THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

Navigate360

The Leader in Holistic Safety

Reclaiming Connection in the Digital Age

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Scott Poland is an internationally recognized expert on school crisis, suicide prevention, and youth mental health. He has authored multiple books, served on national crisis response teams, and collaborates with Navigate360 to train schools across the country in suicide risk assessment, prevention, and response.

Dr. Poland has long been concerned that children are rarely seen playing outside and are missing out on exercise and many life skills like how to interact with others, how to work things out, and how to get along with other people.

He was subpoenaed in the multi-district lawsuit filed in Northern California by numerous school districts that are suing Meta and TikTok. The premise of the suit is that schools, because of the impact of social media, had to significantly add mental health staff to cope with increased student mental health concerns of depression and anxiety. His favorite quote about adolescence is the following:

> "Perhaps the only way an adolescent can truly find themselves is through service to others."

In the digital age, that sentiment can feel lost in a constant scroll. But it remains truer than ever.

As a school psychologist, researcher, and grandfather, I've seen firsthand how the effects of social media on youth have reshaped childhood, disrupted mental health, and eroded some of the most important protective factors we once took for granted: sleep, family connection, in-person interaction, and purpose. I've read with great interest the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Social Media.

While there are positive aspects to social media, the mental health issues emerging in its wake—anxiety and depression, self-harm, eating disorders, and suicide ideation—are not fringe concerns. They are front and center in the daily work of school leaders across the country.

— Dr. Scott Poland

THE DATA TELLS THE STORY

You don't need to be a psychologist to recognize that our students are struggling. But the scope of the crisis is deeper and more immediate than many realize—and **social media is part of that story.**

Social Media, Screen Time, & Mental Health

According to a recent American Psychological Association study:

4.8 hours

The average amount of time U.S. teens spend on social media daily, with YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram accounting for 87% of that time.

41%

The percentage of high-use social media teens who rate their mental health as poor or very poor, compared to 23% among low-use teens.

60%

The percentage of heavy social media users with low parental support who report poor mental health. That number drops to 25% among those with strong parental relationships.

These statistics underscore a critical truth: **Social media isn't just a lifestyle shift—it's a mental health factor**. And while screen time alone doesn't cause depression or suicidal thoughts, its impact is magnified when students lack strong relationships, structure, and support.

Suicide Risk in Schools

The mental health crisis isn't just visible in digital habits—it's showing up in suicide-related data across schools.

According to the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 40% of high schoolers reported feeling hopeless or persistently sad for at least two weeks. That number climbs to over 50% among girls, and nearly 1 in 3 boys also report significant symptoms of depression.

Navigate360 data revealed that more than 18,000 suicide prevention cases were opened last year using its Behavioral Case Manager platform. Most alarming: over 15,000 of those students had attempted, planned, or seriously prepared to attempt suicide in the month before the case was opened.

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"Those are 18,000 opportunities where a district noticed something, took it seriously, and got the student help," said Navigate360 SVP Thom Jones. "That's why early identification and structured follow-up matter."

Each of those cases generated critical follow-ups—parent contact, counselor check-ins, safety planning—all tracked and managed through the platform. In total, schools created more than 123,000 tasks tied to student suicide prevention and mental health support.
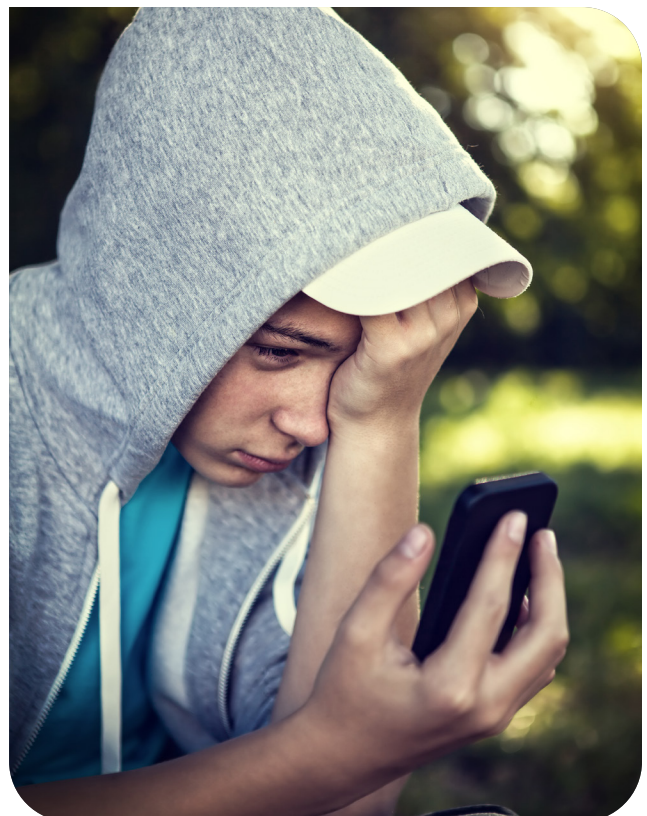
SCHOOLS CAN'T IGNORE THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

We know social media isn't going away, but we also can't let it erode our students' mental health.

