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Pledged: Gabriela Salgado
Professor Norman and Dr. Schwartz
FYE - What We Know That Just Ain't So
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Should Children 9-12 Have Access To Social Media?

The increased development and adoption of social media during the last decades has had an undeniable and huge impact on society's behavior and psychology. Even though people of several ages own social media accounts, the use of social media among underage children is eliciting a lot of attention in the popular media and is being investigated in several academic and scientific articles. Today, 56% of children have social media accounts, and the average age when initially signing up for the account is 12.6 years (Howard). Additionally, Dr. Michael Rich, an associate professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, states that children aged 8 to 18 use social media on their mobile devices for an average of almost eight hours a day (Dyer). With social media becoming a part of everyone's daily lives, there is a significant controversy emerging on the issue of whether or not 9-12-year-old children should have access to social media. Some parents and educators believe that social media is harmful to children's psychological, physical, and well-being. Others believe that technology is part of today's society and that social media is an opportunity to connect with peers, find new groups, and develop communication, socialization, and learning. In my point of view, to benefit from the positive aspects of technology, parents should give their children important orientations about the benefits and harms of social media and create boundaries to avoid their excessive use, and educators should reinforce everything taught by the parents and raise awareness about how to safely navigate cyberspace.

Children ages nine to twelve, in the middle of childhood, are often referred to as “tweens” or “young teenagers.” During this age, they learn how to relate to peers, adjust to social rules, and evolve to more structured interactions and expectations. According to *Scholastic*, the brains of children at this age are changing and they start to apply highly developed thinking skills, advanced language abilities, and increased concentration skills (Anthony). Therefore, scientists are trying to identify what can affect children's development during this age. Social media, for example, is one of the main aspects of their social interactions, and its use among children this age is increasing, which can influence their development in various ways. In the first place, children decide to join social media sites to maintain and strengthen friendships, connect online with people who share common interests, and search for information (Bruggeman). They also join in response to peer pressure and anticipation of dating opportunities, wanting a private venue to communicate with friends, and seeking a way to explore aspects of their identities such as sexuality and ethnicity (Dyer). As children ages nine to twelve experience subtleties of emotion that affect their understanding of social relations with peers, having positive or negative experiences online will impact the way they see the world (Anthony).

Parents and educators have a lot of opinions about what they think is right and wrong regarding social media, but ultimately this debate is not about values. Society needs to think about technology the way they think about children’s education. It is important to use evidence to see how tweens are changed and affected in negative or positive ways by these media, analyze the strategies that are being used, and learn how to make conscious and effective use of social media platforms (Dyer).

Even though such digital technology seems like a mere tool to connect people and help them communicate, parents underestimate the negative effects that social media can have on their children if they do not know how to use it safely and healthily. Children are more influenceable, and therefore are more likely to develop poor judgments. Within social media, this will not be different (O’Keeffe). If used improperly and at an addicting level, social media can increase levels of anxiety and depression, affect children’s health, cause cyberbullying, and worsen real-life relationships. Some of these risks occur because of access to unsupervised and unregulated content, children’s lack of awareness of privacy issues, and young people's vulnerability to outside influences (Dyer).

One of the main concerns parents have is that social media causes people to compare themselves to others more often, and increases the risks of depression and anxiety. Research shows that this fact indeed can be true. One finding suggests that children spending more than three hours a day on social media are twice as likely to suffer from poor mental health (Mrunal). The most pressure falls even more on girls because they tend to be more susceptible than boys to mental health conditions due to screen time. With everyone trying to look good online, it is hard for most children to see that they may be comparing themselves to someone else’s carefully constructed online persona. Experts found that some features such as ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ activate the reward center in children’s brains (Mrun) and the worry about measuring up to expectations makes children feel “less satisfied with all aspects of their lives, except for their friendships” (Fyer). Due to the intensity of their online experience and the fear of not being in the social loop (Fear Of Missing Out), some children may even exhibit signs of depression (Mrun). Consequently, social media may amplify risky behaviors such as substance abuse, risky sexual

activity, or other self-destructive behaviors. Scientists also found that GABA, a neurotransmitter that helps to regulate vision, motor control, and anxiety, was significantly elevated in internet-addicted children compared to non-addicted children of the same age, which led to increased drowsiness and anxiety (Dyer).

