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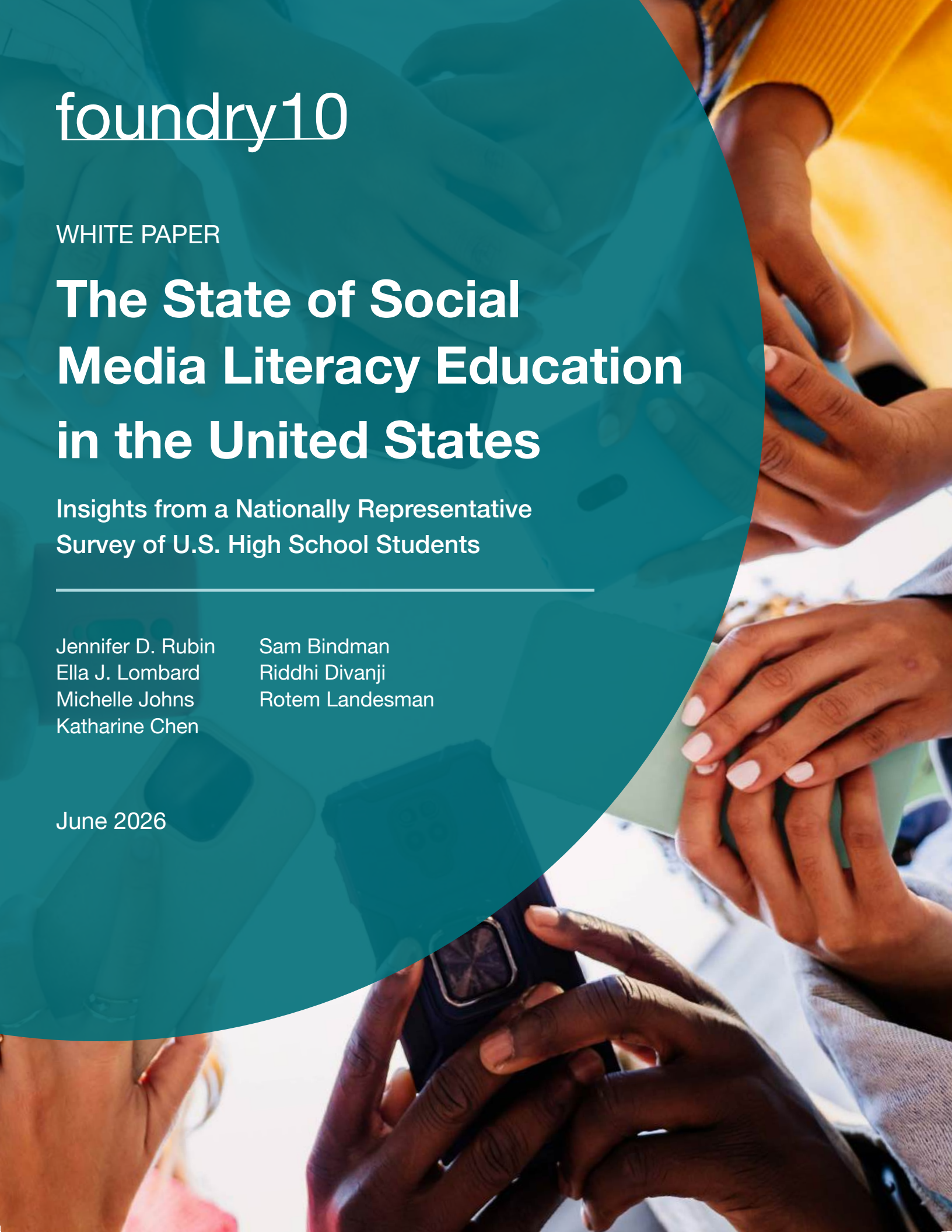
The State of Social Media Literacy Education in the United States

Insights from a Nationally Representative Survey of U.S. High School Students

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Executive Summary

Across the United States, educators and parents are grappling with how to help young people navigate social media safely and meaningfully. While concerns about adolescent mental health dominate public discourse, far less attention has been paid to a crucial question: What are we actually teaching teens about social media—and who is doing that teaching?

This nationally representative online survey of 1,027 U.S. high school students (ages 14–18) addresses these questions. Conducted between June and August of 2025, the study examines where teens receive social media literacy education, what topics are covered, how instruction is delivered, and whether these approaches prepare them for real-world challenges. The findings reveal a fragmented landscape: most teens receive guidance through infrequent caregiver conversations and limited school instruction, with meaningful gaps in the comprehensiveness and consistency of support.

Social media literacy education

What are we actually teaching teens about social media—and who is doing that teaching?

Key Takeaways

1

Parents and caregivers are the primary and most trusted source of social media education, yet conversations remain infrequent.

Nearly three-quarters (76%) of teens reported learning about using social media safely and responsibly from their parents or caregivers—far more than from teachers (57%) or peers (20%). When asked who provided the most helpful guidance, 69% named parents. However, regular conversations about social media were far from universal. More than one-quarter of teens (26%) reported discussing social media with their parents or caregivers only a few times a year. Only about one in five (19%) reported weekly or frequent discussions.

2

Teens want social media education to start early.

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents said social media education should begin before age 13, reflecting the reality that many young people go on social media well before high school. Their instincts appear sound: those who received social media literacy instruction before age 13 held more positive views of social media's role in their lives than those who began learning about it later.

3

Younger teens are learning earlier and in more settings than older peers, with some variation by gender.

Generation Alpha teens (ages 14–15) were more likely than Generation Z teens (ages 16–18) to receive social media education from both parents and teachers and to begin learning in childhood. Within Generation Z, girls tended to report earlier conversations than boys. These differences suggest a generational shift toward earlier and more coordinated guidance, alongside potential gender gaps in access to early education.

4

Informal conversations with parents were the most common way social media education was delivered, while school-based instruction was far less frequent.

Sixty-one percent of teens said they received social media literacy education through casual discussions with parents or caregivers, while fewer experienced school-based instruction: 32% recalled a one-time assembly or presentation, 21% said it was addressed within an existing class, and only 14% reported taking a standalone course on digital or social media literacy. Importantly, teens who experienced a broader mix of learning formats—including interactive discussions and project-based activities—found their education more relevant and engaging.

5

The framing of social media literacy education matters.

Most instruction emphasized risks such as privacy breaches, cyberbullying, and misinformation (72% of teens reported learning about risks), while fewer lessons addressed social media's benefits or positive uses (57%). Yet both dimensions are important: teens who learned about both the risks and benefits of social media held more positive beliefs about its role in their lives. Notably, teens who learned about the benefits of social media felt more confident, empowered, and uplifted during their social media experiences. These findings suggest that balanced, strengths-based approaches better equip teens for real-world engagement.

6

Comprehensive education covering a broader range of topics and delivered through varied approaches is associated with better outcomes.

Teens who received instruction covering a wider range of topics—from safety and privacy to algorithmic literacy and creative expression—reported more positive perceptions of their education and greater confidence in their social media skills. Similarly, receiving education from multiple sources (parents, teachers, peers) and through varied learning approaches (project-based learning, interactive discussions, peer-to-peer teaching) was associated with adolescents finding their education more relevant, engaging, and effective in addressing real-world challenges.

7

Most teens have a limited understanding of how algorithms shape their social media experiences, but education can meaningfully improve algorithmic literacy.

While 55% of teens reported at least some knowledge of algorithmic systems, they could identify only an average of 3 of 7 factors influencing content recommendations. Teens who received social media literacy instruction from social media platforms and teachers scored higher on an objective measure of algorithmic literacy than those who did not. These findings suggest that algorithmic literacy should be a core component of social media education, integrated directly into both platform design and classroom instruction.

8

Access to social media literacy education varies significantly by family income, mirroring broader educational inequities.

Teens from families earning more than \$60,000 annually were more likely to receive structured school-based instruction, experience interactive teaching approaches, and learn about a wider range of topics than those from families earning less than \$30,000 annually. Lower-income teens scored lower on objective measures of algorithmic literacy and were more likely to rely on siblings rather than teachers for guidance. Family resources may shape access to comprehensive digital literacy education.

Introduction

In the United States, few issues spark as much cultural anxiety as the relationship between adolescents and social media. From dinner tables to congressional hearings, and in bestsellers like Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation* (2024), the dominant narrative is clear: social media is harming young people's mental health and development. Yet amid this debate, a fundamental question remains largely overlooked: what are we teaching young people about social media, and how well are we preparing them to navigate its complexities?

Research shows that teens' social media experiences are more complex than polarized debates suggest. In this report, social media refers to platform-based, networked spaces where users create, share, and interact with content and with one another (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Discord). Studies have linked social media use to sleep disruption (Alonzo et al., 2021; Pirdehghan et al., 2021), body image pressures (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022; Ryding & Kuss, 2020), and lowered mood (Karim et al., 2022; Vidal et al., 2020). However, systematic reviews suggest that these negative effects are typically small and highly variable, underscoring that teens' experiences don't follow a single narrative (Kross et al., 2021; Orben & Przybylski, 2019).

Other research emphasizes the developmental opportunities social media can provide, such as sustaining friendships (Al-Jbouri et al., 2024), exploring identity (Avci et al., 2025), and offering communities of support for those who feel marginalized offline (Craig et al., 2021). These benefits often coexist with risks, sometimes even within the same online interactions (van der Wal et al., 2024). Social media is therefore best understood as a complex environment that shapes teens' lives in varied and sometimes contradictory ways.

Because the consequences of social media use may depend on how young people engage with these platforms, social media literacy education is crucial for equipping them with the skills to do so safely and thoughtfully (Cortesi et al., 2020; Livingstone, 2014; Turner et al., 2025). Quality social media literacy education extends beyond basic technical skills to help youth understand how algorithms influence content, evaluate the credibility of information, and engage responsibly in online communities (Cho et al., 2024; Dennen et al., 2020). Well-designed programs can enhance young people's ability to critically evaluate information, resist misinformation, and engage constructively online (Huang et al., 2024; Jeong et al., 2012).



Despite growing attention to the need for social media literacy education ([U.S. Surgeon General, 2023](#)), efforts in the United States remain fragmented and inconsistent. As a result, explicit instruction focused on social media tools and practices is often absent from state standards and curricula ([Media Literacy Now, 2024](#)). Where instruction does exist, it often emphasizes risk avoidance—like cyberbullying, online predators, and misinformation—while giving less attention to the broader set of skills adolescents need to thrive online ([Cortesi et al., 2020](#); [Vega & Robb, 2019](#)). As a result, young people may receive uneven guidance that does not fully prepare them for the realities of digital life.

To design learning experiences that meet the needs of young people, we must first understand how teens across the U.S. experience social media literacy education. Adolescents receive social media guidance from multiple sources, such as informal peer and adult-led communities that support positive social media use ([Charmaraman et al., 2022](#)). Still, we know little about which forms of support teens find helpful and where meaningful gaps remain. This lack of systematic evidence risks leaving educators and policymakers without the resources to develop effective social media education.

Our prior work begins to fill this gap by demonstrating that adolescents seek more comprehensive social media education that addresses both opportunities and risks. Teens emphasized the need for more nuanced guidance—education that supports them in building friendships, exploring their identities, and engaging creatively and civically, while also helping them navigate challenges such as AI-generated content, privacy concerns, and social pressures ([Rubin et al., 2025](#)). The current research builds on that foundation through a nationally representative survey of U.S. teens ages 14–18, offering new insights into how they experience and evaluate social media literacy education and identifying opportunities for improvement.



Current Research

This research investigates how teens develop social media literacy, assesses the effectiveness of these efforts, and identifies gaps in current educational approaches. We identify the sources of instruction—whether in schools, at home, online, or from peers—and explore how well they prepare young people for real-world digital challenges. Beyond documenting what is taught, the study examines whether these approaches meet teens’ needs by covering the skills and topics that they identify as most relevant to their everyday online lives. We also investigate variations in these experiences across groups, such as young people of different genders and ages, to gain a deeper understanding of patterns in social media literacy instruction and reception.

To our knowledge, this is the first nationally representative survey in the United States focused specifically on adolescents’ experiences with social media literacy education. Previous surveys have examined related domains, including digital citizenship ([Pew Research Center, 2012](#)), cyberbullying and online safety ([Hinduja, 2020](#)), and news literacy ([News Literacy Project, 2024](#)). Yet, these studies do not capture how teens themselves experience social media education, what they find helpful, or where gaps remain. Surveys focused on educators (e.g., [Fromm, 2024](#); [NAESP, 2019](#)) offer insight into instructional practices but do not capture data that can be generalized to youth populations. By contrast, the present study centers on adolescents’ perspectives to document the availability and perceived effectiveness of social media literacy education for U.S. high school students across a wide range of demographic backgrounds, including race, gender, and socioeconomic status.



How We Did This

Study Design and Oversight

This study draws on a nationally representative survey of U.S. adolescents ages 14–18 who were enrolled in high school during the 2024–2025 academic year. Data collection was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago between June 25 and August 4, 2025. NORC administered the survey online, and it took an average of 13 to 18 minutes to complete.

Participants were recruited through NORC’s AmeriSpeak Teen Panel (probability sample) and supplemented with respondents from Prodege (non-probability sample). A total of 1,027 adolescents completed the survey (498 from the probability sample and 529 from the non-probability sample). To ensure broad representation, NORC employed TrueNorth Calibration, a statistical methodology that combines probability and non-probability samples to align responses with U.S. population benchmarks. NORC obtained parental consent for participants under age 18, and all adolescents provided assent before beginning the survey. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by both NORC’s Institutional Review Board and foundry10’s Institutional Review Board (see Supplement for additional information).



Survey Content

Based on prior literature and researcher expertise, the survey examined nine key domains that capture different dimensions of adolescent social media experiences. These domains were selected to reflect widely recognized definitions of social media literacy while centering adolescents' everyday experiences and perspectives (e.g., [Cho et al., 2024](#); [Cortesi et al., 2020](#); [Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022](#); [Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021](#); [Valle et al., 2025](#)).

The domains include the following:

SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

- ▶ **Usage patterns and habits** explored frequency and duration of social media use, which platforms teens access most, cross-platform behaviors, the contexts in which they log on (e.g., at school, at home, with friends), and the ways they manage visibility and privacy.
- ▶ **Experiences and challenges** examined the pressures teens encounter online, including self-presentation, social comparison, and privacy concerns, as well as how social media relates to teens' sense of connection and identity.

