

# Social media makes it tougher for teens

*Pressure to look great, lead exciting life can engender feelings of isolation, discontent*

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Ever felt FOMO?

Not sure what FOMO is?

It's literally the "fear of missing out."

According to the Urban Dictionary, it's "a form of social anxiety, a compulsive concern that one might miss an opportunity or satisfying event, often aroused by posts seen on social media websites."

This angst is a side effect of a digital world in which everyone knows what everyone else is doing.

And when a middle-schooler has proof that she is missing out — thanks to a post of classmates hanging out together — it can be devastating, said Ele Santini, a licensed clinical social worker at Clarendon Hills Middle School.

"Social media can leave them feeling disconnected even if they are connected in school, in real life and real time," she said.

"We all have a need to be included. What we used to not know didn't hurt us. I just feel like now we know everybody's move and everybody's life highlights. It's so in front of us as adults, too," she added.

But for kids, whose brains are still growing, finding perspective is a challenge.

"They see things as such extremes," Santini said. "Kids will go to the place, 'I have no friends, nobody likes me, nobody cares.'"

Even teens who don't spend a lot of time on social media find they are not immune to its effects.

Ella Brewer, a senior at Hinsdale Central High School, said she has felt inferior after looking at social media sites like Instagram and Snapchat.

"This past spring break I had to stay home the entire time, and I saw everyone's spring break trips and I felt jealous," the Hinsdale teen said. "I thought, 'I wish I could be out doing something, too.' I think it can be a negative impact when you look at it that way."

Sophia Sorentino of Burr Ridge, a junior at Lyons Township High School who sits on the Hinsdale Hospital Junior Board with Brewer,



**Identity development** is a normal part of adolescence, Hinsdale psychologist Dr. Cara Hurley said. But the "edited identities" teens and pre-teens, especially girls,

view on social media can make that task more challenging. Social media and smartphone use in general can affect self-esteem in many ways. (Jim Slonoff photo)

said she tries to be cognizant when looking at social media posts that they do not always capture life objectively.

"I try to consciously remember not everyone looks like how they look in a picture," she said. "You only see snippets of people's lives. Their lives may seem really good."

Santini believes most kids aren't out to hurt others with their posts. They most likely haven't thought about the classmate who will feel left out because their brains are still developing.

That's where parents can act as role models and help teach their children how to be kind.

"I think being your own good digital citizen is really important," Santini said.

She suggested parents explain to a child why they are not going to share a photo on social media.

"You know, I'm not going to post this because you only got to invite five friends to your birthday party and I don't want the other moms to feel bad," she offered as an example.

The anxiety isn't limited to those who are left out of an online photo, however. Girls especially are conscious of

how they look in photos they post online, said Dr. Cara Hurley, a Hinsdale resident and practicing clinical psychologist.

"Girls are doing their own version of making their pics look good," she said. They make their eyes brighter or bigger, for example, and wait for comments that tell them how gorgeous they are.

"If they don't get enough likes, they will remove the picture from Instagram," Hurley said. "I think that has a huge impact on girls."

Sorentino confirmed that when she does post a photo of herself, which isn't often, she's eager to see what others think of it.

"Sometimes if my picture doesn't get a lot of likes, I'll think it wasn't a good picture to post and I'll second guess it," she said.

Girls have long been under pressure to focus on their appearance, Santini said, which can create insecurity. Social media has become a way for them to seek affirmation.

"When they don't get that, even if no one says anything negative back, they take that as negative," she said. "They're keeping track of the

feedback and that is either validating or invalidating."

The whole practice of taking and posting selfies, if unchecked, can become narcissistic, Hurley cautioned.

"I think it can get in the way of forming an other-focus," she said.

In addition to seeing edited appearances on social media, kids are also seeing editing experiences, noted Suzanne Wychocki, Hinsdale mom of two kids in high school and one in middle school. A video tutorial on nail art, for example, shows someone executing the task perfectly. What kids don't see are the hundreds of images of nails that didn't turn out.

"We don't ever see the practice part, how they struggled, how many errors," Wychocki said. "I watch the kids kind of give up. They're like, 'Oh, I can't do it the first time and I see they're doing it perfectly and I don't want to try it.'"

"When we were kids, seeing somebody do something obscure and talented was few and far between because it was either in the news or on the front page of the paper," she said. "Now everybody is doing something phenomenal and it's all over the place."

## ■ DIGITAL LIVING

*This is the second in a four-part series on the digital age and how it affects young people's mental health.*

So how do these kids feel like they're doing something impactful?"

Social media also can have an impact on self-esteem when people are trying to interact with a friend or parent and that friend or parent is too busy looking at their phone.

"Sometimes, I think you feel like, 'Oh, I'm talking to myself,' and then it's really awkward because you're waiting for them to get off their phone," Brewer said. "I'm sure I've done it before, but I try not to do it to other people."

Wychocki said it takes a conscious effort to shut down her devices and pay attention to her kids.

"They think it's the norm for somebody to be texting and talking to them at the same time, but I don't know if the emotional feelings have caught up with that," she said. "Do they feel left out? Do they feel ignored? I think they do."