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Adolescents and Social Media: Tools To Navigate Life Online

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Abstract

Social media is an important part of all of our lives. However, there is no requirement for students in Manitoba to receive formalized education in regards to social media and its usage in the K-12 Canadian curriculum instruction. Such formalized education is extremely important for adolescents to understand the multiple facets of social media usage and engagement. These facets include and are not limited to exploring both the risks and the advantages associated with social media usage, consistent classroom programming with multiple members of the school team (guidance counsellor, school social worker and school psychologist), access to community resources, and management of social media to navigate their life online. When adolescents are safe online, they can use social media as an important tool to enhance their lives.

Social media is a prevalent part of our lives, as we know them to be today. As far back as only fifteen years ago, the lives of adolescents were not as connected to their life online as they are today. Today, there are many social media platforms for young people to choose from, including Snapchat, Instagram, Tiktok and Tumblr. In 2021, more than 3 billion people in the world are using social media platforms, in comparison to fewer than a billion in 2010 (Santora, n.d., para. 2). It is no surprise that adolescents growing up today are very connected virtually. There are proven long-term negative outcomes of social media usage on adolescents and their well-being, such as dangers related to sexting, body dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019). With access to social media at the fingertips of most teenagers, solutions for safe social media engagement must be explored. In order to make social media a safe way to engage in communication and connection online, one must explore both the risks and the advantages associated with social media usage. It is important that adolescents understand the true meaning of digital citizenship through classroom programming that prepares them for safety online, which extends beyond the walls of the classroom. A part of being safe online is having access to community resources to feel supported when adolescents and caregivers require guidance. Ultimately, adolescents need rules and regulations to serve as a guideline for success when accessing social media. Formalized education is extremely important for adolescents to engage in so that they can understand the multiple facets of social media usage and engagement.

Risks and Advantages

When using social media, it is important to understand the risks as well as advantages to be well equipped online. Social media presents obvious advantages that are visible to any user worldwide. Connecting with friends and loved ones both near and far is made easier than ever with access to social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. The OECD found that participating in online platforms is the most popular online leisurely activity among adolescents (Betton & Woollard, 2018). Engagement with social media is a balancing act for many young people. Adolescents are instantly drawn to the idea of connecting online with friends and strangers with similar social circles and interests. However, there are two sides to the coin when it comes to social media engagement for adolescents. Many adolescents describe the usage of social media as positive to connect with friends even when they are not physically close by (Wilson & Stock, 2021). Adolescents describe social media as improving their relationships with peers because they are able to connect instantly (Feliciano, 2015). Adolescents who are a part

of online communities tend to feel connected, supported and understood, which is a significant advantage of social media as seen in many classrooms. Adolescents have shared that connecting with others who are going through similar experiences helps them to feel less alone. There are also disadvantages involved in relationships online because online relationships do not provide adolescents with any face-to-face contact. However, online interaction can only go so far when connecting online with others. With a limitation of face-to-face interactions, many adolescents are lacking socialization skills (Price-Mitchell, 2019, para. 12). A lack of socialization skills in the classroom creates issues of belonging, leading many adolescents to feel unconnected to their classroom communities or peers.

While adolescents may not be connected to classroom communities, many adolescents feel a sense of community and belonging when they connect with others online. Adolescents have shared that feeling they were a part of something made them feel connected to others with similar experiences as they transition into adulthood (Wilson & Stock, 2021). This is a significant advantage to being connected online, especially during a time of enormous transition. However, the other side of being a part of an online community can consist of taking part in the sharing of negative experiences that other community members may open up about (Wilson & Stock, 2021). Sharing negative experiences amongst one another can lead to feelings of depression and increased mental health issues for many adolescents.

Hearing about the negative experiences of others can add to fear for oneself, such as sharing around issues related to health and sexuality. Adolescents may fear a sense of decline if they are going through physical health or mental health concerns (Wilson & Stock, 2021). The positive benefits of this could also be exchanging information with one another. It is important to note that the balance for adolescents could be tipped to one side at any point when it comes to the usage of social media. Self-reflection and awareness are required in order to manage when and how to best use social media for the purpose of helping adolescents to live a healthy life. With explicit instruction and support in navigating life online, a balance may become easier to maintain for many adolescents.

Classroom Programming

In order for adolescents to navigate their lives online in a safe manner, it is important to provide explicit education to adolescents about social media and their lives online. Manitoba's ICT curriculum is outdated because it focuses mostly on the use of technology, which in itself has changed drastically in the last decade. The curriculum should instead focus on the use of intentional educational programming, because it is an integral part of navigating life online. Educators and caregivers need to be involved in explicit teaching around adolescents and their lives online by using beneficial curriculums and engaging adolescents in conversations involving ICT.

Adolescents need information to navigate the choices they make online. One program that aims to do this is the My Life Online curriculum developed by Blake Fleischacker and Dave Anderson. The program focuses on workshops and curriculum that aim at explicit instruction to educate children so that they will not regret something they did online that does not match up with who they are as a person (Top Youth Speakers, n.d.). The key in making programs such as My Life Online successful is making the connection for adolescents that empathy needs to exist, whether through face-to-face interactions or online. Adolescents need to understand facts about social media usage, cause and effect of their actions, personal responsibility and online etiquette (Dickenson & Snedeker, 2021). Most of all, adolescents need to understand that the lessons of compassion they learn throughout their school years extend into the digital world, especially that of having empathy for others. One of the best ways to be compassionate toward others and ourselves is to be safe online. It is important that adolescents understand that the device they have access to, known as the internet, is very powerful and requires navigational tools that extend beyond the classroom.