Youngsters addicted to social media end up spending hours each day watching videos, photos, and other content posted in the accounts they follow. For instance, a British report published stated that social media can be even more addictive than cigarettes and alcohol (Bruggeman). Consequently, this addiction disrupts other activities, such as practicing sports and sleeping (Mrunal). For example, high rates of video game use among children have been linked to obesity, lack of exercise, and poor nutrition (O'Keeffe). Researchers and clinicians have also long observed children complaining of back and neck straining as technology has consumed greater proportions of their lives. As people have become more mobile, their posture has changed, looking down more and changing how they hold their spines. Additionally, injuries from using mobile technology while doing routine activities, such as walking and biking, are starting to become a bigger concern (O'Keeffe). Another bad consequence of social media is that the blue light emitted from smartphones when children spend hours on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and other platforms reduces levels of melatonin and interferes with the quality of children's sleep, worsening their well-being and school performance (Dyer).

Social media can worsen school performance by affecting children's study time, but also by influencing their relationship with their peers. Research has proven that social media can cause cyberbullying and can decrease the quality of existing friendships. Cyberbullying is the use of online technology to deliberately and repetitively harm someone (Dyer). Unfortunately,

children are being bullied on the internet, and especially on social media platforms, where threatening messages or subtle posts with offensive content can be easily shared. And unfortunately, it can be difficult to trace the perpetrator or perpetrators as they usually hide behind fake accounts or delete their digital footprint (Mrunal). Some researchers also defend that social media affects the way children interact in real-life relationships. During the time they spend on social media platforms, children make “friends” that most of the time are not real friendships (Bruggeman). Then, online communication takes time that can no longer be spent on meaningful interactions with offline friends. Additionally, children growing up interacting mostly with social media may turn out non-empathetic and also become poor at communicating verbally and non-verbally. Social interaction is critical to developing the skills needed to understand other people’s moods and emotions. Consequently, excess use of social media reduces the quality of existing friendships that these children might have (Mrunal).

Traditional media often emphasize the aforementioned dangers of digital media consumption. However, whether such media have positive or negative effects or both, is still fiercely debated. It is understandable that parents feel uncertain about how to use technology in this media-focused world and that many want to put the lockdown on social media. However, this is not progressing for anyone (O’Keeffe). We live in a social media-focused world, a world that will only become more digitally connected. Social media is part of the environment children live in and it is not fair to take this away from them. If it is used properly, social media can improve children's well-being, allow them to socialize and find groups that they identify with, and help them develop abilities that are important for the children’s future, such as communication, socialization, and learning.

Opposed to what anti-social media supporters say, scientists found out that there is an insignificant correlation between social media and worse well-being. A survey conducted among 13,871 children from the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades of 163 primary schools located in 54 municipalities in the province of Antwerp, Belgium, found out relevant information regarding this topic. They concluded that even though many children spend time on digital media daily (55.1% of the sample) these activities do not seem to have a substantial effect on their well-being. According to the experiment, correlations between social media and well-being fell into the range between 0.00 and 0.10, which can be labeled as small relationships. Moderate use was even accompanied by a small, but non-significant increase in psychological health as compared to non-use. This trend is called the ‘digital Goldilocks hypothesis,’ which states that a mild level of media use is advantageous in a connected world, whereas overuse may occur, if not used properly, at the cost of other activities. Scientists also found out that in the long run, children that start using social media when they are 9-12 may become more resilient to possible negative effects in later life, such as internet addiction and sexting (Bruggeman).

To understand the other benefits that social media can cause, it is also important to understand in more detail why children decide to join social media. Today, there is a lack of sufficient outdoor spaces, as tighter parental controls are becoming more common (Dyer). Preteens need social connections and experiences and Dr. Michael Rich, an associate professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, states “one of the great things the internet has done is create an environment where youth who feel isolated can create community,” increasing children’s well-being and the quality of friendships (Dyer). Although it can appear disconcerting to adults to see children interacting with their smartphones in a way that makes them appear