DIGITAL LITERACY AND AGENCY

- ▶ **Algorithmic awareness** assessed adolescents' knowledge about how algorithms shape their feeds and the extent to which they actively try to influence the content they see.
- ▶ **Skills and confidence** measured teens' self-reported ability to perform key tasks, including adjusting privacy settings, identifying misinformation, managing screen time, evaluating content credibility, critically evaluating influencer content, and recognizing AI-generated content.

EDUCATIONAL DIMENSIONS

- ▶ **Social media education** examined where teens receive instruction about online behavior and safety, when that guidance first occurred, how it was delivered, and what content areas were emphasized.
- ▶ **Perceived effectiveness of education** explored whether teens found social media education engaging and relevant, as well as whether it helped them navigate the real challenges they face online.
- ▶ **Unmet needs and preferences** highlighted the gaps teens see in existing instruction, the approaches they believe would be most effective, and who they trust most to provide guidance.
- ▶ **Parental and school mediation** captured the rules, restrictions, and conversations that guide teen social media use at home and school, including policies around phone and platform use.

WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES

- ▶ **Well-being and relationships** measured how social media influences teens' psychological well-being (mood, stress, self-esteem) and social well-being (friendships, family connections, romantic relationships, and sense of belonging).

Each domain was measured using validated scales, where available, and supplemented by researcher-developed items. Demographic questions (e.g., age, gender identity, race/ethnicity) were included to support subgroup analyses.

Analytical Approach

Our analyses combined descriptive and inferential statistics to examine adolescents' social media use and its relationship to education. We first summarized overall patterns across key domains, including exposure to and perceptions of social media education. We then compared results across demographic groups, such as age and gender, to identify variation in experiences. Finally, we examined how various forms of social media education—including its timing, delivery, and content—are associated with outcomes such as skills and confidence.

Statistical Significance

We tested for statistical significance when examining differences across demographic groups (e.g., gender, age, race/ethnicity, household income) and when evaluating relationships among variables using predictive models (e.g., linear or logistic regression). Results are described in comparative terms (e.g., “more likely,” “less likely”) only when differences or model effects were significant at the $p < .05$ level. We occasionally note when no significant differences or effects were found, but do not report this exhaustively across every survey item to keep the findings concise.

Detailed information about statistical tests can be found here:

https://osf.io/yh4p5/overview?view_only=2fd536d9b81f466a99869f5564f9feb9

Generational Categories

To contextualize age-related patterns, this report uses generational categories to distinguish between younger and older adolescents in our sample. Australian demographer Mark McCrindle introduced the term Generation Alpha to designate the cohort succeeding Generation Z (McCrindle, 2014). Generational boundaries are approximate and vary across sources, but most research identifies Generation Alpha as beginning around 2010, coinciding with the release of the iPad and Instagram, and extending into the mid-2020s (Höfrová et al., 2024; McCrindle & Fell, 2020).

In line with McCrindle's framework, Generation Z is defined as those born between 1995 and 2009, and Generation Alpha as those born between 2010 and 2024 (McCrindle, 2014; McCrindle & Fell, 2020). In this report, Generation Alpha comprises teens ages 14 to 15, and Generation Z comprises teens ages 16 to 18. Although approximate, these categories allow us to highlight patterns between younger and older adolescents in our sample.

In this report, we use the terms adolescents, teens, young people, and youth interchangeably to refer to the sample, which comprises people ages 14-18.



Findings

Timing and Sources of Social Media Literacy Education

Most teens first talked about social media between ages 10 and 12, but this timing varied by generation and gender, with Generation Z boys often receiving guidance years later than their peers.

The age at which social media guidance began varied, but the most common age range for these discussions was 10 to 12. Nearly two-thirds (65%) had them before their 13th birthday. Yet more than 1 in 3 did not have these conversations until they were 13 years or older. This delay reveals important patterns when we examine more closely who received guidance and when.

► **Girls received social media guidance earlier than boys.**

By age 12, nearly three-quarters of girls (71%) had already received guidance, compared to 62% of boys. Boys were more likely to begin having these discussions as teenagers—38% first had them at age 13 or later, compared to 29% of girls (See Figure 1).

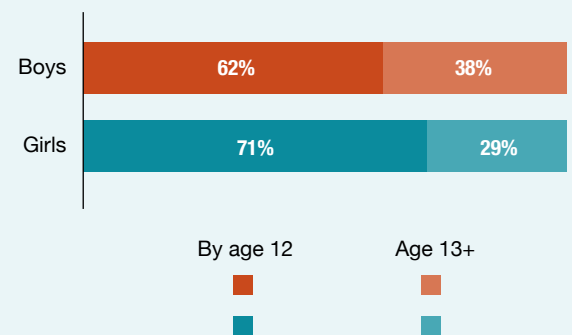
► **Generation Alpha teens reported substantially earlier conversations than their Generation Z peers.**

One-third of Generation Alpha teens (ages 14-15)—both girls (33%) and boys (34%)—discussed social media with adults before age 10. The most common age range was 10–12 years, with 46% of girls and 40% of boys receiving guidance during that period.

FIGURE 1.

Girls received social media literacy education earlier than boys

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 who reported age of first conversation about using social media



► **Generation Z teens showed variation in when boys and girls first discussed social media.**

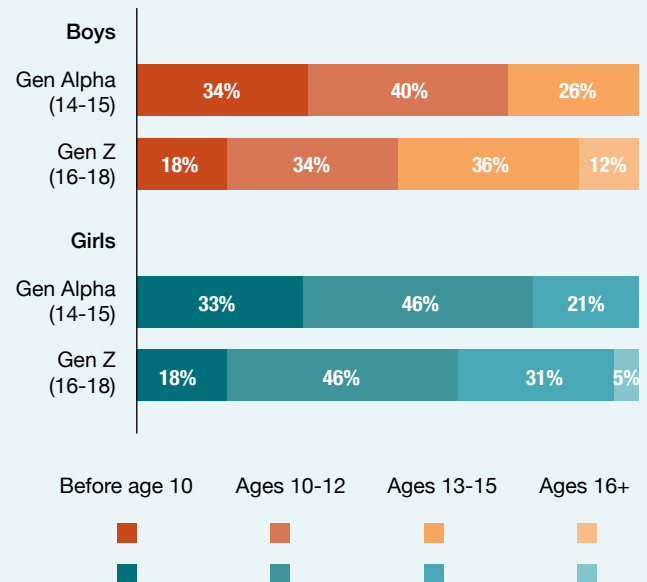
Generation Z girls showed a pattern similar to younger teens: 18% had conversations before age 10, and nearly half (46%) had them between ages 10 and 12. Generation Z boys matched girls, with 18% having early conversations before age 10, but nearly half (48%) did not discuss social media until age 13 or later. These patterns reflect broader trends in the data: boys were more likely than girls to have later conversations, and Generation Z teens were more likely than Generation Alpha teens to have later conversations (See Figure 2).

These patterns point to a shift in how families approach social media education. Younger teens tend to have these conversations during childhood, which may reflect growing awareness among parents and educators of the importance of early guidance about social media use. At the same time, generational shifts in technology access mean that many youth now receive smartphones and gain access to social media platforms at younger ages, which may also prompt earlier conversations (Faverio & Sidoti, 2024). Many older teens—especially boys—reported having these conversations later, suggesting that early guidance was not consistent across groups and that the timing of social media education may not always align with the onset of social media use.

FIGURE 2.

Most teens first talked about using social media between the ages of 10 and 12

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 who had a first conversation about using social media, by gender and age



Parents were the primary and most helpful source of social media education for teens.

More than three-quarters of teens (76%) reported that their parents or caregivers had discussed the safe and responsible use of social media with them. Teachers or school staff were the second most common source, reported by 57% of teens. Other sources of education were less frequently mentioned, including friends (20%) and siblings (16%). A smaller share (8%) reported that no one had spoken to them about social media (see Figure 3).

► Most teens received their education from multiple sources.

On average, teens reported receiving social media literacy education from two or more sources. When we consider combinations of sources, the most common pattern was receiving education from both parents and teachers (27%), followed by education from parents only (17%) and from teachers only (5%).

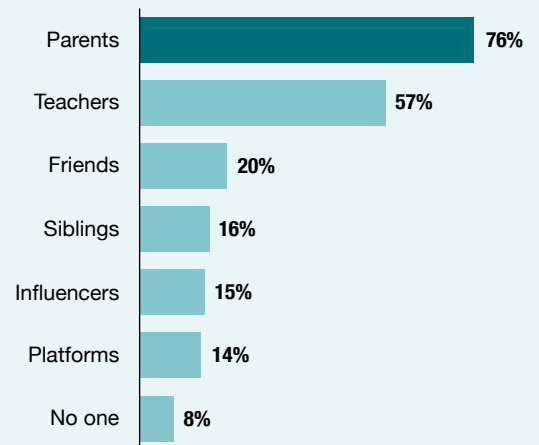
► Parents were not only the most common source of social media education but also the most helpful.

Sixty-nine percent of teens identified parents or caregivers as providing the most helpful guidance, followed by teachers (24%). Smaller shares named friends (15%) or siblings (11%), while 8% said they figured it out on their own. This overlap—where parents are both the most frequent and most helpful educators—underscores their influence in shaping teens' understanding of social media (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 3.

Parents were the primary source of social media education for teens

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 who reported different sources of social media education



Note: Participants could select multiple sources of social media education.

► **Generation Alpha teens received more education from both parents and teachers.**

Among Generation Alpha teens, 81% reported that their parents had discussed social media with them, compared to 72% of Generation Z teens. Similarly, 64% of Generation Alpha teens reported receiving education from teachers, compared to 51% of Generation Z teens (see Figure 5).

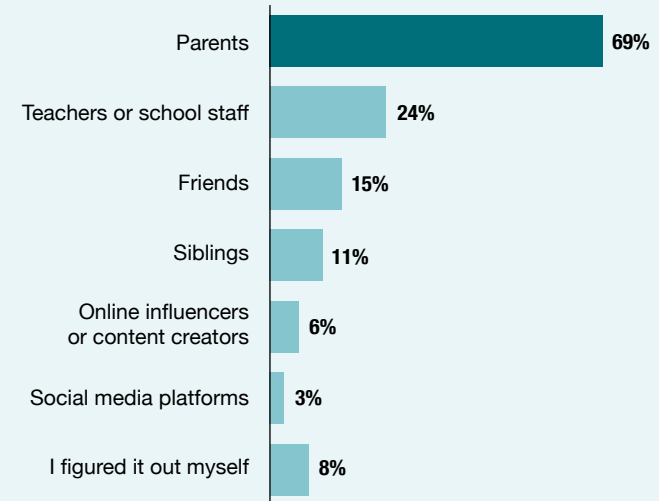
These findings suggest social media conversations are starting earlier and becoming more distributed across home and school settings. Younger teens were more consistently reached in both settings. This shift may reflect growing recognition of the importance of social media literacy among parents and educators. However, many current high school juniors and seniors may have developed their social media literacy with less support.



FIGURE 4.

Teens viewed parents as the most helpful source of guidance about social media

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 who reported the most helpful form of guidance about social media literacy

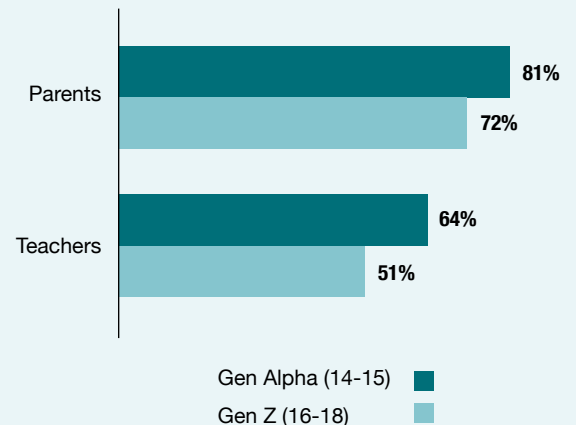


Note: Participants could select up to two sources.

FIGURE 5.

Gen Alpha teens received more conversations about responsible social media use from both parents and teachers compared to their Gen Z peers

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 who reported that parents or teachers had talked to them about social media



Many teens learned to navigate social media on their own, rather than through education at school.

For teens, learning to navigate social media—including setting up accounts, using features, creating and sharing content, and following others—is a key part of building their online presence. Nearly half of teens (49%) reported learning to navigate social media primarily through trial and error. A similar share (47%) reported learning from parents or caregivers, while 41% cited friends or siblings as important sources of guidance.

► School-based instruction was notably absent from most teens' learning experiences

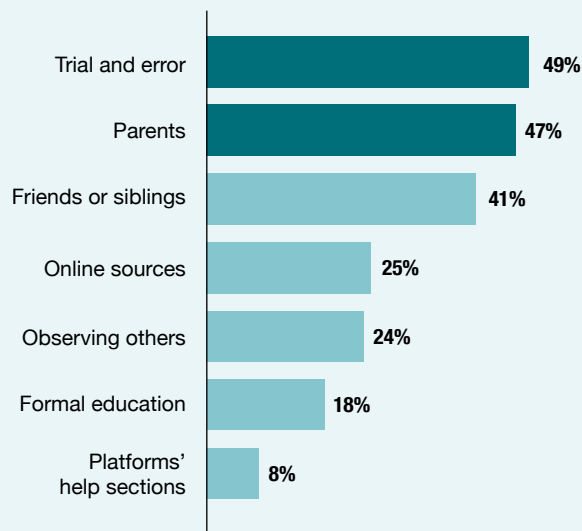
Formal, program-based instruction was notably absent from most teens' learning experiences with navigating social media. Only 18% of teens reported learning about social media navigation through a school program or a community organization. This does not preclude teachers from serving as a source of guidance; rather, it suggests that when teachers do contribute, they may do so through informal conversations or ad hoc classroom moments rather than through structured curricula. Instead, many participants turned to online sources, such as YouTube or TikTok (25%), or simply observed others' use of social media (24%). A small group (8%) reported relying on the platforms' own help sections (see Figure 6).

