

Social Media and Students with Disabilities

A Resource Document



Social Media is everywhere. What we do with it and how we interact with people through social media determines positive and negative experiences. For students with disabilities, especially those isolated by where they live or have social or communication challenges, **social media can open up new worlds and improve skills**. The key is knowing where and how your children are engaged and monitoring their activities to make sure those activities are appropriate to their age and level of maturity. This resource document will list different **types of social media**, discuss **potential benefits, and harm**, and **provide tips to parents** for monitoring social media activity.

So, What is Social Media? Webster's Dictionary defines social media as "forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking or blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content, such as photos or videos." We all know about Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, but several types of social media sites depend on what the user is looking for. There are hundreds of social media sites, many with multiple functions. Here are some of the more common examples.

Types of Social Media Platforms/Networks	
Social Networking Sites provide access to news, information, online communication, and messaging. They focus on connections with other people.	Example - Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, WT Social, EyeM, Yubu, Elpha, Tumblr
Media Sharing Networks focus on sharing photos, videos, including live videos, lectures, etc.	Examples - YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok, Imgur, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitch, Vimeo, WhatsApp, Snapchat
Discussion Networks allow individuals to find, discuss, and share news, information, and opinions. Discussion threads enable people to see others' posts and comments and reply.	Examples – Reddit, Quora, Digg, Nairaland
Interest-Based Networks focus on one subject, like books, music, home, movies, cats, etc.	Examples – Goodreads, Houzz, Last. fm, aNobii, BAND
Sources: How Social Media Benefits Students - World Scholarship Forum 103+ Social Media Sites You Need to Know in 2022 - Influence Marketing Hub	



Social Barriers for Some Students with Disabilities

- ✓ **Isolation** – Some students may have fewer opportunities for social interaction due to the nature of their disability or where they live.
- ✓ **Social challenges** – Individuals might have difficulty interacting with peers in person, inability to read social cues or know when and how to join a conversation, challenges in maintaining personal space, not being accepted by their peer group, and inability to disclose their disability, awkward interactions.
- ✓ **Communication deficits** – You may lack the ability to take turns in conversation, have limited interests, or find it hard to focus on the topic of discussion. If English is their second language, this may also make it more difficult.

Research shows that a lack of social acceptance can lead to poor attendance, poor behavior, exclusion from peer groups and activities (https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_facpub/40)

Potential Benefits of Social Media for Students with Disabilities

- ✓ **Eye** contact isn't necessary.
- ✓ **Verbal communication** isn't needed because social media is an accessible method of communication, especially for those with hearing or speech challenges.
- ✓ **Personal Space** issues are avoided.
- ✓ Lags in **conversational turn-taking** are typical.
- ✓ **Random comments** or conversation strands are acceptable and even appreciated.
- ✓ Joining **online gaming** networks allows active participation versus just being an observer.



Potential Benefits of Social Media for Students with Disabilities

- ✓ **Social awkwardness** is reduced, and social skills may be improved.
 - ✓ There is no need to **disclose disability** unless the student wants to.
 - ✓ **Interest groups** might be appropriate for those who have very few topics that interest them.
 - ✓ Students feel **part of the group** and don't feel like they are being singled out for being different.
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- ✓ Online relationships can be **less judgmental**
 - ✓ **Communication, language, reading, and computer skills** may improve.
 - ✓ **Independence, a sense of belonging, and self-confidence** may increase.
 - ✓ **Connections and human interactions** may be more accessible.
 - ✓ It helps students **try new things**.
 - ✓ Students may have an opportunity to meet people with the **same disability**.
 - ✓ They can **socialize even if they cannot leave the house due to their disability, lack of support, or the area where they live**.
- ✓ Social media may improve their ability to **collaborate** and **get feedback** on the ideas, photos, and posts that are important to them.