anti-social, they are often, in fact, socializing with their friends when there are fewer and fewer opportunities available to socialize in person. And both extroverts and introverts benefit from this type of interaction. Extroverts benefit from social media because their offline and online networks are complementary. The use of social media can help them to obtain online social support, which thus adds to the level of general social support and well-being. Additionally, social media benefits introverts because online communication provides them with a better way to express themselves, increases their social circle, and makes them less socially anxious and lonely in the long run (Bruggeman). Either way, social media has proven to improve friendships among tweens. Using social media can also help children find groups that they identify with and get children exposed to people with different viewpoints. By identifying with like-minded individuals, children can participate in group discussions and collaborations for projects and enhance their feelings of self-worth. Children who live in more homogenous communities can search for racial, LGBTQ+, and other underrepresented groups online and find a place where they can have a voice. Other tweens find people who share their artistic, literary, or other interests, which can reduce feelings of isolation. Consequently, improving their social bonds can guard against factors that put mental health at risk (Dyer). It also allows them to network with people from around the globe, exposing them to cultures and ideas that they may not otherwise come across and helping them acquire a broader perspective on life (Mrunal).

Creating a social media account has also proven to foster communication, socialization, and learning. Scientists found out that text-based communication can enhance communication and technical skills (Dyer). By using social media, tweens will learn how to have an elaborate online network of friends, making them more empathetic, considerate, relationship-oriented, and

open to sharing how they feel. It also allows them to be competent citizens in a digital age, where they can fully participate in the broader society, learn the social skills of that generation, and expand their general knowledge about the world (Mrunal). Social media can also be used in schools as an educational tool. Some teachers use it for assignments, students use it to swap homework and form study groups, and school groups use it to post about activities (O’Keeffe). By using social media, children can easily and instantaneously share ideas, get access to material, and learn from their peers (Mrunal).

As the debate of whether children should own social media increases, various possible strategies have been put forth. To decrease the risks of social media, some people argue that possible solutions are creating “babyish” versions of social media apps, while others want to set more strict age limits in social media accounts. The idea of creating “babyish” versions of social media involves convincing social media platforms, like Instagram for example, to develop a version of its photo-sharing app restrictively for children under 13. This proposal may seem like a good alternative. However, Mark Zuckerberg says that “while 10- to 12-year-olds with Instagram accounts would be unlikely to switch to a ‘babyish version’ of the app, it could hook even younger users on endless routines of photo-scrolling and body-image shame” (Holtermann). If the owner of some of the biggest social media platforms in the world thinks that this alternative will not effectively change the negative outcomes that social media can cause on children, society needs to try to find other approaches. Policy decisions on age limits are one proposal in debate. Currently, the age limit of 13 is set by the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). According to COPPA, children 13 and older are developmentally ready to understand these concepts and find an adult if something is not appropriate or seems

overwhelming. They state that a younger child is not developmentally equipped to negotiate the many paths these sites can take a child down (O’Keeffe). However, an article from CNN said that apps set an age limit of 13 not to help protect kids' safety, but because most platforms share data, and they're not allowed to do that for users under 13 (Howard). No matter what the real reason behind the age limit exists, they have not been shown to be effective. Approximately 75% of children between ten and twelve years old create social media accounts by falsifying their birthdates during registration. Although preteen children are not officially recognized as users on these platforms, they are simply incognito and appear as older users, which makes the full picture of preteen usage difficult to ascertain. Child welfare organizations argue that if there were no age limits, children would not lie about their age. Then, providers could be required to and would be able to deliver targeted age-appropriate protective measures such as upgraded control features, child-friendly user tools, and safety information, privacy settings instructions, and easy-to-use reporting mechanisms (Sonia Livingstone, Kjartan Ólafsson, Elisabeth Staksrud).

Social media and the internet are here to stay, so as a society we need to find more effective ways to protect children from their harmful potential (Dyer). In my opinion, the best strategy to minimize the risks children may have with social media is by enforcing social media education. Parents should explore social media platforms with their children and schools should teach children about the harms of social media. The rich-get-richer and social compensation hypothesis assumes that social support affects the relationship between digital media use and psychological well-being (Bruggeman). Then, there should be a better effort in teaching children how to use social media in the safest and best way possible.

