

Parents and their teens have somewhat different views regarding the age at which young people should be allowed to have their own smartphone and join social media. On the whole, parents consistently report significantly later ages for each milestone than teens. That said, 39% of teens felt that the age at which young people should join social media should be older than 13, the age technically allowed by social media companies.

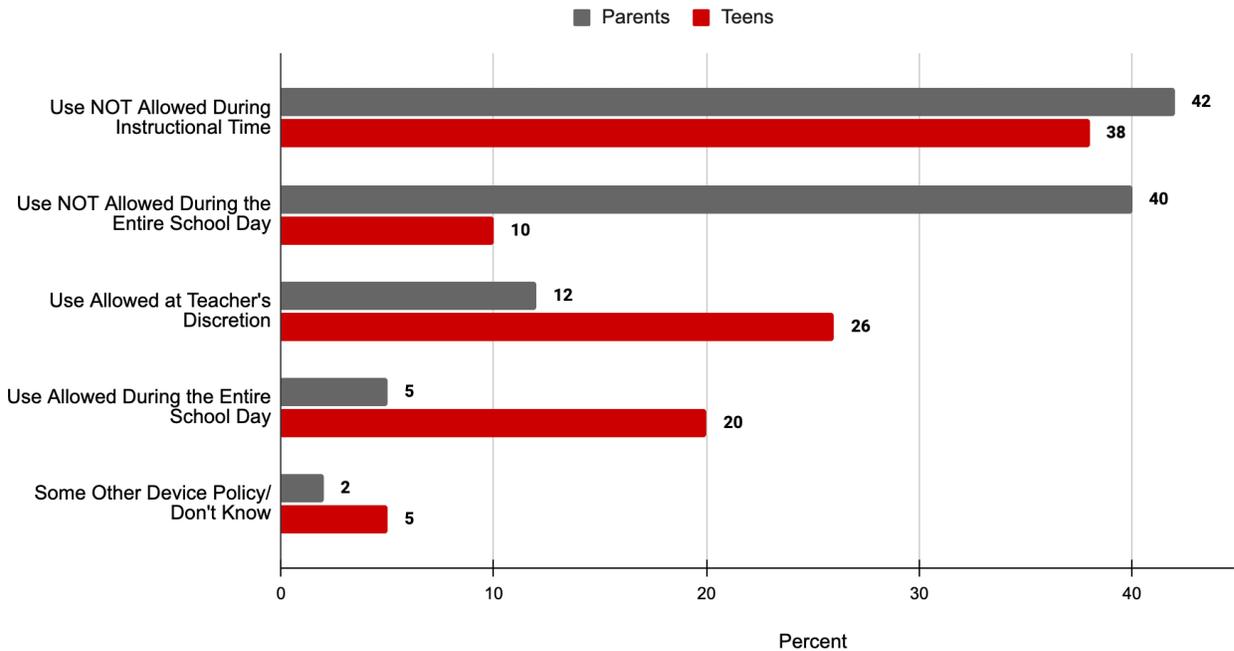
Mean Age for Media Access



## Beliefs about School Cell Phone Policies

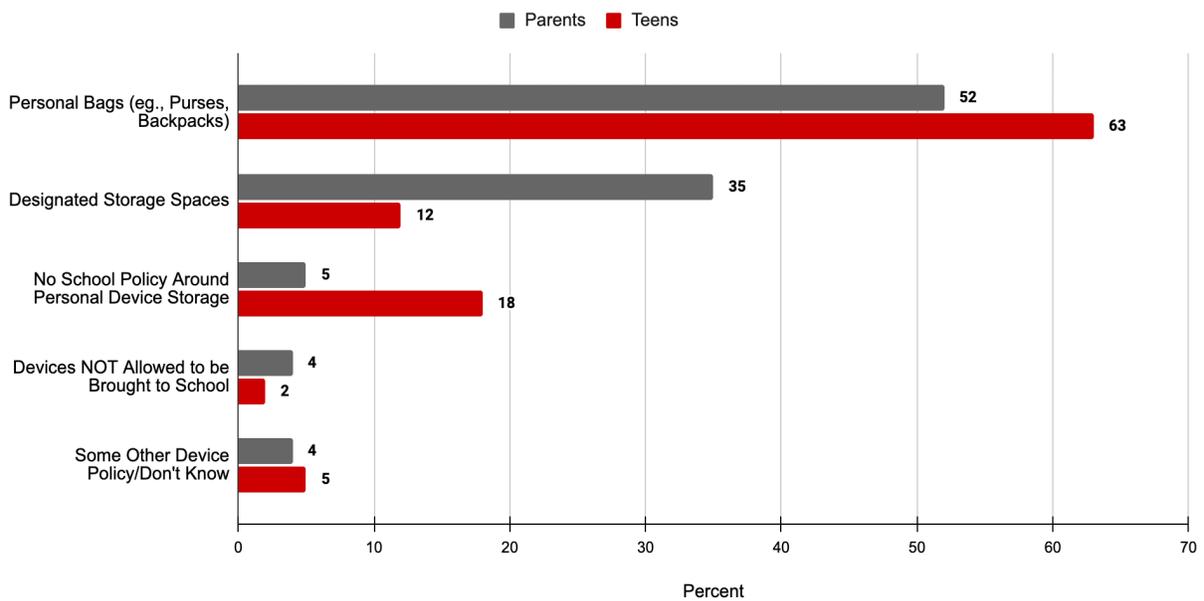
There are interesting convergences and differences in teens' and parents' views on policies around personal device use during the school day. More than a third of both parents (42%) and teens (38%) agree that use should not be allowed during instructional