The minimal role of school-based instruction in teaching platform navigation is notable. While trial and error can foster exploration of technical features, it may leave teens without structured guidance on privacy settings and safety features. Most participants developed these technical competencies primarily through informal channels.

FIGURE 6.

Trial and error and parental guidance were the top ways teens learned to navigate social media

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 who reported how they learned to navigate social media



Note: Participants could select multiple ways they learned to navigate social media.

Content and Scope of Social Media Literacy Education

Social media literacy education most often focused on safety, responsible use, and digital citizenship.

To understand what social media education looks like in practice, we asked teens to identify the topics covered from among 10 options (and one “other” option). Across the sample, teens reported that their social media education covered an average of 3 of the 10 topics. The most common areas were safety and privacy (72%), responsible use of technology (52%), and digital citizenship (44%). The least common areas were algorithmic literacy (19%), media creation and communication (19%), and building supportive online communities (13%; see Figure 7).

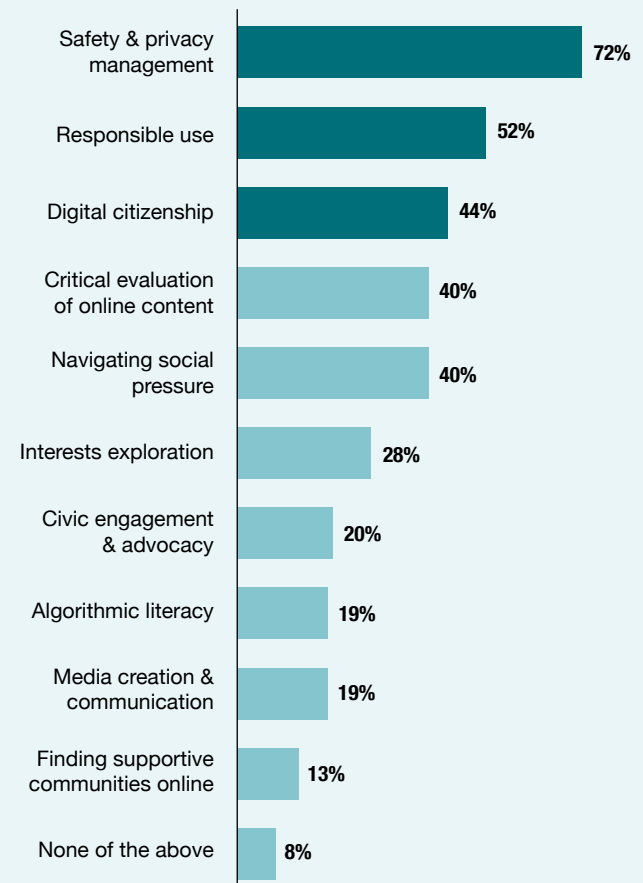
While the topics covered were similar across demographic groups, the breadth of coverage varied by race, highlighting potential disparities in access to comprehensive social media literacy education. Black teens reported their education covering an average of 0.67 fewer topics than White teens, while Hispanic teens reported an average of 1.07 fewer topics than White teens. Youth of color may be exposed to somewhat narrower social media literacy education than their White peers, although the number of topics covered is limited across racial groups.



FIGURE 7.

Safety, responsible use, and digital citizenship were the focus of teens' social media literacy education

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 who reported each topic covered in their social media education



Note: Participants could select multiple topics covered in their social media education.

Informal conversations were the most commonly reported way teens received social media literacy education, with fewer reporting school-based lessons or participatory approaches.

Sixty-one percent of teens reported that their social media education was delivered through informal conversations at home, consistent with earlier findings that parents or caregivers are the primary source of social media guidance. School-based approaches were less common: 32% recalled a one-time assembly or presentation, 21% reported it was taught within an existing subject, and 14% experienced a standalone course on digital or social media (see Figure 8).

- **Teens most often reported learning about social media through informal conversations, while fewer described school-based instruction or participatory approaches.**

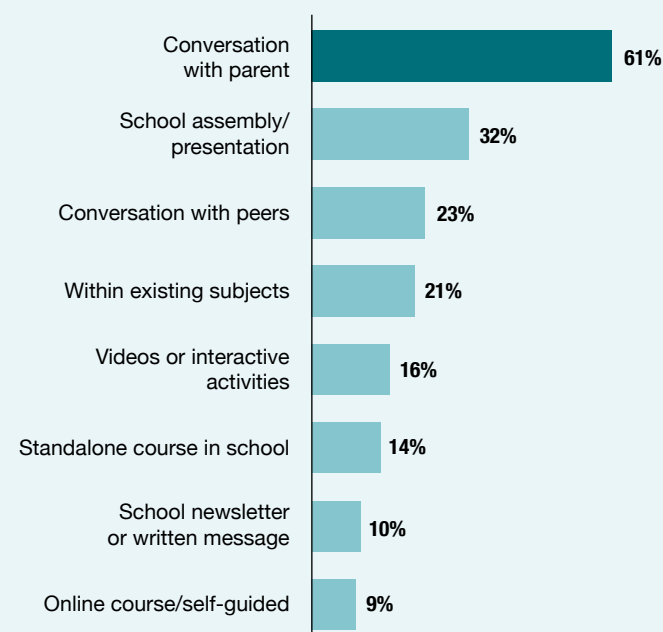
These overall patterns mask significant age differences: Generation Alpha teens (ages 14–15) were more likely than Generation Z teens (ages 16–18) to report receiving a one-time assembly or presentation (40% vs. 26%) or a standalone course (17% vs. 11%).



FIGURE 8.

Social media education happened more through everyday conversations than structured school programs

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 who reported how their social media education was delivered



Note: Participants could select multiple ways their social media education was delivered.

► **Direct instruction and interactive discussions were the most reported teaching approaches.**

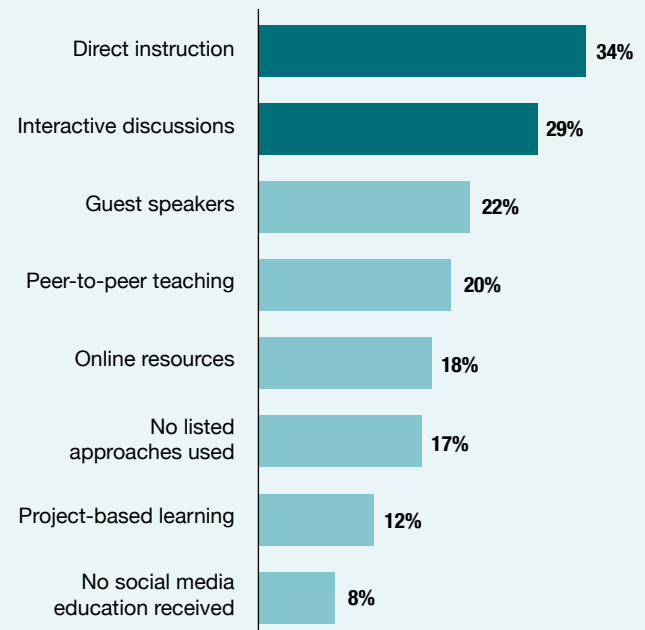
Beyond where and how education occurred, the style of instruction also varied. When asked about the teaching style of their social media education, 34% of teens reported receiving direct instruction from teachers, while 29% described engaging in interactive discussions or debates. Notably, 17% reported using none of these approaches, and 8% reported receiving no social media education (see Figure 9).

Taken together, these findings reveal a complex and uneven landscape. Most teens participate in informal conversations at home, but far fewer experience structured school-based instruction or a variety of teaching approaches. This gap suggests that while many teens receive basic guidance, comprehensive learning opportunities that incorporate multiple formats and pedagogical approaches that support social media literacy development remain uncommon.

FIGURE 9.

Social media education most often relied on direct instruction and discussions, with fewer opportunities for project-based learning

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 who reported learning approaches used in social media education



Note: Participants could select multiple learning approaches used in their social media education.



Teens valued social media education but often found it only moderately relevant or engaging.

Teens generally viewed social media education as valuable. About seven in ten (69%) agreed it is useful for teens, with nearly one-quarter (25%) strongly agreeing. Overall, perceptions of usefulness were positive across demographic groups, with no meaningful variation by gender or age.¹

► Teens valued social media literacy education but often found it only moderately relevant or engaging.

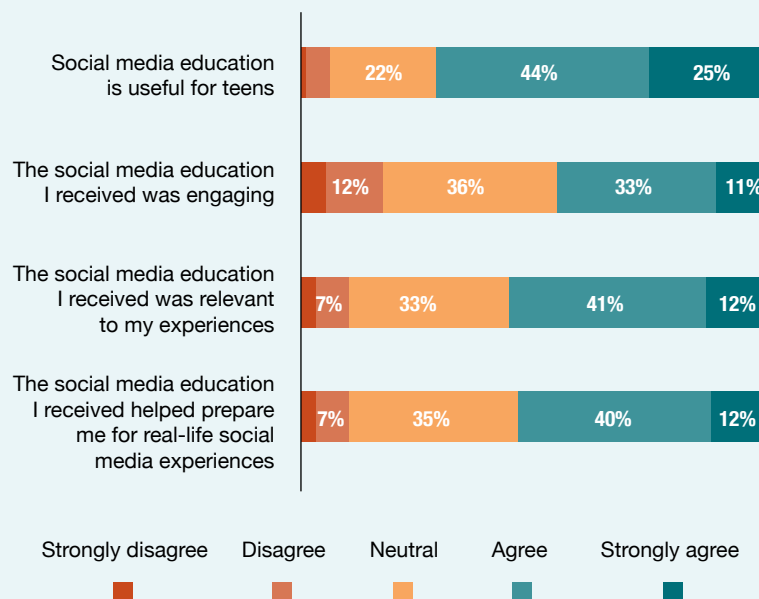
Fewer than half of teens (44%) described their education as engaging, more than a third (36%) were neutral, and 17% found it unengaging. In other words, while most teens see the topic as important, many do not find the instruction itself compelling. Black, Asian, and Hispanic teens, however, rated their social media education as more engaging than White teens. This difference may reflect variation in how relevant or inclusive the instruction feels across groups.



FIGURE 10.

Perceptions of social media education were broadly positive but tempered by uncertainty about its engagement and real-world relevance

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 who reported their social media education was useful, engaging, relevant, and helped prepare them for social media use



Note: Percentages may not total 100% because some respondents did not answer the question.

► **Preparedness and relevance ratings were lukewarm, suggesting mixed confidence in the extent to which social media education connects to teens' real lives.**

Just over half of teens (52%) felt their education prepared them for real-life social media use, and 53% said it was relevant to their experiences online. Roughly one in three remained neutral, indicating uncertainty about whether what they learned applied to their everyday online experiences. Black teens perceived their social media education as more relevant than White teens, highlighting potential differences in how instruction resonates with students from different racial backgrounds (see Figure 10).

► **Few teens reported opportunities to apply what they learned in real-world contexts.**

Applied learning opportunities could include activities like practicing responses to online conflicts, analyzing examples of misinformation, or reflecting on their own posting habits. Half (50%) reported some opportunities to apply their learning, while only 13% described extensive opportunities. An additional 17% were unsure whether such opportunities existed, and 11% said there were no application opportunities at all. This lack of practical reinforcement may help explain why many teens' evaluations of engagement and preparedness remain moderate.

The pattern across all measures reveals a consistent finding: while slight majorities acknowledged some value in their social media education, the consistently high rates of neutral responses—ranging from 33% to 36%—suggest that many teens held mixed or uncertain views about their current social media literacy experiences.²



Variety and breadth were linked with more positive perceptions of social media literacy education.

Analyses showed that teens who received broader, more varied social media education were more likely to view it positively. When social media education covered more topics, used multiple teaching methods, or came from several trusted sources, teens rated it more favorably (e.g., as more relevant, engaging, or helpful in preparing them for real-life social media use; see below for details).

► **Teens exposed to more topics viewed their social media education more favorably.**

Those who received instruction in a broader range of topics in their social media literacy education described it as more relevant, engaging, and more effective at preparing them for real-life social media use and addressing online challenges. Teens who learned from more sources (e.g., parents, teachers, and friends) also perceived their education as more relevant and better at preparing them for real-life social media use.

► **Specific delivery methods stood out.**

Teens who participated in standalone courses, integrated lessons, or conversations with parents or caregivers felt that their education better prepared them to address the challenges they face online. Relationship-based learning mattered: conversations with friends, siblings, or classmates were linked to higher engagement and perceived relevance. Teens also rated their education more positively when it included interactive or hands-on approaches, such as interactive discussions, project-based learning, peer-to-peer learning, or self-paced online modules.

► **Overall, variety itself made a difference.**

Teens who experienced more types of instruction or activities reported more positive views across all dimensions (i.e., relevance, engagement, preparedness for real-life use, and addressing the challenges they face). This pattern suggests that diversity in both content and teaching style strengthens teens' positive perceptions of the value of social media literacy education.



Social media literacy education emphasized the risks over the benefits.

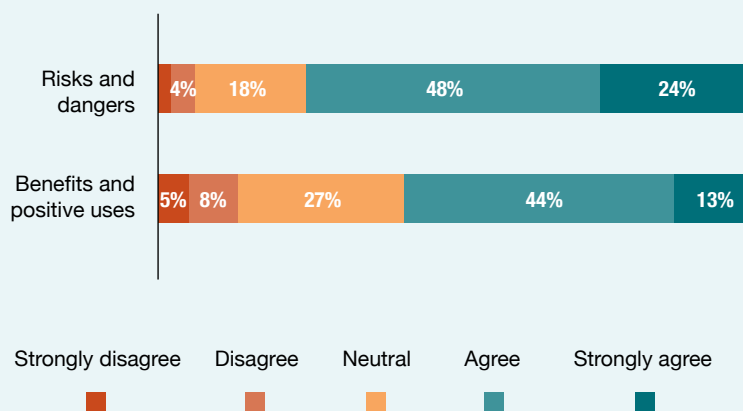
Teens reported that their social media education emphasized risks and dangers more than benefits and positive uses. Nearly three-quarters (72%) agreed that their education taught them about risks, whereas fewer than six in ten (57%) reported the same regarding benefits. Neutral responses were also more common on the benefits item (27%) than on the risks item (18%; see Figure 11).³

To better understand this imbalance, we directly compared teens' ratings of the two dimensions. We calculated a simple difference between the extent to which education emphasized benefits and the extent to which it emphasized risks. Scores below zero reflected greater emphasis on risks (range: -4 to 4). The average difference score ($M = -0.35$) was negative, indicating that teens consistently received risk-focused instruction with less attention to the positive or constructive uses of social media.