Potential Concerns Relating to Social Media Activity

- ✓ **Online Safety** may be an issue for students with disabilities. Students may unknowingly communicate with dangerous people that want to abuse their trust and to them harm.
- ✓ **Privacy** can be compromised. The student may give out information without realizing the danger. Someone may pretend to be their "friend" on social media and gain access to private information like their address, passwords, social security number, etc.
- ✓ Some students may become **addicted to social media**, which can be bad for schoolwork, family life, and in-person social interaction.
- ✓ While communication skills can be improved through social media, students who use social media too much may lose **in-person communication skills** they need to use in their community, school, work, etc.
- ✓ The student may post **inappropriate content** like pornography, threats, misinformation that could get them in trouble, including being banned from social media or reported to law enforcement.
- ✓ **Cyberbullying** is a real danger. According to a study by the *Ruderman Family Foundation* of 24,000 Boston area high school students, students with disabilities are almost twice as likely to be victims and more than one-and-a-half times more likely to be perpetrators of social media cyberbullying than students without disabilities. More than 20% of students with disabilities reported being victims of cyberbullying.
 - Cyberbullying can lead to **depression**.
 - The student may deliberately or without knowing **bully others** through hurtful messages, photos, etc.
 - In addition to depression, students who are cyberbullied exhibit other **physical symptoms** like anxiety, headaches, stomach aches, fatigue, changed eating habits, poor grades, poor concentration, and loneliness

Parents and caregivers can help prevent the potential negative impacts of social media.

What Parents Can do to Make Sure the Student is Safe on Social Media Sites

It's impossible to "police" your child's activities 24/7, but there are steps you can take to help your child be safe online so they can obtain the benefits of social media. Depending on the nature of the disability and your child's age, some of these may not be needed. That is up to you as the parent!

- ✓ Keep an open line of communication with the child about what they are doing.
- ✓ Keep the computer in the family room or other public space where you can monitor online activities.
- ✓ Have the child share their online ID and passwords as a condition of using social media but to never share that information with anyone else.
- ✓ Remind your child to never give out any personal information and explain what that includes.
- ✓ Help them understand what is ok to share online, including types of posts and pictures.
- ✓ Remind them that once something is online, it is there forever and what they think are private posts can become public.
- ✓ Tell them to be careful to not to hurt others, be kind, helpful, and accepting of others.
- ✓ Don't allow them to take devices to bed with them; set other limits for online activity.
- ✓ Consider parental controls on the devices they use so you can track their activities.
- ✓ Make sure your child also has opportunities to interact in person so they can improve their social skills.
- ✓ You need to understand how the sites work, their features, and options for privacy.
- ✓ Be alert to signs that your child is being cyberbullied or is bullying someone else; take appropriate action (*see PEATC Fact Sheet on Cyberbullying*).



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REFERENCES/RESOURCES

[Cyberbullying - A PEATC Fact Sheet](#)

[Cyberbullying Resources - PACER Center](#)

[How Social Media Benefits Students - World Scholarship Forum](#)

[Inclusion for Children with Special Needs must Extend to Social Media - Education Development Center](#)

[Is Social Media Harmful to Students with Disabilities - Education Development Center](#)

[Is There a Role for Social Media in Special Education - Masters in Special Education Program Guide](#)

[Social Media - A Double-Edged Sword - Education Week](#)

[Social Media as a Communication Tool for Disabled People - EveryoneCan](#)

[Social Media as a Communication Tool for Individuals with Disabilities Living in Rural Settings - Education Faculty Publication](#)

[Social Media, Cyberbullying, and Mental Health: A Comparison of Adolescents with and without Disabilities](#)

[Social Networking Sites: Consider the Benefits, Concerns for your Teenager - PACER Center](#)

[The Benefits of Social Media for People-with Disability - MyCarespace](#)

[The Role of Social Media in Special Needs Education - The Koala Mom](#)

PEATC's mission focuses on building positive futures for Virginia's children by working collaboratively with families, schools, and communities to improve opportunities for excellence in education and success in school and community life.



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