It has been proven that parents do influence their children's use of social media, and most children will approach them for support. However, some children do not feel their parents have the technical knowledge or would know how to deal with a cyberbully. To effectively assist tweens to use social media, and to gain their trust, parents need to make themselves aware of the technology, its uses, and its pitfalls (Dyer). Several platforms and websites teach people about media literacy, such as "Internet Matters". The website covers the first steps into social media, advising on what things parents and young people need to consider before opening an account. They have "First Steps", "do the Basics", and "The Hard Stuff" for parents and children, giving them valuable tips (Connecting Safely Online).

With the knowledge about the best way to use the tool, parents will be able to give direct and important orientations and boundaries to their children. Children whose parents say that they restrict their child's social media use are much less likely to have a social media profile than those whose parents do not impose restrictions. If parents only permit the child to use social media under supervision, the likelihood of the child having a profile decreases by 57% (Sonia Livingstone, Kjartan Ólafsson, Elisabeth Staksrud). For this reason, parents have to set effective boundaries and make an "agreement" with their children about how to use social media platforms responsibly. Examples of effective boundaries include making their children take breaks from technology, balancing hand-held devices with computer use, taking stretching breaks, using tablets mixed with phones, and motivating children to spend time practicing sports and doing outside activities (O'Keefe). Parents should also enforce the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics about children not sleeping with devices in their bedrooms, avoiding using devices for an hour before bedtime, and during family dinners. The Academy also

recommends developing a family "media use" plan that includes consistent limits and "Screen Times" on how many hours of screen time are allowed per day while allowing for at least an hour of daily physical activity and an adequate eight or more hours of sleep (Howard). However, parents should set these and other rules carefully. Parents who place too many limits, such as supervising all online conversations a child has, while overusing technology themselves can, for the child, seem contradictory. A survey conducted by the University of Michigan indicates that parents and children believe the other is too distracted by technology. Then, parents must be good role models by moderating their use, practicing good social media habits, being away from their devices when true social connections with family and friends are needed, and setting a family use plan that holds everyone accountable. Creating a family use plan that holds everyone accountable has been reinforced in society by a variety of "unplugged" campaigns, such as the Sabbath Manifesto's National Day of Unplugging Campaign, ChickFil-A unplugged container, and the unplugged stacking game. All of these campaigns are aimed at helping people become more aware of the need to talk more in their lives and become active in the world without technology. In addition to these recommended actions, parents should also be a source for the child when he or she needs help or a safe place to ask questions. For example, if children know that sensitive digital topics, such as cyberbullying and sexting, are today's new health issues, they will call their parents if an issue arises (O'Keefe).

Schools also play a major role in educating children about how to use social media properly. Reinforcing everything taught by the parents and raising awareness about how to safely navigate cyberspace needs to be a regular part of the curriculum as well as part of the school's anti-bullying policy (Dyer). In creative ways that will catch the young teenager's attention,

teachers should teach students about each one of the harms of social media and what is appropriate to share online. Jacqueline Howard, a Health reporter at CNN adds "I do think around 12 years old is when kids have that capability to follow rules and to understand that those rules are really important and set in place to help protect their safety" (Howard). Another important topic that should be included in children's activities is privacy issues. Among social network users, 43% of 9-12-year-old children keep their profiles private to all but friends; 28% have profiles that are part public, part private, allowing friends of friends to see them; and 3% claimed not to know their privacy settings (Sonia Livingstone, Kjartan Ólafsson, Elisabeth Staksrud). The school should play a role in guiding children about the technical part of social media and help them with any doubts they might have about it. If educators take these small steps, they will create a huge impact in the long run by making children more digitally literate citizens in the future.

Social media is a tool. Like all tools, whether there is harm or not depends on how it is used. If used improperly and at an addicting level, social media can increase levels of anxiety and depression, affect children's health, cause cyberbullying, and worsen real-life relationships. If it is used properly, social media can improve children's well-being, allow them to socialize and find groups that they identify with, and help them develop abilities that are important for their future, such as communication, socialization, and learning. Today, in this polarized scenario of whether tweens should have social media or not, parents and teachers have the important role to teach children how to use social media properly and enforce boundaries to avoid excessive use of it. We teach our children how to drive but not how to use properly the greatest amount of information the world has ever seen. Teaching children about the harms social media can cause

will make them have more attention the next time they use social media platforms. In the short run, children 9-12 years old will be avoiding the negative consequences of social media usage and increasing its benefits, and in the long run, it will transform social media platforms into a safer space for everyone, children and adults of all ages.

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