FIGURE 11.

Teens reported greater emphasis on risks than benefits in their social media literacy education

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 who reported their social media education taught them about risks and benefits



Note: Percentages may not total 100% because some respondents did not answer the question.



The framing of social media literacy education mattered—but not in the way you might expect.

Given that teens' social media education typically emphasized risks over benefits, we examined whether this focus shaped their overall thinking and feelings about social media. Three clear patterns emerged.

► **Learning about both risks and benefits was linked to more positive views of social media.**

Teens who learned about potential downsides and teens who learned about positive uses were both more likely to view social media as a tool for connection, creativity, and learning. In short, well-rounded education seemed to foster a more balanced and optimistic outlook on social media's role in their lives.⁴

► **However, the balance between risks and benefits did not make a difference.**

What mattered most was exposure to each dimension, not which one received greater emphasis. Whether a teen's education emphasized risks or presented a more positive view did not influence their attitudes toward social media or the emotions they experienced while using it. Simply hearing about risks more than benefits—or vice versa—wasn't strongly linked to their overall experiences online.

► **Lessons highlighting benefits stood out for their impact on confidence and empowerment.**

Teens who learned about the benefits of social media were more likely to report feeling confident, empowered, inspired, or uplifted in their online lives.



Spotlight

How Household Income Shapes Teens' Social Media Education

Teens' experiences with social media education varied widely by household income, revealing a digital literacy gap that mirrors broader educational inequities. Teens from higher-income families were more likely to receive structured instruction about social media, often from teachers who integrate lessons into class discussions or projects. Their education tended to emphasize safety and the risks of social media while covering a broader range of topics overall.

In contrast, teens from lower-income families reported receiving more informal and less consistent social media education. They were less likely to report receiving guidance from teachers and more likely to rely on siblings. These differences suggest that opportunities to learn about social media and to engage with it critically depend in part on the resources available to schools and families.

KEY DIFFERENCES BY FAMILY INCOME

► Exposure from Teachers

Teens from families earning more than \$60,000 were more likely to say that teachers had discussed social media literacy with them than teens from families earning \$30,000 or less. Teens from families earning more than \$100,000 were also more likely to say teachers had discussed social media literacy with them than teens from families earning between \$30,000 and \$60,000.

► Instructional Approach

Teens from families earning \$30,000 or less had fewer opportunities for interactive discussions and debates than those from families earning over \$60,000, and fewer opportunities for direct instruction than those from families earning over \$100,000.

► Content Breadth

Teens from families earning \$30,000 or less reported that their social media education covered fewer topics than peers from families earning more than \$60,000. Teens from families earning \$30,000–\$60,000 also reported fewer topics than those from families earning more than \$100,000.

► Trusted Sources

Teens from families earning \$30,000 or less were more likely to identify siblings as the most trusted guides than those from families earning more than \$100,000.

► Algorithmic Literacy

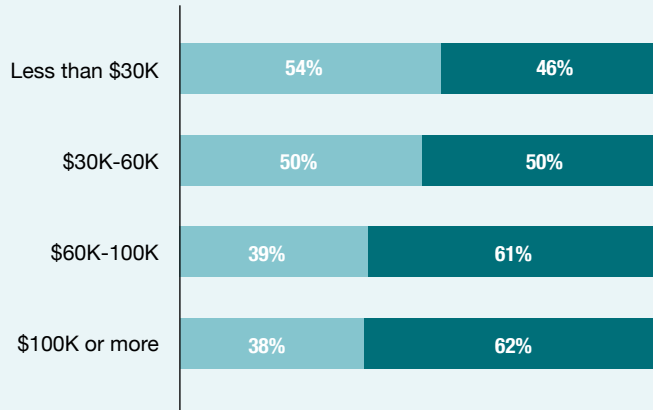
Teens from families earning \$30,000 or less scored lower on our objective measure of algorithmic literacy than peers from families earning more than \$60,000.

Income-based gaps in social media literacy reflect a broader divide in educational opportunity. As digital life becomes central to learning and connection, ensuring equitable access to social media education is increasingly essential for preparing all teens to participate fully online (see Figure 12).

FIGURE 12.

Teachers' discussions about social media were less common among teens from lower-income families

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 who said a teacher had talked to them about using social media safely and responsibly, by household income



No 
Yes 



Confidence and Knowledge in Social Media Competencies

Teens expressed moderate confidence in social media literacy competencies, with notable strengths in privacy settings and learning new skills.

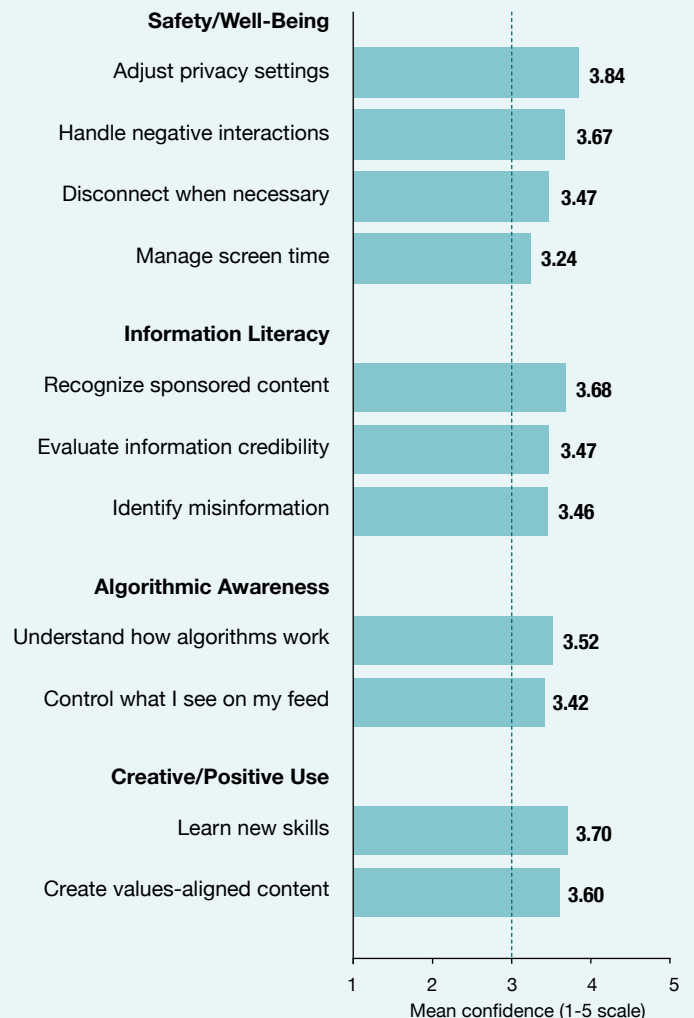
Overall, teens felt moderately confident in their ability to navigate and manage social media. Confidence was particularly strong in adjusting privacy settings, learning new skills, recognizing sponsored content, and handling negative interactions (see Figure 13). Girls tended to express slightly higher confidence than boys in adjusting privacy settings, suggesting that girls may feel more comfortable managing personal boundaries online. The lowest confidence ratings emerged in managing screen time and controlling what they see on their feeds (see Table 1).



FIGURE 13.

Teens showed moderate confidence in social media competencies

Mean confidence (1-5 scale) of U.S. teens ages 14-18 in specific social media literacy skills grouped by category



Note: The dotted line represents the midpoint.

TABLE 1.

Average confidence in social media literacy skills

Skill	Total	Girls ^a	Boys ^b	GenAlpha ^c	GenZ ^d	White ^e	Black ^f	Hispanic ^g	Multiracial ^h	Asian ⁱ
Identify misinformation or fake news	3.46	3.47	3.44	3.32 ^d	3.57 ^c	3.44 ⁱ	3.61	3.47	3.59	2.99 ^e
Adjust privacy settings to control who can see my posts	3.84	3.93 ^b	3.75 ^a	3.75	3.91	3.83	3.99	3.81	4.03	3.39
Manage my screen time effectively	3.24	3.29	3.21	3.18	3.30	3.19	3.37	3.39	3.19	2.82
Handle negative interactions (e.g., cyberbullying, unwanted messages)	3.67	3.66	3.67	3.63	3.70	3.71	3.71	3.69	3.70	2.94
Create content that aligns with my values	3.60	3.63	3.57	3.47 ^d	3.71 ^c	3.63	3.67	3.61	3.59	3.12
Understand how algorithms determine what I see	3.42	3.41	3.43	3.34	3.48	3.36 ^{f, i}	3.64 ^e	3.26	3.41	2.90 ^e
Intentionally influence what I see (e.g., seeing more or less of certain content)	3.52	3.49	3.53	3.50	3.53	3.47 ^f	3.72 ^e	3.08	3.57	3.22
Evaluate the credibility of sources	3.47	3.41	3.52	3.48	3.47	3.47 ⁱ	3.50	3.26	3.44	3.05 ^e
Recognize when content is sponsored or paid	3.68	3.65	3.70	3.63	3.72	3.68	3.66	3.40	3.81	3.30
Use social media to learn new skills or information	3.70	3.70	3.70	3.66	3.73	3.75 ⁱ	3.78	3.36	3.67	3.27 ^e
Disconnect from social media when needed	3.47	3.44	3.49	3.47	3.46	3.48 ⁱ	3.48	3.30	3.38	2.89 ^e

Note: Participants responded to the question, “How confident are you in doing the following on social media?” Participants responded on a scale from 1 (Not at all confident) to 5 (Extremely confident); the table reports average ratings. Superscript indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table. We tested for differences between girls and boys, Generation Alpha and Generation Z, and between White and Black, Multiracial, Hispanic, or Asian teens.

► **Generation Z teens reported stronger confidence in identifying misinformation.**

When asked about information literacy, teens expressed moderate confidence in recognizing misinformation and evaluating the credibility of online information. Generation Z teens (ages 16–18) were more confident than their younger peers in spotting misinformation.

► **Teens' confidence in understanding algorithms was mixed.**

Most teens felt only somewhat confident in understanding how social media algorithms work or in influencing what appears in their feeds. Confidence was similar across gender and age.

► **Teens felt more assured in creative and skill-building uses of social media.**

Many teens felt confident they could use social media to learn new skills or to create content that reflects their values. Generation Z teens reported slightly higher confidence in creating values-aligned content than Generation Alpha teens, underscoring how experience may contribute to comfort with online expression and self-presentation.

Taken together, teens' responses reveal a pattern of moderate confidence overall—strongest in personal safety and creativity, and weakest in areas requiring self-regulation or technical understanding. These contrasts highlight where future education might focus—supporting teens in balancing use and in understanding how digital systems shape their experiences.



Relevant, project-based learning was linked to higher confidence across all skills.

To better understand what fosters confidence, we examined which aspects of social media education were associated with teens' overall sense of competence. A clear pattern emerged: teens expressed greater confidence when their education was both broader and more practically relevant. Those whose instruction addressed real-world challenges, who felt it prepared them for everyday use, and who learned about a broader range of topics reported stronger overall confidence. Most important was learning through applied approaches: project-based learning was associated with higher confidence, suggesting that hands-on learning may help adolescents feel more capable.

► Topic-specific education was associated with greater confidence in related skills.

Beyond general confidence, teens who received instruction in specific topics—such as safety and privacy, algorithmic literacy, or content creation—also reported greater confidence in those areas. This pattern suggests that targeted instruction can build specific competencies, helping teens feel more confident in particular aspects of social media literacy.



Teens demonstrated wide variation in their understanding of how algorithms and data collection influence their feeds.

Just over half of teens reported at least some understanding of how algorithmic systems work. Nearly one in five (19%) reported having a very good understanding of these systems, and more than a third (36%) indicated some knowledge of them. Yet many indicated limited knowledge: 28% reported understanding only a little, and 14% either did not understand at all or had never considered how these systems function.

► Awareness of data collection practices showed similar gaps.

Adolescents also demonstrated uneven awareness of how platforms collect and utilize their data, a key factor in how algorithms recommend and personalize content. Only 27% described themselves as very aware of these practices, while one in four (25%) reported being not very or not at all aware of them. Most teens placed themselves somewhere in between, suggesting partial knowledge of how these systems work (see Figure 14).

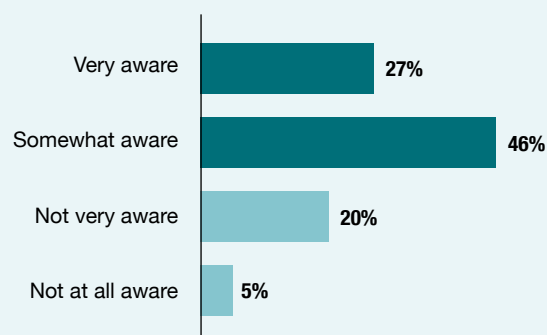
► Teens identified an average of 3 of 7 factors driving content recommendations and personalization.

When asked to identify specific factors that influence what they see, recognition rates remained modest. Even the most widely recognized factors—previous likes and interactions (63%) and viewing duration (53%)—were identified by fewer than two-thirds of respondents. Awareness dropped even further for less visible but essential drivers, with only 30% identifying location data or advertising. On average, teens correctly identified fewer than half of the possible factors affecting what they see online, though variability was high (see Figure 15).

FIGURE 14.

Most teens reported being at least somewhat aware of how social media platforms collect and use their data

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 who reported their awareness of how social media platforms collect and use their data



Note: Percentages may not total 100% because some respondents did not answer the question.



► **Nearly half of teens rarely or never attempted to curate their feeds.**

This limited understanding may help explain teens' engagement with feed curation tools. While 49% reported taking at least occasional steps to shape their content, a similar proportion showed more limited engagement—25% rarely took action to influence their feeds, 17% had never attempted to curate their content, and 8% were unaware that such control was possible (see Figure 16).