time. However, differences emerge regarding stricter policies; for example, 40% of parents favor a policy prohibiting use during the entire school day, compared to only 10% of teens. Conversely, teens were more likely than parents to favor use allowed at their teachers' discretion (26% vs. 12%), or use allowed during the entire school day (20% vs. 5%).

**Percent Who Favor These Policies For Personal Device Use During School**



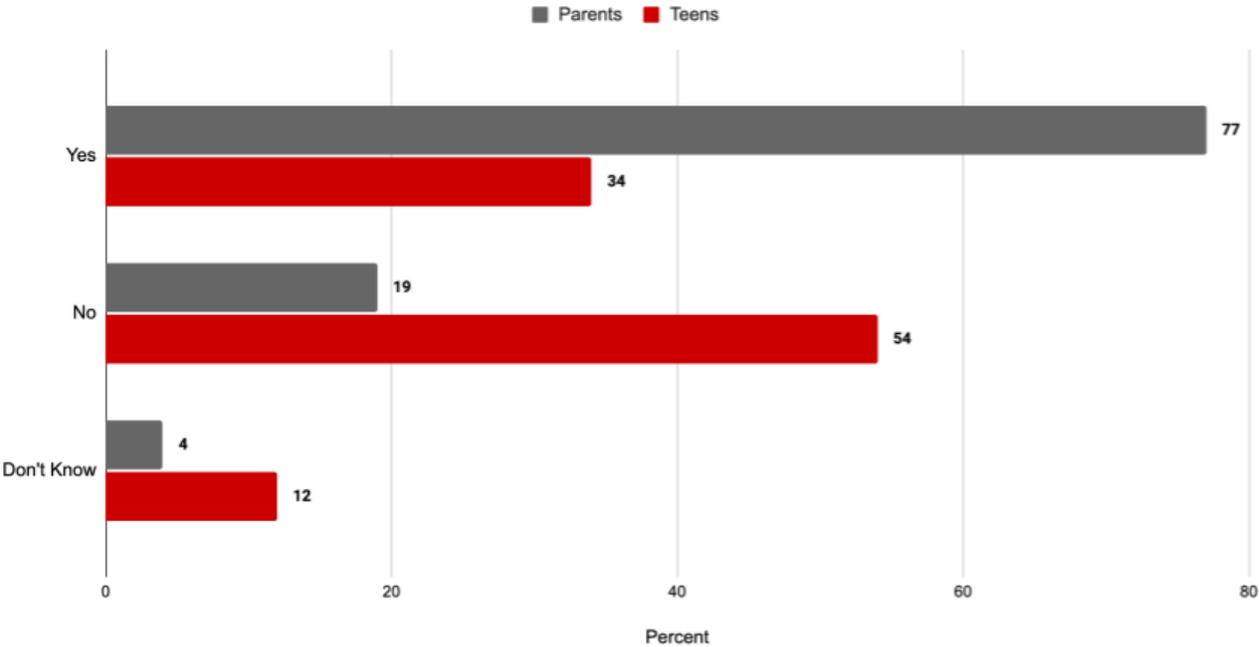
Teens and parents were somewhat more aligned on where personal devices should be kept when not in use. Many teens (52%) and parents (62%) preferred teens’ personal bags (e.g., purse, backpack), though more parents (35%) than teens (12%) preferred a designated storage space. More teens than parents also expressed a desire for no school policy related to storage (18% vs. 5%).

