Anticipatory Guidance:
Media and Social Skills

Center on Media and Child Health

Social behaviors are actions that relate to or affect others and can be either negative (anti-social) or positive (pro-social). Media can help or hurt depending on the kinds of social interactions they demonstrate (such as resolving conflict through conversation or a fistfight) and, if they include violence, depending on its portrayal (whether it's justified, damaging, funny, attractive, or normative). Subsequently, it is important to understand the relationship between media and social behavior, as this knowledge can help guide adolescents and families toward mindful media use.

What the Evidence Says

- Cyberbullying can have severe effects on an adolescent's physical and mental health, especially since they use screen media almost constantly throughout the day—putting them at risk of being bullied 24/7. Cyberbullying can lead to anger, frustration, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation in adolescent victims.[1] LGBTQ teens are at an especially high risk of being cyberbullied.[2]
- Media can desensitize or help encourage empathy towards others' experiences/feelings. Research has shown that exposure to video game violence increases anger and aggressive thoughts and behaviors, while decreasing helpful behaviors.[3] The subsequent physiological desensitization to violence affects how they react to real-life violence and tragedy: They tend to be less affected by it.[4] Prosocial media can have the opposite effect, by encouraging altruism.[5]
- Media can help teens further connect with peers they know in real life,[6] and can help them build new relationships with peers from diverse backgrounds across the world,[7] but relying too heavily on technology for social interactions may result in teens missing out on face-to-face communication and opportunities to build meaningful relationships with friends and family.
- Research suggests that parents should "friend" their teen on social media, and learn more about what platforms they use, and how they use them. Social media may even strengthen the relationship between the parent and their teen.[8]

Recommendations

- Advise parents to limit their teen's exposure to media violence. Recommend that parents talk to their teens about the media violence they see, hear, or interact with, so that they can make sense of these messages and also understand what the real-world implications of similar actions might be.
- Encourage the use of pro-social media. The internet provides an opportunity for teens to connect with friends, family, and acquaintances, and can encourage the development of helpful behaviors and empathy.
- Educate parents about the severe effects of cyberbullying. Advise parents that their teen may be hesitant to discuss whether they are being cyberbullied as they fear that their devices may be taken away. Ask parents to be aware of how their teen's moods may change after using their phone or computer, including whether their teen is more upset than usual, and whether their teen has become more secretive about what they are doing online, as these are often signs of cyberbullying.
- Recommend that parents get to know the social media platforms their teen uses. Encourage them to "friend" their teen, and talk to their teen about what they do, see, like, and dislike on these platforms.

Future Directions

As we continue to both learn how to interact through media and use it to communicate and interact with each other, we need to monitor how it is affecting adolescent social health in the long-term. Continued research on cyberbullying interventions for adolescents is also needed. We also need to continue to foster positive communication adolescents experience through social media.

References

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Suggested Reading

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