At The National College, our WakeUpWednesday guides empower and equip parents, carers and educators with the confidence and practical skills to be able to have informed and age-appropriate conversations with children about online safety, mental health and wellbeing, and climate change. Formerly delivered by National Online Safety, these guides now address wider topics and themes. For further guides, hints and tips, please visit nationalcollege.com.

10 Top Tips for Parents and Educators

SAFETY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Currently, children are growing up in an immediate and throwaway culture when it comes to content that's consumed online. So much material is now deliberately created to be shorter in nature – and may often contain hidden elements such as advertising, or extreme political and cultural views. With complex algorithms built to keep people on their phones and engaging with social media content, it's becoming increasingly difficult to reduce time spent on these platforms.

1 REDUCE DOOMSCROLLING

It's concerningly common for young people to spend hours 'doomscrolling': trawling through social media and aimlessly viewing every post they see, many of which might make them feel sad or anxious. Social media can be useful for keeping in touch with friends and family, as well as staying up to date on current events. However, it's important to use it with a clear purpose, instead of endlessly scrolling through content, which could lead to young people accidentally discovering harmful material.

2 TALK ABOUT THE CONTENT

It's important to keep appraised of the kind of content that a young person is being exposed to. Discussing what they're watching online can help you understand why they're using social media in the first place. Furthermore, ensure that children are aware of hidden content, such as advertising of a product - and that they know how to spot that the creator is being paid to talk about it.

3 FIND POSITIVE ASPECTS

Despite all the concerns, there's plenty of wholesome content on social media. It's worth spending time with children to help them find something suitable and enjoyable. Perhaps you'll even discover a joint interest, and you can enjoy the content alongside the child. As part of this, you should also point out why certain things shouldn't be given attention, explaining why it isn't suitable and why it's been created in the first place.

4 REDUCE SCREENTIME

Young people can sometimes be unaware of the exact amount of time they spend looking at social media. Smart phones don't just have the capacity to monitor screentime; they also record how much time is spent on each app. Consider setting targets to reduce this and support children to meet these goals, gradually reducing the amount of time spent on different apps.

5 FILL THE VOID

Monitoring and reducing screentime can create a lot of free time to fill, and young people can even face withdrawal symptoms when made to step away from their phones. To mitigate this, consider what offline activities you could introduce the child to, and what they would enjoy. This can ensure that young users will permanently cut down on their screentime, rather than temporarily doing so while they know it's being monitored.

6 REDUCE NOTIFICATIONS

One way in which social media platforms keep people coming back is through notifications. The algorithms behind these apps track people's daily habits, including the times of the day where they're most likely to engage with the platform. This data is then used to deliver specifically timed notifications to draw them back in. To avoid young users being exposed to this tactic, simply turn off notifications for the app in their phone's settings.

7 LIVE IN THE REAL WORLD

Overexposure to social media can distort someone's perception of the real world – from body norms to social conventions. This filtered environment can make it hard for young people to distinguish reality from online content, which is now becoming even more difficult with the rise of AI. To mitigate this concern, take time to teach young people how to discern truth from fiction, both on and off social media.

8 DIGITAL DETOX

Encouraging young people to take a 'digital detox', from even just a couple of the apps that they use, can result in an overall reduction of screentime and less exposure to potentially harmful content. Alternatively, rather than avoiding the app entirely, encourage children to take a 'digital detox' from content creators and influencers, and instead, keep in touch with friends and family – which is generally a far healthier use of these platforms.

9 MODEL GOOD BEHAVIOUR

Consider the habits that you're demonstrating to your children. How much time do you spend on your phone? How much do you 'doomscroll'? Comparing your own usage with the child's could put things into perspective for them – or if it turns out that you're also overusing social media, it can turn screentime reduction into a joint mission, which you and the child can work on together.

10 BE CLEAR ON THE "WHY"

Research shows that young people can become addicted to social media. There are many schools that are moving towards being 'phone free' due to the negative impacts of using social media and phones continuously. It's important to explain to young people why managing screentime is important. Set out the benefits and ensure they have all the relevant information, so it's not just seen as a punishment.

Meet Our Expert

John Insley is a senior leader in a Birmingham secondary school and has vast experience in leading schools over the past 15 years – including the development of computing curriculums across primary and secondary schools, writing e-safety policies and supporting schools with computing and e-safety advice.

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