**Percent Who Favor These Policies For Personal Device Storage During School**



When asked about consequences for violation of school policy, twice as many parents as teens said that the teens' phone should be taken away (77% vs. 34%).

**Percent Who Favor a Policy That Allows Personal Devices to be Taken Away if They are Being Used in Violation of the Rules**



## Findings: Advice from New Jersey Parents and Teens

### Open-Ended Advice Sample Description

The final question on the survey was an open-ended invitation for parents and teens to share advice they would offer relating to teens' social media use. Among the larger sample, 67 percent, or 614 parents, shared their perspectives. As for the parent-teen dyads, 66% of teens and 55% of parents, or 133 teens and 111 parents, shared advice.

### Categories of Parent Advice

Parents emphasize strategies that fit within six, sometimes overlapping, categories:

- Prohibit
- Delay
- Monitor
- Moderate
- Model
- Engage

Parental advice on prohibiting and restricting social media came forth in the vocabulary of control, restriction, and vigilance. Many parents recommended not allowing social media and delaying as long as possible. Advice to monitor and conduct random checks surfaced frequently. Parents' advice on monitoring revolves around who and what their children are encountering online. Parents also emphasized dialogue and flexibility because, as one parent put it, "each child is different." Parents encourage having frank discussions, staying involved, building trust, and actively guiding children rather than relying solely on policing their behavior. Underlying the dominant themes of monitoring and dialogue, there is a recognition that social media cannot be entirely avoided and that rules must be flexible or consider positive applications such as safety and connection in everyday life.

The following quotes represent the six categories of advice from parents, and the frequency of the tone and representative messages expressed:

## Parents' Advice and Parenting Strategies on Teen Social Media Use

Advice (Count)	Strategy	Representative Parent Quotes
<b>Prohibit (28)</b>	Ban, limit	<i>"Don't allow it. Period. My daughter is 15, I haven't allowed her to use social media and it's one of the best decisions I made as her mother." (Parent of 15-year-old girl)</i>
<b>Delay (33)</b>	Wait until child is older	<i>"Delay as long as possible. It is a GIFT of extended childhood to hold off on social media. Their brains cannot handle it." (Parent of 14-year-old boy)</i>
<b>Monitor (91)</b>	Check phones, content, connections	<i>"Get to know your child...then you'll have a good grasp of what they are looking at on social media...Go through their phones if necessary, these are our children. We need to protect them from what they Don't Know and think they do." (Parent of 17-year-old girl)</i>
<b>Moderate (46)</b>	Time limits, rules	<i>"Social media is part of life, so helping kids navigate it is important even if you limit and monitor their use. Keep lines of communication open and rules as flexible as possible for each child's needs and reactions...discussion is better than hard rules. They'll be on their own soon and will have access to everything they want so it's best to have had lots of conversation and allowed them some freedom so they can make mistakes (like taking the phone to bed) and learning from them." (Parent of 16-year-old girl)</i>
<b>Model (8)</b>	Reflect on own social media use	<i>"Parents' relationship to their children's social media use probably mirrors the overall relationship. Parents might best model the behavior they want to see and offer open communication while respecting personal boundaries. That has worked very well for my two adolescent children and in my life as a classroom teacher." (Parent of 18-year-old boy)</i>
<b>Engage (46)</b>	Trust, dialogue, conversation	<i>"Listen to your kids. Don't lose your mind over what they're watching. If you do, they'll keep it secret. Better that they're unafraid to share it with you so that you can influence how they think and feel about what they're seeing by letting them know if it's good or bad rather than to just fly off the handle and punish their curiosity. You will never be able to hide them from the world. You have to guide them through the world while you can." (Parent of 16-year-old girl)</i>