In line with explicit instruction about navigating life online, adolescents need to learn about digital citizenship beyond the classroom. ICT (Information and Communications Technology) instruction is very important to educate adolescents. When adolescents learn key features that include technical factors (viruses, spam) and ethical online behaviour in the world, they can be better equipped to handle many situations. Teachers have reported that they feel supported in regards to teaching digital citizenship and digital literacy, because this connects with positive character education (Lauricella et al., 2020). Learning about digital citizenship cannot stop at simply the use of technology in the classroom. Education around technology usage in a safe way can promote mental health, which extends beyond the classroom.

Many facets of digital literacy connect with social emotional regulation. Social emotional regulation is the "process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (Lauricella et al., 2020). The key components of social emotional regulation consist of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Lauricella et al., 2020). These components overlap with the teachings of digital literacy. Digital literacy has to be seen as interdisciplinary learning that connects with all of the curricular areas that adolescents learn about in schools to prepare them for risks online. When such risks present themselves to adolescents, community resources can provide guidance in navigating potentially dangerous situations.

Community Resources

Community resources can act as an important support system for adolescents and their caregivers when navigating the risks online. With the ongoing occurrence of sex crimes at a rapid rate, many adolescents and their families are unsure of which steps to take when navigating shared explicit photos or videos of themselves or their child online. In many cases of sex crimes, victims feel shame and think that they cannot do anything about the situation. Sexting is the act of sending, forwarding, or sharing explicit photos to others (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). While sexting might be a part of many teens' sexual development, with 14%, or 1 in 7, teenagers engaging in the act, there are also tremendous risk factors that come with the sharing of graphic images by means of social media (Lee, 2018, para. 2). With the risk of images being shared and forwarded to unintended audiences, the risk for adolescents increases. Thus, it is important that adolescents be aware of the resources that exist to support them if needed.

One example of an important community resource is the Canadian Centre for Child Protection. The Canadian Centre for Child Protection (n.d.) is a national charity Centre dedicated to protecting all children. The Centre supports children and families in many ways, such as providing resources, information, and connections with law enforcement. The Centre acts as an important advocate for children and adolescents in cases of sexting and child pornography. Instead of feeling helpless and afraid in the cases of sex crimes, the Centre for Child Protection advocates for victims to get information and report crimes in cases where they may feel helpless and violated.

Due to the seriousness of sex crimes, being connected to services provides a safety net for families. Another community resource that is supported by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection is Cybertip!ca (n.d.). Cybertip!ca is a supportive online environment where families and adolescents can access help with concerns about shared intimate images, online luring, and other areas involving child victimization on the internet. The increase in such cases caused the Government of Canada to criminalize the unauthorized distribution of nude photographs and videos in December 2014 (Allen, 2019). Community resources help adolescents to address danger or victimization regarding sex and cyber crimes. With the support of these resources, adolescents can gain information and advocacy skills to protect themselves and others online. Despite many proactive measures to support adolescents and their learning, management of

their social media with clear guidelines is necessary. With every tool that is provided to young people, it is also important that rules and regulations are shared in a clear manner.

Management of Social Media

When beginning to use any new device, there is often a "crash course" that is provided to steer individuals. Interestingly, there is no such formalized, mandated learning that takes place in Manitoba to prepare young people in navigating their lives online. The lack of rules and regulations that often come with social media lead to many adolescents feeling out of control. It is important that caregivers and educators create strong boundaries for adolescents around social media usage.

Educators and caregivers must create boundaries by giving adolescents very specific rules for using social media. In the classroom, there is significant impact when rules and contracts around social media access are co-created with students in the classroom. With student voices being central in rules established, a clear outline of expectations can be created that all students in the classroom agree to. Rules can be focused on the amount of time spent online, a "good fit" time for using social media, and what sort of content is okay for posting online.

Similar conversations with adolescents around social media contracts need to be had at home. Setting family expectations at home is important to set the tone for equality, because all household members can navigate using technology in a safe way. Creating guidelines and a social media contract around where and when social media can be used is important (Ben-Joseph, 2018). Even more important is sticking to those guidelines and developing consistency in these routines. Creating a social media or technology agreement in the home allows all members of the family to have a say in what they believe to be valuable. This also opens the conversation around any non-negotiables, such as downloading apps without permission or accepting requests from strangers. Agreements made around social media should be made visible in the home, where everyone can refer to them. Referring to rules and consequences regularly reminds family members of commitments made, encouraging open communication. The world of social media and technology needs to be monitored with the same diligence as real-life interactions.

Conclusion

Social media cannot be labelled as a social evil and therefore banned and censored from adolescents. Adolescents and their lives online are complicated. Like any other device, tools are needed to be safe when navigating social media. Understanding both the risks and advantages of social media sets adolescents up for success in knowing what to look out for as they navigate their lives online. Providing in-class programming that supports student learning in the classroom and beyond supports adolescents in exploring who they want to be online. Having access to community resources to protect adolescents online can make adolescents and their lives feel secure. Most importantly, having rules and regulations for using social media sets adolescents up for success. Social media can be an exceptional way to connect online and become a valuable part of extended and supportive communities. When adolescents are safe online, they can use social media as an important tool to enhance their lives. Thus, it is important that adolescents have a circle of support surrounding them as they navigate their lives online, in order to set them up for success in who they want to be, both online and offline. Formalized education that expands on all of the above noted topics prepares adolescents for the realities of social media, taking away the fears but also presenting the facts so that young people can be engaged online in a way that aligns with their goals and aspirations for the future.

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