► **Girls and older teens were less likely to adjust or curate their feeds.**

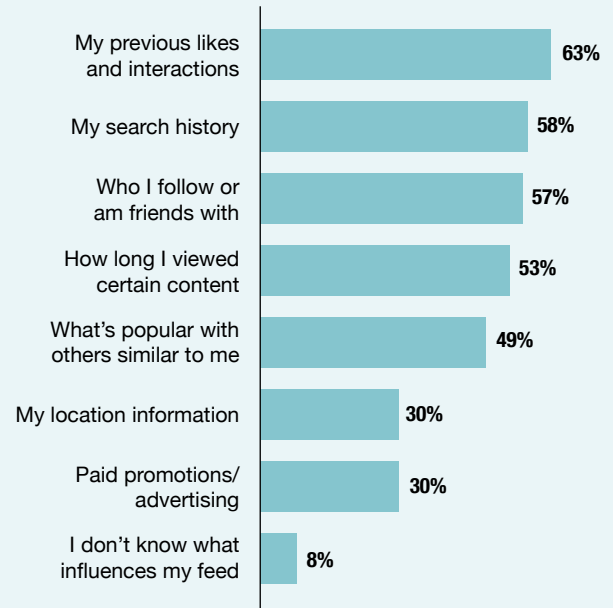
Gender and generational differences followed a similar pattern. Girls perceived that they understood how platforms collect and use their data less than boys did, and they also reported taking fewer steps to influence their feeds. Similarly, Generation Z teens (16–18) reported taking fewer steps to influence their feeds than Generation Alpha teens (ages 14–15).⁵

These findings present a layered picture of teen algorithmic literacy. Adolescents recognize that algorithms shape their social media experiences, and many are aware that platforms collect data about them. Yet their understanding is uneven across different factors, and their engagement with available curation tools remains limited. This gap suggests that education should not only explain how algorithmic systems work but also equip teens to manage their digital environments.⁶

FIGURE 15.

Teens showed uneven knowledge of the factors shaping their social media feeds, with no single influence recognized by more than two-thirds of respondents

% of U.S. teens ages 14–18 identifying factors they believe influence the content in their social media feeds

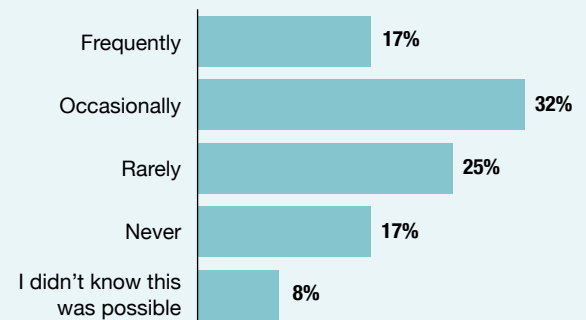


Note: Participants could select multiple factors.

FIGURE 16.

Most teens reported taking at least some action to influence their feeds, though frequent curation was less common

% of U.S. teens ages 14–18 reporting whether they have taken actions to influence the content in their social media feeds



Note: Percentages may not total 100% because some respondents did not answer the question.

Teens who received social media education showed higher algorithmic literacy, especially when it came from social media platforms and teachers.

Algorithmic literacy—the ability to understand how social media platforms recommend, prioritize, and personalize content, and how users’ own behaviors and data shape those systems—is increasingly central to navigating digital life effectively (Boots et al., 2024). To explore how to support teens’ algorithmic literacy, we examined whether different types of social media education were associated with greater understanding.

We measured algorithmic literacy in three ways: teens’ ability to correctly identify factors that influence content recommendations (score 0-7; objective knowledge), their perceived understanding of how algorithms work, and their perceived understanding of how platforms collect and use their data. Teens who reported understanding algorithms and data practices also tended to perform better on the objective knowledge measure. However, the relationship was weak, suggesting that teens’ confidence in their understanding does not always align with their actual knowledge.

► Education from platforms and teachers was linked to the strongest algorithmic literacy.

Not all sources of education had the same impact. Teens who received social media guidance from teachers or the platforms themselves scored higher in objective algorithmic literacy than those who did not. Platform-based education showed the largest gap: teens who reported receiving guidance directly from a social media platform scored, on average, 1.05 points higher than those who did not, controlling for the effect of other sources of education. Teacher-led instruction also stood out, with scores about 0.69 points higher on average, holding constant the effect of other sources of education.

These findings suggest that algorithmic literacy may be most effectively supported when lessons are integrated into the platforms themselves and reinforced through school-based instruction. Interestingly, subjective algorithmic literacy showed a different pattern: only education from influencers predicted teens’ perceptions that they understood how algorithms worked, whereas no sources of education were associated with teens’ perceived awareness of how social media collects and uses their data. Teens’ actual algorithmic literacy may be shaped by education even when their perceived understanding is not.



- **Instruction that addressed algorithms directly—and education that covered more topics and came from a greater number of sources—supported higher literacy.**

The content and scope of social media literacy education also mattered. Teens who reported that their education specifically included algorithmic literacy scored approximately 1 point higher on the objective knowledge measure than those whose education did not. Even multi-topic education and education coming from a greater number of sources were linked to stronger overall algorithmic literacy. Both of these factors also predicted teens' subjective perceptions of their algorithmic literacy. These results suggest that both targeted instruction and comprehensive approaches can improve teens' understanding of the systems that shape their online experiences.



Preferences for Social Media Literacy Education

Teens preferred social media literacy education to begin in childhood rather than adolescence, though many expressed lukewarm interest in expanding content.

When asked when social media education should begin, most teens pointed to childhood rather than the teenage years. About two-thirds (63%) said instruction should begin before age 13, with more than one-third (37%) preferring ages 10-12 and one-quarter (26%) preferring ages before 10. Only 36% believed education should wait until ages 13-16 (see Figure 17).

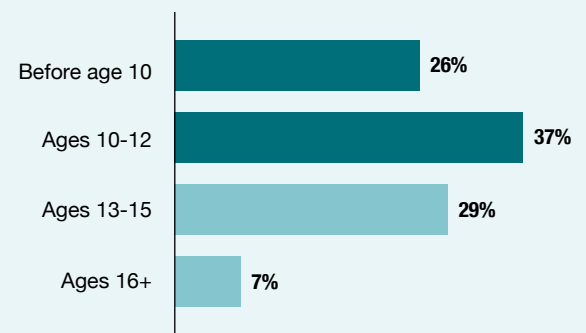
Teens' instincts about early education may be well-founded. In our sample, those who had received social media literacy education before age 13 had more positive overall feelings about the role of social media in their lives and scored higher on our objective measure of algorithmic literacy than those whose education began at age 13 or older. There were no differences between those whose social media literacy education began before age 10 and those aged 10-12.

Together, these findings suggest that teens value learning about social media early, and that earlier exposure may help them develop a more informed relationship with digital platforms.

FIGURE 17.

Most teens thought social media education should start before age 13

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 reporting when they think social media education should begin



Note: Percentages may not total 100% because some respondents did not answer the question.



► **Teens prioritized safety and responsible habits, but enthusiasm for expanding content was lukewarm.**

Beyond timing, we also asked teens what topics they would most like social media literacy education to cover. Safety and privacy management topped the list at 31%, followed by healthy usage habits at 27%. Fewer teens expressed interest in topics such as media creation (16%) or algorithmic literacy (15%), while civic engagement through social media received the lowest interest at 9% (see Figure 18).

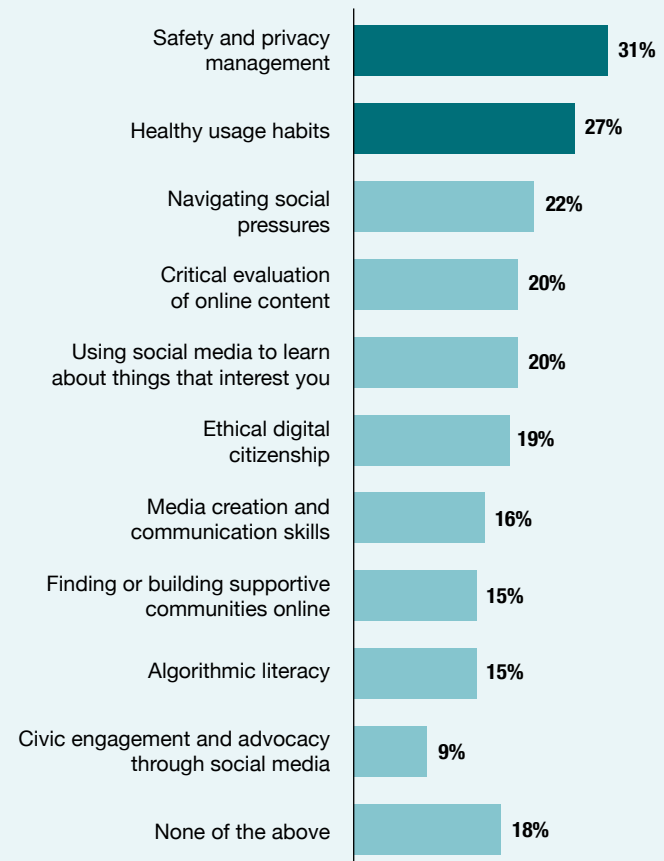
Even the most popular topics were selected by fewer than one in three teens, and nearly one in five (18%) said none of the suggested topics appealed to them. Because participants could write in additional options, these relatively low rates may indicate ambivalence about expanding social media education. While a majority (69%) described social media education as useful, teens also reported learning an average of only three topics in their current instruction. This gap suggests that many do not necessarily expect or even want a broader curriculum.



FIGURE 18.

Teens most often wanted safety and privacy and healthy usage habits covered in their social media literacy education

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 identifying topics they wish had been included in their social media education



Note: Participants could select multiple topics.

► **Younger teens and girls expressed a stronger interest in specific content areas.**

Generation Alpha teens (ages 14–15) were more likely than their Generation Z peers (ages 16–18) to want lessons on responsible use of technology (32% vs. 23%) and on media creation and communication (19% vs. 13%). Girls were also more likely than boys to want instruction on using social media to explore their interests (24% vs. 15%).

► **Preferences also differed by race and ethnicity.**

White teens were more likely than Asian/Pacific Islander teens to want education in critical evaluation of content (23% vs. 7%), while Black teens were more likely than White teens to want instruction in finding or building supportive communities online (25% vs. 14%).

► **Findings revealed both shared priorities and limited enthusiasm for expanding the curriculum.**

Although teens broadly agree that social media literacy should begin before adolescence, they are less unified on what it should include. Their preferences emphasize safety, privacy, and healthy habits as top priorities, yet the modest overall interest across topics suggests ambivalence about expanding social media education. Teens may value guidance that feels practical and personally relevant, rather than broad and more top-down approaches.



Teens showed the strongest preference for family-based social media education, with varied interest in formal and informal school approaches.

When asked about the most effective delivery methods for social media education, teens preferred relationship-based approaches. Discussions at home with parents or caregivers topped the list at 35%, followed by integration into regular school subjects (28%) and peer-led talks or workshops (25%). Fewer teens favored more structured approaches, such as interactive online courses (19%) or standalone school courses (17%; see Figure 19).

► Preferences were generally consistent across groups, though some differences by race emerged.

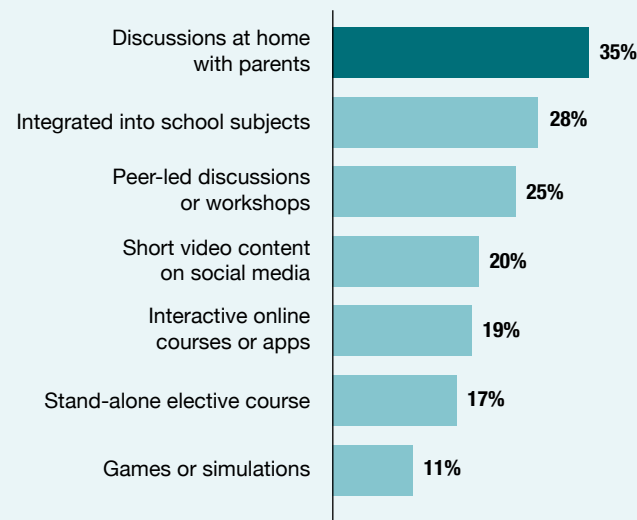
Asian/Pacific Islander teens were more than twice as likely as White teens to prefer peer-led discussions or workshops (45% vs. 22%), while Hispanic teens were less likely than White teens to favor discussions at home with parents or caregivers (27% vs. 40%). These variations suggest that while most teens value relational learning, cultural factors may shape how different groups envision effective social media education.



FIGURE 19.

Teens most often favored family discussions and informal approaches, though many also supported classroom-based instruction

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 reporting how social media education should be delivered to be most effective



Note: Participants could select multiple delivery methods.

► **Parents and teachers were viewed as the most trusted sources of guidance, mirroring the delivery methods teens favored most.**

More than half of teens (57%) identified parents or caregivers as the people they trust most to teach them about social media, followed by teachers or school experts (36%). Smaller shares selected peers (18%) or siblings (17%), while about one in ten teens named influencers (13%) or researchers (13%) as trusted sources. Social media companies were trusted least overall, at just 6% (see Figure 20).

► **Trust patterns also differed modestly by race.**

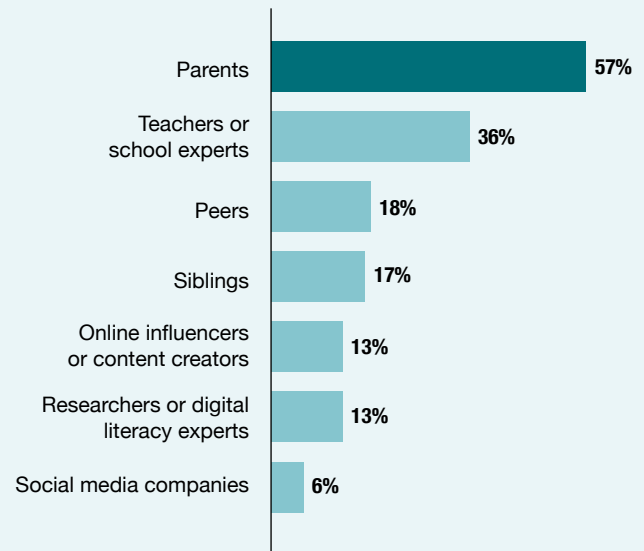
Black teens were more likely than White teens to identify siblings as the most trusted source (25% vs. 14%). The same difference emerged among teens from lower versus higher-income families (see Spotlight on family income). These patterns suggest that cultural and familial contexts shape whom teens view as credible guides for navigating social media.