## Categories of Teen Advice

Teens reflected on their social media experiences and offered advice along the following lines:

- Personal safety
- Moderation, addiction awareness
- Posting responsibly; digital permanence
- Well-being
- Positive peer interaction

Teens' advice revolves around themes of heightened wariness. While seeking to carve out their personal digital space, they remain acutely aware of negative impacts they and their peers experience on social media. They counter by recommending sharing photos only with a trusted circle of contacts and taking action swiftly when online harm surfaces. Younger *and* older teens mentioned the risks and permanence of digital footprints. Some teens, who mentioned parents in their comments, expressed trust that their parents could be taken into confidence should problems arise.

The advice, offered by both girls and boys, reveals consensus on core safety protocols, extending beyond general caution to specific tactics for risk mitigation. Both boys and girls frequently caution against overuse and addiction, emphasizing the need to limit time spent on social media. Some teens described their own experiences on social media while others reflected on their peers' social media use. A second area of overlap involves both groups advising against trusting or communicating with strangers and advocating for interaction only with people known in real life. A third area of convergence is around safeguarding personal information, with frequent warnings against sharing private details, including addresses or private photos. Girls offer more frequent guidance on psychological impact, advising users not to compare themselves to others online, noting that social media often makes younger teens feel insecure or depressed. They stress the importance of evaluating if social media use *actually makes you feel good*. Girls also address the long-term risk of content permanence with reminders such as *everything you post will be there forever*, and that content can always be found even if deleted. Boys make the distinction between learning versus entertainment, asking users to be intentional and *use it to learn and grow, not to entertain*.

Similar to parents' insights, the teens' advice fit into broad thematic categories:

## Teens' Advice and Strategies for Social Media Use

Advice (Count)	Strategy	Representative Teen Quotes
<b>Safety, Privacy (31)</b>	Protect against strangers, scams, exposure of personal information	<p><i>"Do not trust anyone! Do not meet strangers. Tell your parents about who you're talking to." (18-year-old girl)</i></p> <p><i>"Don't fall for scams . . . It could possibly harm you as in doxxing you or people around you." (14-year-old girl)</i></p>
<b>Balance, Addiction Awareness (17)</b>	Limit time spent, recognize addictive design	<p><i>"Put down your phone and pay attention, it'll be worth it once you realize how much more productive you are." (15-year-old girl)</i></p> <p><i>"Even though it doesn't feel like it, social media is a drug. it preys on dopamine...it is really hard to keep a positive relationship with it...use carefully, or at least consciously." (18-year-old boy)</i></p>
<b>Digital Permanence (8)</b>	Post responsibly, the internet never forgets	<p><i>"Never ever, ever post images of yourself or your face until you are 18 years old. Know that whatever you put out there can always be found even if deleted." (14-year-old girl)</i></p> <p><i>"Remember that other people can see what you post, even people that you don't know. Once you put it out there, they can do whatever they want with that." (16-year-old girl)</i></p>
<b>Well-Being (12)</b>	Avoid comparisons that lead to negative self-image	<p><i>"If you give social media too much power you will find yourself in an addictive state and...requiring satisfaction and approval from people online that you do and don't know." (18-year-old boy)</i></p> <p><i>"I do not believe that people who aren't sure of themselves should have socials...tends to make minors feel insecure, depressed, and cause things like EDs, depression, and suicidal tendencies." (16-year-old girl)</i></p>
<b>Positive Peer Interaction (9)</b>	Don't bully, be kind	<p><i>"Social media is not built to replace the people around you, but to strengthen the connection you have with your peers." (17-year-old boy)</i></p> <p><i>"I've found that social media has taken up my friends' lives and taken away time we could have had to be with each other but instead they spent on their phones or computers on social media." (16-year-old boy)</i></p>

