STEPS FOR YOUTH
Science to Enhance Policy Success
FROM THE UCLA CENTER FOR THE DEVELOPING ADOLESCENT

SCIENCE SPOTLIGHT

Promoting Positive Development and Decreasing Risk in Online Spaces for Early Adolescents

Adapted from Engaging, Safe, and Evidence-based: What Science Tells Us about How to Promote Positive Development and Decrease Risk in Online Spaces *from the National Scientific Council on Adolescence*

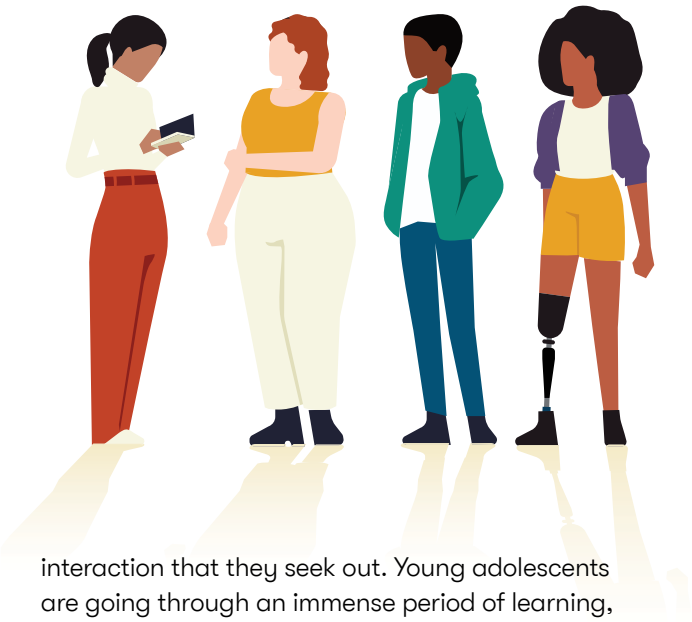
The science of early adolescence—roughly ages 10 to 13—tells us this is a key time of exploration, discovery, rapid learning, and social and emotional change. As youth transition from childhood into the early stages of puberty, they develop their identities, learn about interpersonal relationships, and navigate novel and complex social contexts. What does this mean for adolescents growing up in the digital age?

Over the past 20 years, developmental scientists have begun to understand how young people are using digital technologies and the impact that doing so has on them. While we still have much to learn as young people's use of digital platforms evolves, digital technologies change, and new online spaces are introduced, current research tells us that digital technology has both benefits and risks for young people, and during early adolescence, its effects can be amplified.

We also know from research on brain and social development and on the impacts of technology during these years that we must craft standards and regulations for digital tech used by adolescents that can support and protect our young people. Specifically, we must craft policies and programs that:

SUPPORT HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

Developmental scientists have identified many core aspects of positive development that occur in adolescence and during the transition into adolescence, including exploration and risk-taking, decision-making and emotional regulation, and a heightened focus on respect and social status. In today's world, early adolescents are increasingly approaching these developmental milestones in online spaces and benefiting from the new opportunities afforded by these spaces. The design, regulation, and use of digital technology should be focused on promoting the positive development of these core developmental milestones.



During the transition to adolescence, young people experience an acceleration of pubertal and sexual changes, rapid brain development, changes in self image, intensification of peer relationships, and more diversity in the sources of information and social interaction that they seek out. Young adolescents are going through an immense period of learning, independently reasoning through complex social situations, exploring new social interactions, and testing adult limits.[1,2] Questions of identity also

become central as youth think about who they are and their place in the world. This development of identity subsequently influences attitudes, motivations, and behaviors.[3, 2, 4]

Early adolescence in particular is a time of profound change when these key milestones of development are happening simultaneously.[5] As they go through these changes, young adolescents are especially sensitive to external social and emotional influences, and compared to older adolescents, they are not as able to regulate their responses to these influences.[1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10] The sheer degree of change during this time means that both healthy and potentially harmful influences abound, and supports that promote positive development and limit harm are especially important.[10, 11]

Program and Policy Insights

- Options to avoid sleep disruptions, time limits on particular applications (perhaps depending on the educational or wellness value of the app), and tools to limit or discourage use at times when digital technology might interfere with other activities (such as during school or after bedtime) should be built into platforms and applications.[12, 13]
- Default settings could also include auto-shutoff features that further promote health, safety, and well-being (such as shut off features on non-academic platforms during class time). These protections should all be automatic unless youth and their parents elect to change their default settings.