What makes teen social media use especially harmful is how it hijacks the brain's reward system during the most vulnerable stage of development. The constant stream of likes and notifications triggers dopamine releases, reinforcing compulsive scrolling and comparison. We now have middle and high schoolers—some even younger—who are **online every waking hour,** never unplugging, never resting, and often navigating toxic digital spaces without supervision or support.

In my presentations to parents, I often emphasize: **Technology is a privilege, not a right.** But that message doesn't always land. One mother, concerned about her daughter's access to her friend at 2 AM, resisted even basic boundaries like turning off the phone at night.

"What if her friend needs her in the middle of the night?" she asked.

My response: "If something is so important in the middle of the night, your daughter's friend should talk to her own parents."

We've lost a shared understanding of digital limits. It's time to rebuild it—starting with schools and families.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES TO RECLAIM BALANCE:
TIPS FOR SCHOOLS, PARENTS, & STUDENTS

When setting digital boundaries, some schools have explored banning phones entirely. However, widespread media coverage of school shootings has made many parents hesitant to support such policies as they want their children to be able to reach them quickly in an emergency.

Still, there are alternatives that provide peace of mind without opening the door to constant distraction, such as flip phones or certain smartwatches that allow calls but limit internet access.

The truth is, **technology doesn't have to come at the cost of mental health**. With thoughtful choices, schools, families, and students can take back control.

For Schools: Create a Culture That Supports Digital Well-Being

1. **Designate blackout days** or "digital detox" weeks that encourage device-free engagement.

2. Support student-led organizations like the Reconnect Movement, a growing college initiative where students switch to flip phones and host events like hiking, painting, and "goofy debates" to reconnect face-to-face (USA TODAY).

3. Include screen time guidance in family outreach. Use back-to-school nights, newsletters, and conferences to educate and reinforce expectations.

4. The parent teacher conference, for example, provides an opportunity for the teacher to ask the parent about the amount of screen time for their child.

5. **Develop and enforce clear smartphone policies** that are updated annually and co-created with students, staff, and families.

6. Match each student with a trusted school adult who checks in regularly, reducing isolation and identifying issues early.

7. Educate families about smartphone alternatives such as watches that allow calls to be made. Many students in the Reconnect Movement say switching to a flip phone improved their focus and well-being (USA TODAY).

8. Provide staff training to recognize signs of cyberbullying, digital addiction, and other online risks.

9. **Promote classroom modeling.** When staff put their phones away, students are more likely to do the same.

10. **Encourage tech-free zones**, like phone-free lunch tables or morning arrival spaces.

11. Let students help shape the rules. Involvement increases buy-in and reduces resistance.

For Parents: Connection Starts at Home

1. **Remember, you are the parent**. You have a right to know your child's passwords and to check their messages and social media accounts. You do this because you care. Just as you would never put your child behind the wheel of a car without supervision and guidance, you should stay by their side and help them learn how to safely navigate technology.

2. Consider technology usage in your home only being allowed in common areas and not in your child's bedroom. At the very least do not allow your child to take their devices with them to bed. Teens need 8–10 hours of uninterrupted sleep, and late-night scrolling is a major sleep disruptor. Sleep deprivation is strongly associated with depression.

3. **Use the 10-minute rule**: 10 minutes of screen time—includes all screens, even television—per day for every year of age. For a 10-year-old, that's 100 minutes—not unlimited access.

4. **Create tech-free zones** during family meals, outings, and shared activities.

5. **Build a family screen time plan.** Include device contracts and safety pledges your child can help create. Make technology a family affair.

6. **Know the apps** your child uses and walk through each platform's privacy tools together.

7. **Delay smartphone ownership if possible.** Slow things down and do not be in a hurry. Initiatives like Wait Until 8th provide the opportunity to connect with like-minded parents and communities in the goal of setting shared boundaries.

8. **Try a digital detox together.** Perhaps a screen-free Sunday or a shared flip phone challenge.

9. Help them identify and unfollow social media accounts that create stress or self-comparison. Experts call this **"algorithm resistance"**—a mindful approach to shaping your child's digital diet (USA TODAY).

10. **Model the habits you want your child to adopt.** They notice when you unplug.

11. **Praise progress, not perfection.** Even small steps like enabling grayscale mode or reducing app time limits deserve encouragement (USA TODAY).

A QUICK NOTE ON ONLINE SAFETY

Parents should be aware that social media comes with real risks. Students have been exposed to online predators, harmful internet challenges, and, increasingly, sextortion scams targeting teen boys.

Cyberbullying is also common, with many students reporting anonymous posts that are far more hurtful than anything said in person. Encourage your child to speak up if they're being harassed or pressured online.

A helpful tool is the **ReThink app** (rethinkwords.com), which alerts students when a message might be hurtful and gives them a chance to rethink before posting. Research shows most students choose to revise or delete their messages when prompted.

Stay involved, ask questions, and keep the conversation going.