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### Key Considerations and Next Steps

This report's findings highlight several key considerations and next steps. First, a noticeable gap exists between the perceptions of parents whose children do not use social media (often those with younger children) and those parents whose children are social media users. Parents with direct experience navigating social media issues possess valuable insights. Sharing these insights with other parents earlier could alleviate anxiety and support acclimating parents in addressing relevant concerns more effectively during a sensitive developmental stage for their children. Secondly, the comparisons between parents of social media users and their teens reveal a general alignment and a shared set of concerns. For instance, both parents and teens recognized specific emotional, physical, and academic impacts of social media.

This level of convergence across the study suggests that social media has become "domesticated," a term communication and media scholars use to mark the gradual changeover through which novel technologies initially perceived as disruptive become ordinary parts of everyday family life (Silverstone 2005). This normalcy of social media, and its opportunities and challenges, for *both parents and teens* in New Jersey can be seen in the quality and specificity of the advice each group offered. This accumulated wisdom reminds us that domestication is not passive. Rather, families actively negotiate social media boundaries within their households and the role of social media within their teenagers' lives. Indeed, the second most common category of connection that teens report (after friends) is with their family members.

In their advice, parents emphasize monitoring and conversation. Similarly, many teens recommend consulting with parents, demonstrating family-wide engagement and the normalization of social media conversations within the family system. Common ground between parents and teens allows for mutual understanding of the positive values of social media use for scholastic tasks and, more broadly, connectedness, creativity, and inspiration, alongside the various negative aspects of teen use, especially disrupted sleep, decreased attention, and reduced physical activity.

Beyond identifying areas *where* parents and teens express the need for support, our survey suggests *how* to better support families by increasing parental awareness and enhancing teen agency.

## Parental Awareness

We discovered a gap in parental awareness of their children's social media use late at night as well as before-school, in-school, and especially during-class use. Parents and teens both cite time spent online as the primary reason for conflict in their relationship, which may also explain *why* teens, when they are out of sight from parents in their bedroom or at school, may not disclose these usage times. And yet teens readily acknowledge the drawbacks of heavier social media use. Fruitful parent-teen conversations should address the depth and range of time on social media, while acknowledging teen privacy and leveraging shared concerns for improved sleep, focus, and physical activity. Families may wish to institute family rules like charging phones outside of the bedroom at night and family routines like phone-free walks and exercising together.

Parents were less likely to perceive teen feelings of anger, exclusion, and depression, among other emotional impacts. They were also less likely to be aware of teens' negative experiences while on social media, including their exposure to inappropriate content, stalking, misinformation, and body shaming. Given that parents stressed the importance of both monitoring and dialogue with their children, increasing parental awareness in these less-visible areas may foster improved monitoring and more meaningful conversations while also allowing parents to provide emotional support to their children after negative encounters on social media.

Overall, parents expressed confidence in their ability to manage their child's social media use. However, about three in ten parents said they were not confident monitoring their child's use, a sizeable minority. Increasing parental awareness about time spent online and emotional and physical impact may help more parents intervene more effectively, but some parents would also benefit from greater knowledge of how to monitor social media and implement parental controls. Depending on the smartphone, various supervision tools may be built in that can help parents enforce time limits on use, block inappropriate online content, and detect sensitive photos and videos sent to/from phones.