These findings indicate that adolescents prefer to learn about social media from people they know personally and trust, particularly parents and teachers. Their preferences highlight a desire for guidance that feels relational and embedded in daily life, rather than programmatic or externally driven.

FIGURE 20.

Teens trusted parents most to teach social media education, followed by teachers

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 reporting who they would trust most to teach social media literacy education



Note: Participants could select multiple sources.



Experiences with Parent and School Mediation

Parents actively mediated their teens' technology use through rules and ongoing conversations, although this involvement varied widely and tended to decrease with age.

Families play a central role in how adolescents learn to navigate technology and online spaces. Understanding how parents guide or monitor their teens' social media use provides essential context for the broader social media education ecosystem.

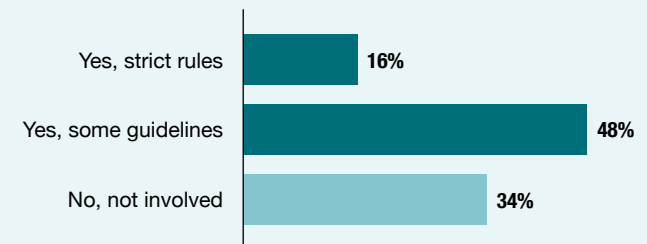
► **Most teens reported some parental guidelines around social media use.**

When asked about parental involvement in their social media use, nearly half of teens (48%) reported that their parents or caregivers set some guidelines, while 16% described strict rules. About one in three (34%) said their parents were not involved at all in regulating their social media activities (see Figure 21).

FIGURE 21.

Most teens reported that their parents set at least some rules around their social media use

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 reporting whether their parents have rules about their social media use



Note: Percentages may not total 100% because some respondents did not answer the question.



► **Having rules about social media use was linked to lower confidence and more frequent feelings of being overwhelmed.**

Teens whose parents set “strict” or “some” rules about social media use reported lower overall confidence in navigating online spaces and more frequent feelings of being overwhelmed by what they see on social media than those whose parents had no rules at all. These findings suggest that while parental oversight is common, rule-setting alone may not be sufficient to foster digital confidence. It is also worth noting that feeling overwhelmed by social media content may not always signal difficulty managing one’s emotional responses online but could reflect an appropriate reaction to an often complex digital environment.

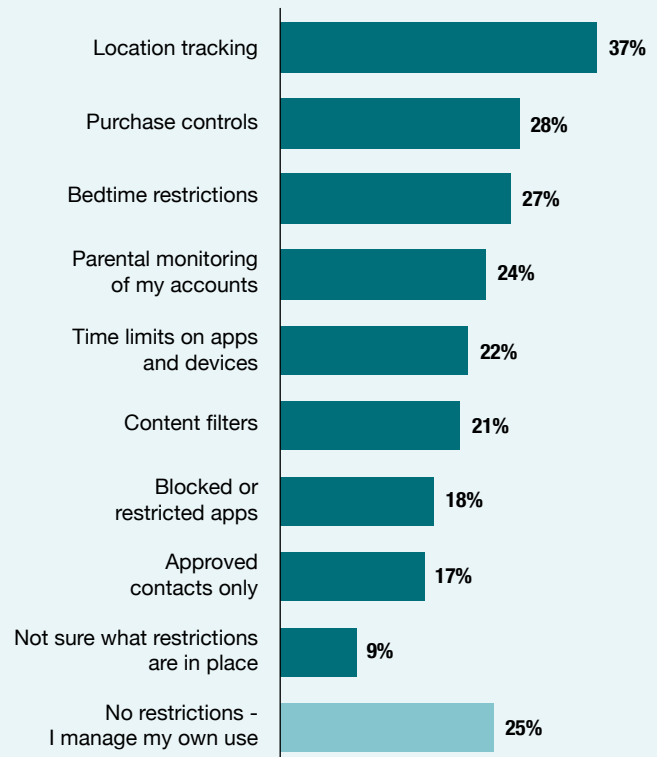
► **Location tracking emerged as the most common form of parental oversight of technology.**

When asked about specific monitoring practices, more than one-third (37%) of teens reported that their parents used location tracking. About one-quarter mentioned purchase controls (28%) or bedtime restrictions (27%), while similar shares said their parents monitored accounts (24%) or imposed time limits (22%; see Figure 22).

FIGURE 22.

Parental controls were common, though one-quarter of teens reported having no restrictions

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 reporting whether their parents or caregivers have controls on their social media or devices



Note: Participants could select multiple restrictions.



► **Most parent-teen conversations about social media were relatively infrequent.**

Beyond setting rules, many parents or caregivers engaged their teens in discussions about social media. However, these conversations happened only occasionally for most families. About one in five adolescents (19%) reported talking weekly or more often with their parents or caregivers about social media use. Larger shares described monthly conversations (24%) or a few times per year (26%; see Figure 23).

► **Younger teens reported greater parental involvement than older teens.**

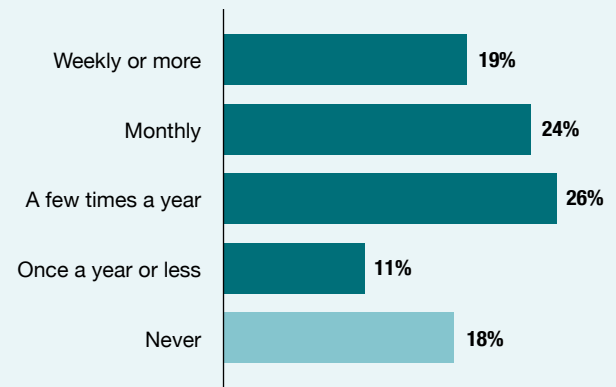
Younger teens reported greater parental guidance and communication around social media than older teens. Generation Alpha adolescents were more likely than Generation Z teens to say their parents set rules or guidelines, enforced controls, and discussed social media use with them. Older teens were more likely to report that their parents were not involved in these areas, reflecting greater autonomy in their online lives.

These patterns suggest that parents engage more actively in both setting boundaries and maintaining ongoing dialogue about social media use during early adolescence. Older teens, by contrast, navigate social media with greater independence and more limited parental involvement.

FIGURE 23.

Most teens reported that parents discuss social media use with them at least occasionally

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 reporting how often their parents or caregivers discuss social media use with them



Note: Percentages may not total 100% because some respondents did not answer the question.



Teens reported that most schools restrict phone use during school hours. Yet a majority of students still accessed social media at school, at least occasionally.

Alongside parental rules, school policies also shape when and how teens engage online. Roughly two-thirds of teens (64%) reported that their schools limit phone use; about one in four (26%) said phones are completely prohibited, and more than one-third (37%) said they are allowed only during specific times (see Figure 24). Smaller shares described more flexible environments: 8% reported that phones were permitted for educational use only, and 14% reported that rules varied by classroom or teacher.

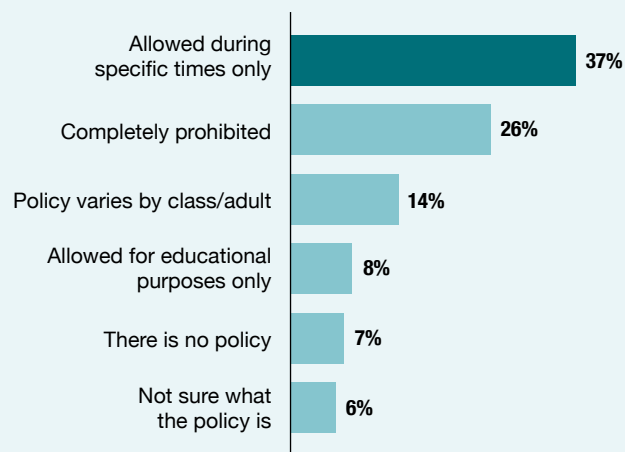
► Younger teens and students of color were more likely to experience stricter phone policies.

Generation Alpha teens were more likely than Generation Z teens to report that phone use during school hours was “completely prohibited” (32% vs. 21%). Similarly, Black and Hispanic students were more likely to report complete prohibition of phones at school (33% and 32%) than White students (21%). These differences suggest that younger students and students of color may attend schools that enforce more prohibitive phone policies.

FIGURE 24.

Most schools restricted phone use during the school day, typically allowing them only at specific times

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 reporting their school's policy on phone use during school hours



Note: Percentages may not total 100% because some respondents did not answer the question.



► **Rules didn't always match reality.**

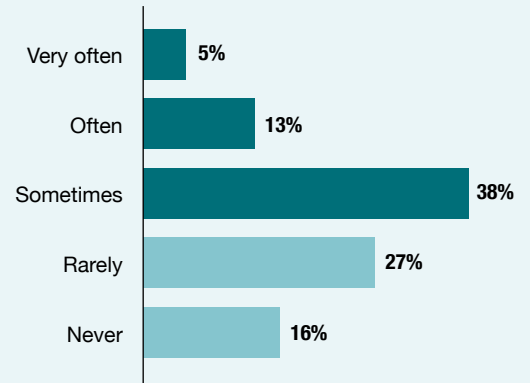
Many teens continued to access social media during the school day. Only 16% reported never using social media at school, while 27% reported rarely using it. The largest share—about 4 in 10 (38%)—reported using it sometimes, and roughly one in five (18%) said they used it often or very often (see Figure 25).

These patterns reveal a disconnect between policy and practice. Even as schools increasingly restrict device use, most students still find ways to engage with social media during the day. This pattern suggests that policies alone may be insufficient to shape online behavior, underscoring the need for education that helps adolescents develop self-regulation and digital balance in school settings.

FIGURE 25.

Most teens reported using social media during school at least occasionally, with only a small minority saying they never do

% of U.S. teens ages 14-18 reporting how often they use social media during school hours



Note: Percentages may not total 100% because some respondents did not answer the question.



Recommendations

Recommendations for Families

Normalize frequent conversations about social media with parents or caregivers starting in childhood.

Parents or caregivers are an ideal starting point for teens to learn social media literacy skills, and they are the people teens most want to learn from. The majority of teens reported both trusting their parents and finding their parents' guidance useful in developing their understanding of social media.

Despite appreciation for and trust in parents to navigate these conversations, few teens reported having them regularly; only 1 in 5 reported weekly or more frequent conversations. Teens may benefit from parents engaging in more regular dialogue about social media: how parents use it, what they see online, and how they discern good information from bad. Conversations like these may not only boost learning but also help normalize social media as a topic teens can discuss with their parents or caregivers. Indeed, regular discussions about social media may encourage teens to bring these conversations to their parents, thereby taking some of the burden off parents to continually initiate them.

Parents or caregivers also have opportunities to begin these conversations at younger ages. One in three teens in this study reported not talking about social media with their parents until their teen years. Given that recent studies indicate that as much as 38% of 8-12 year olds are spending some time on social media ([Rideout et al., 2022](#)), some parents may be missing the window of opportunity to set norms and expectations, as well as build skills, before children are in these spaces.

Teens themselves associate unregulated social media use with behavioral and mental health challenges, like dysregulated sleep, diet, poor mental health, and strained relationships (while also noting the benefits for connection and creativity; [Faverio, 2025](#)). Parents can help mitigate some of the challenges associated with social media use by initiating conversations about these online spaces when children first express curiosity and by positioning themselves as a resource for learning to use social media effectively.



Center an empowerment approach for conversations about social media.

As parents or caregivers begin discussing social media with their children, it is critical to take an empowerment approach—one that addresses both the risks and rewards of social media and communicates confidence in teens' capacity to develop the skills needed to navigate these environments effectively.

Results of this study demonstrate that an overly restrictive approach to managing teens' social media usage may be counterproductive. Teens who reported more rules and regulations surrounding social media use also reported lower confidence and greater overwhelm when navigating online spaces. While some argue that such rules are necessary to deter social media misuse among teens, they may not equip teens with the skills or self-efficacy to navigate online spaces as they transition into adulthood.

Indeed, this finding aligns with broader discussions on effective parenting styles that support youth development and mental health. Parenting styles that emphasize harsh punishment and rely heavily on a high need for control are consistently linked with more challenges in behavioral health (e.g., sleep, diet) and worse mental health than parenting styles that center warmth, support, and consistent parental monitoring ([Davids et al., 2017](#); [Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019](#)). The data from teens in this study on parental approaches to social media monitoring are consistent with this larger discussion.

Parents or caregivers may instead offer teens supportive dialogue about social media that both centers parents' knowledge of the issue and supports the development of social media skills, while providing guidance on which boundaries may help keep teens thriving online. This balanced approach may be more effective for fostering teens' skills and confidence and better supports teens' desire to engage in open conversation with parents about social media environments.

Furthermore, parents or caregivers may be most effective in supporting their teens by honestly accounting for the risks and benefits of social media and resisting narratives that portray online spaces as universally dangerous. Teens in this study who received a nuanced discussion of online spaces reported greater skills and confidence in navigating social media. Parents who can navigate social media's complex role in their teens' lives may ultimately be more effective at fostering habits that sustain teens' well-being into adulthood.



Embrace bidirectional learning about social media between parents and teens.

Parents and teens possess different knowledge and skill sets regarding social media and technology; thus, conversations about social media may serve as a site of co-learning for both groups. Social media literacy is a complex interplay between knowledge of social media content (i.e., the online self, the platforms used, the media consumed) and skills for navigating this content (i.e., analyzing and evaluating content, discernment around content generation; [Cho et al., 2024](#)). Parents or caregivers need not be experts in the full scope of these domains to initiate conversations with their teens.

Teens in this study expressed a desire for more participatory learning about social media, that is, learning while doing. Parents could support this preference by making time to explore social media alongside their teens. Teens might walk parents through their social media platforms, demonstrating how they navigate through these online spaces. Parents may use these demonstrations to reflect on their values and on the types of content observed, their potential biases, and the boundaries that may be necessary when entering these spaces. Both teens and parents may learn new information about social media content and the competencies needed to navigate it effectively through this interactive approach.