HOW MUCH SCREEN TIME IS TOO MUCH? A DEVELOPMENTAL GUIDE

AGE	RECOMMENDED SCREEN TIME (INCLUDES ALL SCREENS INCLUDING TELEVISION)
Under 18 months	Video chatting only, and only with adult participation
18–24 months	Brief educational shows with a caregiver
2–5 years	Max 1 hour/day on weekdays, 3 hours/day on weekends
6-10 years	10 minutes per day per year of age (e.g., 90 min/day for a 9-year-old)
11–13 years	90–130 min/day max, with no overnight access
14–17 years	Max 2–3 hours/day with strong adult modeling and content awareness

Recommendations adapted from the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry.

Tip

Avoid using screens as pacifiers or babysitters. Instead, prioritize "green time" (outdoors), "face time" (real-world connection), and "creative time" (offline hobbies and play).

For Students: Own Your Digital Story

Your phone shouldn't define your friendships, your focus, or your future. If social media has started to feel more draining than fun, you're not alone—and there's power in taking back control.

- **Start a screen-free social club.** Across the country, students are leading the way with grassroots groups like the Reconnect Movement. From thrift swaps and yoga sessions to outdoor adventures and goofy debates, these clubs are built on one simple goal: real connection, no phones required (USA TODAY). You don't need a fancy campaign—just invite a few friends to hang out, no screens allowed.

- **Try a flip phone experiment.** Some students go all in, ditching their smartphones entirely. Others swap for a flip phone on weekends or nights out. Many say they feel less anxious, more in control, and more present in the moment when they take a break from notifications and algorithms (USA TODAY). Even a short digital detox can reset your focus.

- **Track your habits with a "phone-fed journal."** Every time you reach for your phone, jot down what triggered it, how long you used it, and how you felt afterward. This kind of mindful reflection helps you notice patterns—and gives you the power to change them.

- **Clean up your feed.** You control who you follow. Unfollow accounts that fuel comparison, negativity, or pressure. Fill your feed with creators, content, and communities that inspire and uplift you—not drain your energy. This is called algorithm resistance—and it puts you back in charge of your scroll (USA TODAY).

- **Bring your hobbies offline.** What would you do with an extra hour a day? Students in the Reconnect Movement say ditching the feed helped them rediscover music, art, fashion, and movement. One student returned to the mandolin and harmonica. Another found her true fashion style once she stopped dressing for TikTok trends (USA TODAY). That creativity? It was never gone—just buried beneath the noise.

- **Speak up.** If your friends feel pressure to always be online, chances are they're struggling too. Start the conversation. Lead by example. "You'd be surprised how many other people are feeling the exact same way you are about social media," one Reconnect Movement leader shared. "They're relieved to unplug" (USA TODAY).

You don't have to delete every app or give up your phone forever. But you do get to decide how it fits into your life and who you want to be when you're not online. Be mindful of your screen time and how it makes you feel. Think about what you could be doing more of if you spent less time on screens.

A LONG-TERM INVESTMENT, NOT A QUICK FIX

Too often, schools rely on short-term fixes: a motivational speaker, a mental health week, a wellness tip in the Friday newsletter. But truly supporting youth mental health, especially in the face of social media's lasting effects, requires more than one-and-done solutions.

Long-term support starts with systems that help schools recognize and respond to student needs early. That includes tools for suicide risk assessment, behavioral tracking, and threat detection, such as those built into Navigate360 Behavioral Case Manager. This integrated hub brings together data from PBIS Rewards, Digital Threat Detection, and our Anonymous Reporting System to provide a holistic picture of each student's well-being.

But systems alone aren't enough. Ongoing training in threat assessment and suicide prevention ensures staff can act with confidence and compassion. And perhaps most importantly, **students need role models**. School adults—teachers, administrators, and counselors—must model the kind of balance we want our students to develop.

If your staff is glued to their phones during meetings or in the hallways, what message does that send?

Modeling balance means tech-free meals, real eye contact, and making space for conversations that aren't being had anywhere else. It also means showing students that **their purpose isn't found in a post, but in their potential**.

MENTAL HEALTH IS FOUNDATIONAL.

At the heart of every school safety or well-being strategy is a single, timeless truth: **Kids need to feel seen, safe, and valued.**

Schools must recognize that **mental health is foundational to academic achievement— not an afterthought.**

We won't solve this overnight. But if we partner together—educators, families, mental health experts—we can give our students what algorithms never will: **connection, stability, and hope.**

LEAD THE SHIFT FROM REACTIVE TO **PROACTIVE SCHOOL SAFETY.**

The most effective school leaders don't wait for a crisis to act. They build systems that protect students and support well-being every day. True safety means more than locked doors. It means students feel seen, supported, and ready to learn.

Navigate360 equips your district with **the tools, technology, and training** to take a proactive, comprehensive approach **without adding to your staff's workload.**

Let's simplify your safety strategy and give every student the foundation they need to thrive.

TALK WITH A SCHOOL SAFETY AND WELL-BEING EXPERT TODAY.

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