## Teen Agency

Understanding what is "developmental" about teens' experiences on social media is a crucial step to interpreting the gaps between teens' and parents' reports about negative impacts of social media. Teens are exquisitely sensitive to experiences (Steinberg 2014). Stressful experiences feel worse for teens than they do for adults. While parents recognize *that* teens have negative experiences on social media, they may not be grasping *how* teens are absorbing the stress from those negative experiences, and how they are grappling with it in their minds.

The gaps between teens' and parents' reports on a range of questions on this survey resonate with recent research which approaches the study of adolescence as a sensitive period of cognitive development associated with heightened vulnerability to social stressors (Blakemore 2018). Teen agency emerges from a challenging juncture in cognitive development, as summarized in the below table by Natarajan (2025). What young people experience has as much to do with *what* they are encountering as it does with *how* they are mentalizing, or processing, these experiences.

Contextualizing teen media use through the lens of cognitive development helps in understanding why teens are drawn to—and away from—“irresistible” media design (Alter 2017). Engaging with this framework creates a path for teens, families, and educators to have conversations about media use that are sensitive to the developmental needs of youth.

Findings show that teenagers were acutely aware about their uses of social media, where they see its value, and where they need help in the areas of sleep, focus, and physical activity. In their advice for their peers, boys and girls alike warn against overuse and addiction. They recognize the need to limit time spent on social media. Their advice highlights self-reflection and an eagerness to share peer-to-peer advice. As they navigate social media in everyday life, teens are learning from media experiences and have a growing understanding of what makes their time online wasteful and unhealthy. According to the teens in the sample, peer comparisons (especially for girls), engaging with strangers, and seeking entertainment rather than learning opportunities are unproductive and harmful habits. Teens offer a tool for the evaluation of their own use: *Does it make you feel good?* The advice and the reflection that teens offer underscores their developmental sensitivity to social media design. Teens' insights about their social media experiences present an opportunity for families and educators to engage with the internal landscape of tensions and contradictions teens navigate in their everyday social media use. What is clear is that social media platforms present unique challenges for the developing adolescent.

To this end, we also maintain that young people have a right to know how social media companies profit from their use through an advertising-supported business model. This information is no secret, but social media companies do not disclose where the advertising dollars are coming from and on what basis advertisers are being charged. The public must demand this information. Users, especially teens, must be made aware how their attention is bundled and sold to advertisers for financial gain. Prior research has highlighted that young people can benefit a great deal if they are aware of commercial influences, and the operationalization of persuasion in what is often referred to as the attention economy (Buckingham et al. 2022; Jordan and Natarajan 2024).

## Teen Media Use in the Context of Adolescent Cognitive Development

<b>Developmental Characteristic</b>	<b>What is it?</b>	<b>Implications for Media Use</b>
<b><i>Boredom</i></b>	Teens seek novel experiences, but they live with restrictions, and are often unable to engage in satisfying activity.	Teens often cite boredom as an entry point into, and away from, media use—especially short videos/social media.
<b><i>Heightened Sensitivity to Rewards</i></b>	Teens are more easily persuaded by things that please or "reward" them.	Some media such as short videos, personalized recommendations, "likes," trends, ForYou, Snapstreaks, etc. perform the role of rewards.
<b><i>Executive Functioning</i></b>	Teens' ability to plan, prioritize, and manage time effectively develops gradually throughout adolescence.	Teens may find it more challenging to self-regulate when media design is "irresistible," and removes stopping cues.
<b><i>Peer Orientation</i></b>	Teens are especially sensitive to social validation from peers; there is a shift from parent to peer focus during adolescence.	Teens' media choices are often influenced by peers, and the pressures of "performing" friendship online.
<b><i>Identity Development</i></b>	Teens seek a greater sense of self as they become more independent.	Teens' media environments offer opportunities for identity development, and some teens incorporate strategies that are helpful to their development.
<b><i>Metacognition</i></b>	Teens' metacognitive skills are improving. They are thinking about their thinking and monitoring their cognition.	Teens reflect on their media experiences. They are introspective, and craft new media use tactics iteratively.
<b><i>Learning From Experiences</i></b>	Teens are exquisitely sensitive to experiences, and learning is particularly rapid during adolescence.	Teens' ability to learn rapidly, coupled with metacognition and improving executive functioning, nudge them toward more deliberate use of media.