Furthermore, these moments of bidirectional learning may provide parents or caregivers with an important opportunity to strengthen their connection with their teens. Parents who regularly engage in conversations with their teens and monitor their lives through warm, supportive engagement are associated with greater health and well-being among teens ([Dittus et al., 2023](#); [Grey et al., 2022](#)). Time spent together with parents and teens co-learning about social media may be an ideal opportunity for parents to engage in supportive communication and to learn more about their teens' virtual lives, thereby strengthening the parent-child bond and building a strong foundation for their teens to thrive both online and off.



Recommendations for Educators

Prioritize social media education in formal school settings.

Parents and caregivers are central to the network supporting teens in developing healthy digital habits. Still, educators play a vital role in ensuring that all students receive high-quality guidance on navigating social media thoughtfully. Schools are uniquely positioned to provide equitable access to this kind of education, reaching young people from different backgrounds and experiences.

Although many teens reported receiving some social media instruction at school, these lessons were often limited to brief assemblies or short segments within other subjects. Few students described sustained or in-depth opportunities to explore how social media shapes their lives or to practice the skills needed to use it responsibly. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that media literacy instruction is often limited and, when available, typically takes place in informal rather than formal classroom contexts ([Fromm, 2024](#); [News Literacy Project, 2024](#)). These limited learning opportunities often mean that teens develop their social media skills through trial and error, leaving gaps in understanding around privacy and algorithmic systems.

This lack of structured education in schools may create knowledge gaps among teens, leaving them unprepared to engage safely and responsibly in the digital world. Many teens in our study continued to use social media during the day, even though most of their schools had phone policies that restricted its use. Previous research has also found that many teens report being online almost constantly ([Faverio & Sidoti, 2024](#)) and feeling they spend too much time on social media ([Faverio et al., 2025](#)). Taken together, these findings suggest that teens may need further support to effectively regulate their social media use and develop healthier digital habits.

Finally, expanding school-based social media education can help address inequities in access and experience. Teens from lower-income families were less likely to receive instruction from teachers and more likely to rely on informal learning. Embedding comprehensive social media literacy within the formal curriculum can help close these gaps and ensure that all students are equipped to participate fully in digital life.



Make educational experiences more relevant and engaging.

Current approaches to social media education fall short for youth, with most teens reporting their experiences as only somewhat engaging. Insights from teens themselves point to some strategies that may help make educational content more impactful for young people:

► **Cover a wider range of topics and skills.**

In general, teens who were exposed to multiple topics were more likely to report that their social media education was relevant, engaging, and effective at addressing online challenges. Although teens overall were lukewarm about expanding the content covered in their social media education, these findings suggest that teaching a broader range of topics may still be one way to create more engaging social media education experiences for teens.

► **Teach many things, in many ways.**

Beyond expanding content, incorporating varied instructional approaches, such as direct instruction, interactive discussions, and project-based activities, may increase student engagement. Teens who experienced multiple types of instruction or activities were more likely to report positive views of their educational experiences, including on dimensions such as relevance, engagement, preparedness, and usefulness.

► **Provide opportunities to apply learning.**

Just over half of teens reported having opportunities to apply what they had been taught, mirroring the share who felt their education was relevant and prepared them for real-world social media use. Providing students with more opportunities to practice social media literacy skills may deepen engagement and help them more clearly see the connections between what they learn and how they navigate social media in their daily lives. Our findings suggest that interactive approaches—such as project-based learning, peer-to-peer teaching, and self-paced online modules—may be particularly effective for engaging teens through hands-on learning that builds both confidence and digital literacy skills.

► **Engage teens with topics that interest them and fill confidence gaps.**

Teens were most interested in learning about safety and privacy management on social media. Teens also lacked confidence in managing their screen time and reported interest in gaining more knowledge about the healthy use of technology. Safety and privacy, device management, and setting boundaries around social media use were rated as particularly relevant and engaging topics.

Center algorithmic literacy in future educational efforts.

As teens spend more time online, the content they see is increasingly shaped by social media algorithms, which underlie features such as TikTok’s “For You” page and YouTube’s home feed ([Narayanan, 2023](#)). However, algorithmic literacy was one of the least common topics in teens’ social media education.

This lack of instruction was reflected in students’ confidence in social media algorithms, with many reporting only a limited understanding of how these systems work. Some groups were less knowledgeable than others: fewer girls reported understanding how platforms collect and use data, and both girls and older teens were less likely to take

steps to adjust or curate their feeds. Although some teens expressed greater confidence in their understanding of algorithms, most were unable to correctly identify the majority of factors that influence what they see online.

Given the significant role algorithms play in young people’s lives, this gap in teens’ knowledge and confidence in understanding algorithms suggests that algorithmic literacy may be an important area of focus for future educational programs. Teacher-led, algorithm-focused social media education may be especially useful for building students’ algorithmic literacy, as both were associated with higher scores on an objective measure of algorithmic knowledge.

Teach both the risks and the benefits of social media.

We found that teens’ education tends to focus more on the dangers of social media than on its benefits. However, teens’ views on social media are complex, often acknowledging its pitfalls while also recognizing its potential to strengthen social ties and creative expression ([Faverio et al., 2025](#); [Madden et al., 2024](#); [Weinstein et al., 2024](#)). Given this emphasis on risks, current educational efforts may not fully reflect the realities of adolescents’ experiences with social media.

Our findings also suggest that learning about the benefits of social media is associated with more positive outcomes for teens. When teens learned about both the potential dangers and the positive uses of social media, they were more likely to view it as a tool for connection, creativity, and learning. Teens who learned about the benefits of social media were also more likely to report feeling confident, inspired, and empowered in their digital lives.

Comprehensive social media literacy education should address the benefits and positive uses of social media alongside its risks and dangers. Presenting more holistic instruction reflects the complex ways teens experience social media and can help them feel more confident and empowered as users.



Start social media education earlier and ensure it reaches boys, too.

Our findings indicate that conversations about social media begin earlier among today's youth than among previous generations. Many younger teens (ages 14-15) reported discussing social media with adults before they turned 13, and one-third had those conversations before age 10. This early start may reflect growing awareness among families and educators that digital habits form well before high school. Early social media education can provide a valuable opportunity to help students develop healthy digital practices as they form their first online identities ([Li et al., 2025](#); [Nesi et al., 2018](#)). However, not all young people are equally included in these early efforts. Across both age groups, boys were more likely than girls to have these discussions later. Among older teens (ages 16-18), nearly half of boys reported not discussing social media with adults until age 13 or later. This pattern suggests that some boys may miss opportunities to practice skills, such as setting healthy boundaries around social media use, before their digital routines are firmly in place.

Gender is an important consideration in the teaching of social media literacy. Young people's experiences online are not the same, and platforms often reinforce gendered patterns through content exposure. Boys, for example, are more likely to encounter material that normalizes aggression, emotional detachment, or misogyny, while girls face pressures related to appearance, social comparison, and online visibility ([Robb & Mann, 2025](#); [Rubin et al., 2025](#)). These differences shape how youth understand themselves and others in digital spaces. Waiting until age 13 or later to address these dynamics may miss the window when young people are most receptive to developing awareness of how platforms shape their identities and relationships.

To address both timing and equity gaps, schools should prioritize reaching all students with social media literacy by middle school, paying particular attention to ensuring boys receive this education early. When educators introduce these conversations at younger ages and make them relevant to students' lived experiences, they can help young people develop the critical skills needed to recognize and resist harmful gendered patterns online.



Recommendations for Administrators

Provide opportunities for educators, parents, and teens to engage in collective learning.

District and school administrators are well-positioned to support the creation of spaces for families, educators, and teens to learn about social media. Adults and teens should collaborate to discuss the challenges and opportunities inherent in online environments and to establish best practices for supporting teens.

Teens expressed a desire to hear from both parents and educators as they develop their online skills and reported a preference for hands-on learning experiences. Ideally, the messages they receive from parents and educators should align, enabling youth to operate within a cohesive narrative about how to manage their social media use effectively. Practitioners seeking to support teens' competence in other areas, such as sexual health, emphasize the value of collaborative models that bring together parents and professionals as partners in developing teens' skills for this reason ([Dittus, 2016](#)).

By investing in a cooperative approach to learning social media literacy and promoting dialogue across educators, parents, and teens, administrators can play a leadership role in designing systems that grow teens' skills and confidence in navigating online spaces.

Administrators could think creatively about how to foster such collaborations within their school or district. Options might include:

► **Family–Educator–Teen “Tech Labs”:**

Districts and schools could host interactive workshops where families, educators, and teens explore trending apps together. Teens could demonstrate platform features, while educators and parents guide discussions on privacy, safety, and digital citizenship.

► **Social Media Literacy Cafés:**

Districts and schools could support informal evening learning forums with rotating discussion topics. Teens could serve as facilitators of these discussions as part of coursework or club responsibilities, with educator oversight and parents as attendees.

► **Student-led Digital Storytelling Projects:**

District and school curricula could include collaborative projects in which students teach parents and educators to create short videos or posts about healthy online habits, thereby opening dialogue and building relationships among parents, educators, and students.

► **Community Resource Hub:**

Districts and schools could invest in establishing online portals curated by a coalition of parents, educators, and teens with social media literacy content, such as guides on algorithmic literacy, tips for identifying misinformation, and best practices for engaging compassionately in online spaces.

Recommendations for Developers

Make data collection practices more transparent and understandable to teen users.

Teens want to understand how social media platforms work, but our findings show that most currently do not. Only 27% of high school students reported being very aware of how platforms collect and use their data, and only 30% recognized that data from sources such as location tracking and advertising interactions influence what appears in their feeds. Developers can address this transparency gap by designing for teens as curious users rather than passive consumers.

When developers design to help teens understand how data practices work, they may strengthen young people's ability to make informed choices online.

KEY ACTIONS FOR DEVELOPERS

► **Translate “Terms of Use” into everyday language.**

Replace policy-oriented privacy statements with plain-language summaries that use concrete examples of how data informs content recommendations.

► **Design interactive transparency features.**

Develop “Why am I seeing this?” buttons and simple visual maps that illustrate how likes, follows, and location data shape recommendations over time.

► **Provide explanations in context.**

Provide brief explanations when teens make data-related choices (e.g., turning on location services or interacting with ads) so they understand what information is being shared and why it matters.

► **Make data choices reversible and auditable.**

Provide ongoing ways for users to review and adjust what data is stored and how it's used. Include simple logs or summaries so users can see changes they've made.

► **Test for comprehension, not just compliance.**

Evaluate whether teen users actually understand these disclosures through usability testing, A/B experiments, or comprehension checks built into onboarding and key feature updates.



Equip teens with tools to curate their social media feeds effectively.

Our findings indicate that approximately half of adolescents rarely or never adjust their social media feeds, and only a small minority actively shape what they see. These findings suggest that current content-personalization tools may not be designed with adolescent users in mind. Developers have an opportunity to make feed curation more accessible and educational for young people.

When feed controls are straightforward and responsive, they may help teens see how their actions shape what they encounter online. This visibility builds understanding of how recommendation systems work and may support more intentional engagement with social media.



KEY ACTIONS FOR DEVELOPERS

► Make curation tools accessible and easy to use.

Place “show more,” “show less,” “mute,” or “not interested” options in visible and consistent locations within the platform. Ensure that these tools operate reliably and that their effects are readily discernible. When teens can clearly see that their choices influence their feeds, they may feel more confident using these controls.

► Show the results of user actions.

When a teen hides a post or changes their content preferences, provide clear feedback such as “You will now see fewer posts like this.” Visible confirmation helps users understand how their input shapes what they see.

► Frame curation as creative and goal-oriented.

Offer ways for teens to set personal goals for their content mix, such as “more creative tutorials, fewer product reviews.” Provide visual summaries or dashboards that help them track how their selections influence what appears in their feed over time.

► Support learning through experimentation.

Create safe ways for users to test how their actions affect recommendations. For instance, developers might add a temporary “learning mode” that allows teens to observe how liking or skipping certain content affects what they see next. These changes may help them understand algorithmic systems in a hands-on way.

Develop platform-based education on algorithmic literacy for teens.

Our findings show that teens who received guidance about algorithms directly from social media platforms accurately identified, on average, about 1 more factor (out of 7) that influences their algorithm than those who did not receive such guidance. This finding suggests that platforms themselves can play a decisive educational role. Developers are uniquely positioned to help young users understand how algorithms influence what they see, why certain content appears, and how their own actions shape their online experiences.

Helping teens understand algorithms transforms them from passive recipients of content into informed participants in the digital world. When platforms take responsibility for teaching users how their systems work, they contribute to a generation of more confident and empowered digital citizens.



KEY ACTIONS FOR DEVELOPERS

► **Integrate algorithmic explanations into the user experience.**

Include clear messages such as “You’re seeing this because you liked...” or “This post is popular among people your age.” These small moments of insight can make algorithmic processes visible and easier to grasp.

► **Create interactive learning features.**

Develop optional modules, short videos, or guided simulations that enable teens to explore how engagement patterns affect content recommendations. For example, a “learn about your feed” feature could allow users to experiment with different actions and see how their recommendations change.

► **Use visuals and stories to explain complex systems.**

Present algorithms not as abstract code, but as systems of cause and effect. Visual explanations, animations, or teen-oriented stories can make these ideas relatable and concrete.

► **Collaborate with researchers and educators.**

Partner with youth-serving organizations or research teams to test whether platform-based lessons improve understanding and promote positive engagement.

Make social media a safer place for everyone, including teens.

Although social media can enable positive experiences for youth, such as strengthening social ties and enabling creative self-expression, many adolescents have both positive and negative experiences online. Previous research suggests that many teens believe that social media has a mostly negative impact on people their age ([Faverio et al., 2025](#)) and that, despite recent efforts, young people continue to regularly encounter unsafe content on social media, even on accounts with additional protections in place ([Heat Initiative, 2025](#)). Developers can implement design changes to enhance the user experience.

Though much of the focus lately has been on teen mental health and well-being, adults may experience some of these same harms while using social media. For example, recent surges in posts containing disturbing content or “AI slop” affect both teen and adult users ([Eadicicco, 2025](#); [Kelly, 2025](#)). Platforms can take steps to make social media a safer, more positive space for all users, including teens.