KEEP YOUNG USERS SAFE

Currently, the digital technologies that are heavily used by young adolescents are not required to submit to any standardized regulations or oversight. So as young users explore, discover, take risks, and connect with peers in positive ways online, they must also contend with limited control or assurances related to their own safety and privacy. Youth development experts have identified specific types of data sharing that promote youth safety and positive development.[14]

The threshold for risk is lower for some adolescents. For example, those with existing mental health problems, those who are more sensitive to social appraisal and rejection, and those who may be already struggling with body image issues may experience more harm from digital technology.[15]

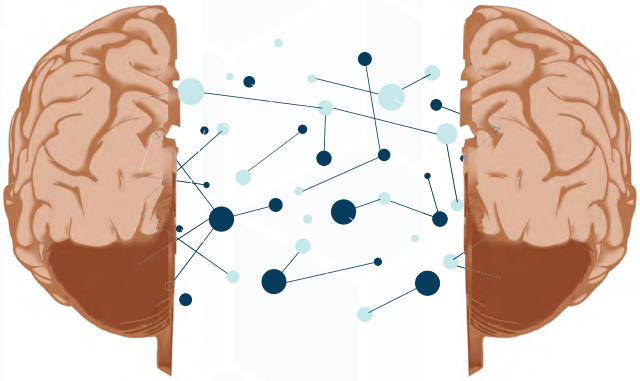
The research also shows discrepancies in the online platforms that adults are familiar with and concerned about versus the ones that young people are actually using the most. Most digital technology platforms designed for adults are, at a minimum, lacking features that promote positive youth development. In many cases, they are inappropriate for youth consumption given current standards (or lack thereof) for consent, privacy, and targeted advertising. Experts in developmental science (researchers), experts that serve youth (including teachers, school counselors, and therapists), and experts in youth digital product design can provide critical insight into the creation of youth-centered digital programs and platforms.[16]

Program and Policy Insights

- Default settings should protect the privacy of young users. Default profiles could be set to private and not allow sharing of any data collected from non-adult users.
- Targeted advertising should be limited for users below a certain age.
- Digital technology features that pose known risks for long-term consequences (including public sharing and storing of private data) should be highly regulated for early adolescent users.

INCORPORATE AND ADVANCE THE BEST AVAILABLE RESEARCH

The body of evidence related to early adolescent use of digital technology is continuing to grow. As additional evidence becomes available, researchers and digital technology companies should make educated decisions that reflect the evolution of the science.



Program and Policy Insight

Some companies have already taken positive steps to protect young users and make evidence-based resources for well-being more accessible. For example, YouTube has initiated an algorithm that applies an age rating to all content as well as supervised accounts for younger users. Similarly, Snapchat now provides suicide prevention information as part of their website support and provides a 24-hour crisis line and in-app, expert-based support when users search for mental health topics (such as those related to depression, anxiety, grieving, bullying, and body image). Digital technology companies should partner with researchers to evaluate and refine these efforts to support youth well-being.

PROVIDE ACCESS TO POSITIVE LEARNING TO ALL YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

All young adolescents should have reliable access to the level of digital connectivity and devices required to fully participate in their education and learning. Accessibility of devices, data plans, internet, and guidance about how to use digital technology differs for youth from different demographic groups. For example, early adolescents who are economically disadvantaged may have less access to fee-based platforms and other technologies. In addition, some young adolescents with visual or hearing impairment may benefit from inclusionary measures like image and video captioning that are not typically built into the platforms they use. Policymakers and digital technology companies should ensure that all young people can benefit from positive opportunities available in age-appropriate online spaces.

ENDNOTES

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