In terms of policy, if new rules are implemented, it is critical to make sure that parents and teens understand what these policies are and why they have been instituted. Research shows the importance of teen involvement in conversations related to policies that bear upon technology use that is ingrained in their lives. The U.S. Department of Education's "Planning

Together: A Playbook for Student Personal Device Policies” (2024) recommends iterative processes of co-design that integrate students, educators, parents/caregivers, and school leaders to develop policies that fit local context and enable trust between youth and adults.

We also suggest that teenagers play a key stakeholder role in the development and implementation of health campaigns and interventions designed to promote improved sleep, ability to focus, and physical activity. Earlier successes with antibullying initiatives that drew on the positive power of peer influence may provide a model for addressing these next challenges. Programming in New Jersey middle schools that leveraged highly influential students as “social referents” to help reshape the social environment away from conflict reduced levels of conflict by about 30 percent (Paluck et al. 2016). Leveraging student influence may again prove helpful in modeling and diffusing relevant messaging around healthier social media use.

Local college students interested in health communication and public health at universities in New Jersey may also be interested in experiential learning opportunities tied to these campaigns/interventions.

Finally, we recommend the importance of more research going forward given the always changing environment of youth, technology, and policy. In other words, we hope this report serves as baseline knowledge for ongoing studies of teen uses of social media and the impacts of social media on students and families in New Jersey.

## Appendix A: Methods Report

This methods report explains how Rutgers University and SSRS conducted a survey in 2025 to learn about teen social media use in New Jersey. It describes who was surveyed, how they were chosen, how data were collected, and how results were adjusted to reflect the state's population. The Rutgers Institutional Board reviewed and approved the survey protocol, procedures, and all the survey instruments by April 2025 (Pro2025000660).

### Who Participated

- Total respondents: 1,125
  - Parents: 923 (with children ages 0–18)
  - Teens: 202 (ages 13–18)
- Surveys were offered in English and Spanish (all teens chose English; 15 parents completed Spanish).
- Only one teen per household was surveyed.

### Recruitment of Participants

Parents were drawn from two panels:

1. Rutgers-Eagleton/SSRS Garden State Panel – a representative sample of NJ residents.
2. SSRS Opinion Panel – a national panel, but only NJ parents were included.
  - Teens were invited through parents who completed the survey and gave consent.
  - Potential bias in the sample may be related to the recruitment of parents who were already panel members with strong enough relationships to enroll their children, and with internet access to take the survey online.

### Scope of Questions

- Parents answered about their child's social media and internet use (focusing on a teenager if they had one).
- Teens answered about their own experiences with social media.
- Both were also asked about school cell phone policies and their opinions on those rules.
- Social media was defined broadly, including YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, Discord, Reddit, and X (Twitter).

## Survey Implementation

- Conducted online between May 30 – July 8, 2025.
- Parents and teens received email invitations and reminders (up to 8 emails, plus optional texts).
- Respondents received gift cards:
  - Parents: \$5 (or \$10 for harder-to-reach groups).
  - Teens: \$10–15 depending on completion date.
- Surveys took about 12 minutes (parents) and 10 minutes (teens).

## Data Processing

- Results were weighted so the findings match NJ's actual population of parents and teens (by sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, region, etc.).
- Adjustments accounted for non-response and the fact that some parents had more than one eligible teen.

## Key Numbers

- Margin of error (how much results might vary if repeated):
  - Parents of children 0–18:  $\pm 4.6\%$
  - Parents of teens 13–18:  $\pm 6.2\%$
  - Parents matched with a teen respondent:  $\pm 10.1\%$
  - Teens 13–18:  $\pm 9.6\%$
- Response rates:
  - About 33% of parents and 51% of teens invited to take the survey completed it.

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