KEY ACTIONS FOR DEVELOPERS

► Invest in proactive safety design.

Move beyond reactive moderation by designing systems that anticipate risks. For instance, machine-learning models can flag harmful or inappropriate content patterns before they appear in a teen’s feed.

► Strengthen user control over exposure.

Offer easy-to-use tools that let users limit sensitive or disturbing content, filter specific topics, or customize who can message or follow them. These controls should be visible and easy to adjust over time.

► Balance safety with autonomy.

Design protections that prioritize informed choice, allowing teens to understand and manage their settings rather than relying solely on automatic restrictions.

► Improve detection of emerging harms.

Monitor and respond to evolving forms of unsafe or manipulative content, including misinformation, AI-generated material, and exploitative trends that affect both teens and adults.

► Foster a culture of positive engagement.

Highlight prosocial interactions and creative expression through design, such as by featuring community challenges that encourage constructive participation.

Conclusion

This study revealed a fragmented landscape of social media literacy education in the United States. Most teens in this study learned to navigate digital spaces through occasional conversations with parents or brief school assemblies rather than comprehensive instruction. While younger teens received earlier and more coordinated guidance than their older peers, significant gaps remained in access to quality education, in the topics covered, and in how well current efforts prepared teens for the realities of their digital lives.

The path forward requires collaboration across sectors. Educators can embed social media literacy within formal curricula so that all students build critical skills for navigating digital life. Parents and caregivers need resources and support to sustain ongoing conversations about online experiences. Technology developers also have a role to play by designing for transparency and making their systems more supportive of young users. Real progress will come when education, family engagement, and technology design work together to support teens in developing the skills they need online. The teens in this study have made clear what they need. Now, adults and institutions must respond.



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Appendix

- ¹ Participants responded to a series of items using labeled ordinal scales (e.g., Very frequently to Never; Strongly agree to Strongly disagree). Numeric values were not displayed to respondents; for analysis, we recoded these categorical responses into a 5-point numeric scale (1–5). This recoding allowed us to report both the distribution of responses (frequencies) and the mean score as a summary indicator.
- ² Mean ratings (1–5 scale) were 3.9 for usefulness, 3.35 for engagement, 3.53 for preparedness, and 3.55 for relevance.
- ³ On average, ratings for risks ($M = 3.91$) were higher than those for benefits ($M = 3.55$), underscoring a stronger emphasis on risks (1–5 scale).
- ⁴ We measured teens’ beliefs about the role of social media in their lives using the valence subscale of the Social Media Mindsets Scale (Lee & Hancock, 2024). The valence dimension captures whether individuals view social media primarily as offering opportunities and benefits (positive valence) or primarily as posing threats and harms (negative valence). Higher scores on this subscale indicate beliefs that social media is meaningful, strengthens relationships, and facilitates learning and growth. In comparison, lower scores indicate that individuals believe social media is a waste of time and harmful. This measure is distinct from behavioral assessments of social media use (e.g., time spent or activity type). Instead, it captures individuals’ core assumptions about the nature and value of social media in their lives.
- ⁵ All items in this scale were reverse-coded before analysis. In the original scale, lower scores indicated more frequent actions to influence one’s feed. After reverse-coding, higher scores reflect greater frequency of taking action to influence one’s feed.
- ⁶ Means reported for algorithmic literacy measures:
 - ▶ **Self-reported understanding of algorithms**
 $M = 3.53$ (scale 1 = “I’ve never thought about it,” 5 = “Very well”).
 - ▶ **Awareness of data collection practices**
 $M = 2.97$ (scale 1 = “Not at all aware,” 4 = “Very aware”).
 - ▶ **Average number of factors identified as influencing recommendations**
 $M = 3.27$ (out of 7 possible factors).
 - ▶ **Frequency of feed curation**
 $M = 3.35$ (scale 1 = “I didn’t know this was possible,” 5 = “Yes, frequently”).
 - ▶ **Gender differences**
Data awareness – girls $M = 2.87$, boys $M = 3.06$; feed curation – girls $M = 3.24$, boys $M = 3.43$.
 - ▶ **Generational differences**
Feed curation – Generation Z (ages 16–18) $M = 3.25$; Generation Alpha (ages 14–15) $M = 3.47$.

Supplement

Sampling and Recruitment

The survey targeted adolescents ages 14–18 enrolled in U.S. high schools during the 2024–2025 academic year. Recruitment employed a dual-frame design:

► Probability sample

We recruited adolescents through NORC’s AmeriSpeak Teen Panel, a probability-based panel that covers approximately 97% of U.S. households. NORC invited all eligible panelists aged 14 to 18 to participate in the study. For participants under 18, parents were contacted first to obtain informed consent, after which adolescents received their own invitation to participate. Parents received a \$2 incentive, and adolescents received \$10 for completing the survey.

► Non-probability sample

To enhance coverage, adolescents were also recruited from the Prodege Panel, a widely used opt-in sample. NORC defined demographic quota cells (age × gender × race/ethnicity) to approximate U.S. population distributions.

Field Procedures

Data collection occurred between June 25 and August 4, 2025.

► **Soft launches** were conducted across both probability and non-probability sources to verify programming integrity and detect errors before full launch. No changes were required following review.

► Recruitment sequence

June 25: Initial invitations to AmeriSpeak parents (14–17-year-olds) and 18-year-old teens (soft launch).

July 2: Remaining AmeriSpeak participants invited.

July 10: Initial invitations to Prodege parents (14–17-year-olds).

July 2–9: Prodege 18-year-olds invited.

► Reminders

NORC implemented structured reminder schedules, including email reminders sent at 3, 5, 8, and 18 days post-invitation for parents and teens, as well as SMS reminders for 14–17-year-olds who had opted in.

► Distribution

The surveys were self-administered online and were available in English only.

Participant Flow

The table below summarizes sample information from initial contact to final completions.

Stage	Count
Sampled parents of teens aged 14–17 (probability)	1,055
Sampled teens aged 18 (probability)	385
Consented teens aged 14–17 (with parental consent)	755
Probability completed surveys	498
Non-probability completed surveys	529
Total completed adolescent surveys	1,027

Data Quality Controls

NORC implemented rigorous data quality procedures to ensure the validity of the survey results, with differentiated approaches for the probability and non-probability samples.

Probability sample integrity (AmeriSpeak)

AmeriSpeak is a probability-based panel that NORC manages through active recruitment; respondents must be selected by NORC to join. Panelists access surveys using unique credentials through a secure web portal or mobile app. NORC delivers invitations directly to each panelist's verified mailing address, email, or phone number, and phone surveys address respondents by name. Each panelist has a unique identifier to prevent duplicate participation across surveys. These procedures help ensure that AmeriSpeak avoids common issues found in online panels, such as bots, fabricated profiles, or uninvited respondents.

Non-probability sample safeguards (Prodege)

In contrast, non-probability panels lack the same structural protections and may be more susceptible to fraudulent participation or duplication. To mitigate these risks, NORC employed a multi-layered quality control process for Prodege respondents:

► Attention checks

Included consistency tests between age and birth year, and instructed-response items requiring respondents to select a specific answer. Respondents failing these checks were removed from the sample.

► RelevantID digital fingerprinting

Used to detect and block suspicious respondents (e.g., duplicate IP addresses, unusual geo-location patterns).

► Exclusions

38 teen and 116 parent cases were blocked by RelevantID, and an additional 66 teen and 7 parent cases were excluded after failing attention checks.

Programming correction

During early data processing, NORC identified a survey programming error that resulted in missing data for 362 respondents on four items. These cases were removed from the final dataset, and additional respondents were recruited to meet the target completion numbers.

Weighting and Calibration

Final survey weights were developed using TrueNorth Calibration, a model-assisted procedure that combines probability and non-probability samples to reduce bias.

Weighting procedure

1. A weighted decision-tree model was fitted to classify respondents into “types” (leaves) based on their survey responses. AmeriSpeak respondents contributed non-response-adjusted weights; non-probability respondents were assigned equal weights.
2. Initial weights were calculated as the inverse of each respondent’s estimated inclusion probability.
3. The ratio adjustment ensured that the combined sample weights were aligned with the probability-only totals.
4. Raking adjusted weights to match 2025 Current Population Survey (February) benchmarks across age, gender, region, race/ethnicity, parental education, and cross-classified interactions (e.g., age × gender, age × race/ethnicity).
5. Raking dimensions included: Age (14, 15, 16, 17, 18); Gender (boy/man, girl/woman); Race/Ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, Other); Region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West); Education (parental attainment: <HS/HS, some college, BA+); and cross-interactions (Age × Gender, Age × Race/Ethnicity, Race/Ethnicity × Gender).
6. Trimming of extreme weights controlled variance inflation. Final weights were re-raked post-trimming.

Response Rates and Error Estimates

► Screener completion rate (ScrC)

55.3% – proportion of invited panelists who completed eligibility screeners.

► Eligibility rate (I)

81.6% – proportion of screener respondents who met eligibility criteria.

► Interview completion rate (IC)

96.9% – proportion of eligible respondents completing the full survey.

► Survey completion rate (SurC)

53.5% – combined screener and interview completion.

► Weighted cumulative response rate (WCR)

10.9% – incorporates panel recruitment, retention, and survey-specific participation.

► Study design effect

1.85

► Estimated margin of error (95% CI)

±4.5%

These estimates reflect both the sampling variation of the probability sample and adjustments from TrueNorth calibration.



Benchmark Comparisons

To evaluate representativeness, weighted demographics were compared against benchmarks from the February 2025 Current Population Survey (CPS).

- ▶ The age distribution was closely aligned with population benchmarks (e.g., 22.2% aged 14, 22.4% aged 15, etc).
- ▶ The distributions of gender, race/ethnicity, and parental education also approximated the CPS targets after weighting.
- ▶ Unweighted versus weighted comparisons revealed meaningful shifts, particularly after correcting for the underrepresentation of 14-year-olds and adolescents whose parents hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

The benchmark comparison table is available in full in the NORC Transparency Report and can be sent upon request.

Limitations

While the use of AmeriSpeak and TrueNorth calibration increases representativeness, several limitations warrant consideration:

▶ Non-probability components

Despite calibration, unobserved biases from the opt-in Prodege sample cannot be entirely eliminated.

▶ Self-report survey design

Responses may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability effects.

▶ Language

The survey was administered in English only, potentially excluding adolescents who are non-English dominant.

▶ Cross-sectional design

Results provide a snapshot of adolescents' experiences but do not capture longitudinal trends.

Deliverables and Transparency

NORC provided foundry10 with the following deliverables:

- ▶ Labeled respondent-level dataset (SPSS format)
- ▶ Frequency tables (weighted and unweighted, Excel format)
- ▶ Codebook (Excel)
- ▶ Final questionnaire
- ▶ Full Project Methods and Transparency Report

This study adheres to the AAPOR Transparency Initiative guidelines, ensuring disclosure of methodological details.



Tables

TABLE 2.
Participant Demographics
(N = 1,027)

Demographics	Percentage (Frequency)
Age	Generation Alpha youth (14-15)
	44.7% (459)
	Generation Z youth (16-18)
	55.3% (568)
Gender Identity	Girl/Woman
	47.2% (485)
	Boy/Man
	50.0% (514)
	Something else
	1.0% (11)
	Chose not to answer
	1.7% (18)
Race/ Ethnicity	White, non-Hispanic
	49.4% (507)
	Hispanic
	26.2% (270)
	Black, non-Hispanic
	12.9% (132)
	2+ races, non-Hispanic
	5.6% (58)
	Asian-Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic
	4.8% (49)
	Other, non-Hispanic
	1.0% (11)
Family Income	Less than \$10,000
	5.0% (51)
	\$10,000–\$19,999
	5.8% (59)
	\$20,000–\$29,999
	6.7% (69)
	\$30,000–\$39,999
	7.8% (81)
	\$40,000–\$49,999
	5.0% (51)
	\$50,000–\$74,999
	16.7% (171)
	\$75,000–\$99,999
	14.3% (146)
	\$100,000–\$149,999
	23.3% (240)
	\$150,000 or more
	15.5% (159)
School Type	Public school
	76.0% (781)
	Homeschool
	6.0% (62)
	Private school (religious)
	4.6% (47)
	Charter school
	4.4% (45)
	Online or virtual school
	3.3% (34)
	Private school (non-religious)
	3.1% (32)
	Other
	2.0% (20)
	Chose not to answer
	0.6% (6)
Urbanicity	Suburban area
	51.5% (529)
	Urban area
	22.5% (231)
	Rural area
	20.1% (207)
	Not sure
	5.6% (57)
	Chose not to answer
	0.4% (4)
Grade Level (2024-2025 School Year)	9th grade
	33.7% (346)
	10th grade
	23.5% (242)
	11th grade
	21.7% (223)
	12th grade
	21.1% (217)

TABLE 3.**Participant Social Media Use**

Teen Social Media Platform Usage	Percentage (Frequency)
YouTube	70.9% (728)
Instagram	64.3% (661)
TikTok	62.0% (636)
Snapchat	47.3% (486)
Facebook	33.9% (348)
Pinterest	22.8% (234)
Discord	21.4% (220)
Twitter/X	16.6% (171)
Reddit	12.0% (123)
Twitch	11.0% (113)
LinkedIn	4.6% (48)
Threads	2.9% (30)
BeReal	2.3% (23)
Bluesky	1.0% (10)
Other	0.6% (6)
I don't use social media platforms	2.9% (30)
Chose not to answer	0.8% (8)

Note: Participants selected all social media platforms they use at least once a week.

Daily Time Spent on Social Media	Percentage (Frequency)
Less than 30 minutes	5.8% (6)
30 minutes – 1 hour	13.8% (141)
1–2 hours	26.0% (267)
2–4 hours	29.2% (300)
More than 4 hours	20.7% (212)

Note: Percentages may not total 100% because some respondents did not answer the question.

About foundry10

foundry10 is an education research organization with a philanthropic focus on expanding ideas about learning and creating direct value for youth. In collaboration with a wide range of partners, we surface, evaluate, and share opportunities to better support youth learning both inside and outside the classroom. Building on more than a decade of impactful work, our unique approach blends applied and experimental research, philanthropy, and education programs rooted in evidence-based best practices.

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