

When it comes to kids and social media, it's not all bad news

Written by Joanne Orlando, Researcher: Technology and Learning, Western Sydney University



Parents should understand where the value is in social media so they can guide their kids to positive use. Shutterstock

While we often hear about the negative impact social media has on children, the use of sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram is not a one-size-fits-all activity. Children use it in a wide variety of ways – some of which are adding value to their lives.

There are risks associated with social media use. But it's also important to understand where the value is, and how to guide children to get the most out of their time online.

Social media can encourage learning

Social media is a platform for sharing ideas, information and points of view. This can have important educational value: it extends the information young people can access while also giving them insight into how others think about and use that information.

For example, an Instagram image can give first-hand insight into how an artist today – or many artists around the world – interprets and applies Picasso's cubist technique. This insight makes the information about Picasso real for the child. It supports a deeper understanding of his techniques, and a deeper appreciation that learning about them is worthwhile.

With so many trending topics online, young people can be exposed to "insider" knowledge across many different subjects they are familiar with, as well as introducing them to new ones.

[Maximum educational benefit](#) comes from combining factual information with shared reflection. This can support a balanced, varied and "real" input for kids, which can help deepen their understanding of a subject.

Health benefits

[Research shows](#) social media can have significant benefits for children with a medical

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condition.

A dedicated online Facebook group can help kids connect with others who understand and relate to their condition. This can support them with a sense of belonging, a safe space for expression, and opportunities to better understand and cope with their condition.

Social media can also raise community awareness about certain health problems. While it's not a replacement for reliable, medically sourced information, a thought-provoking image, or first-hand Facebook account posted by someone with depression, or multiple sclerosis, can spark new thinking for others about the condition and how it affects people's daily lives.

Sharing health information in this informal way [has been found](#) to help combat the stigma about such conditions in the community.

New social avenues

[One of the benefits](#) of using Snapchat or Instagram is that the regular online connection can help to strengthen the friendships young people have formed offline.

For those children who feel marginalised in their local community, social media can help them connect with other people who share the same interests or outlook on life.

In some cases, teenagers with critical problems can turn to social networks for fast support and guidance. There are plenty of groups that offer such help online.

Social media is also an important platform for driving social issues, such as racial issues, to greater national and international attention. For example, [The Books N Bros online book club](#) was established by an 11-year-old boy who wanted to make reading fun for kids while highlighting African-American literature.

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The Black Lives Matter movement started as a Twitter hashtag before it became a major political movement and a noteworthy issue in the 2016 US presidential election.

What should parents do?

An awareness of social media's benefits can help adults understand why technology is so attractive to young people, the potential positive uses of these online spaces, and how to talk to children about their social media use.

When approaching a conversation with kids about social media, it's important not to have an "us-versus-them" attitude. Understanding and accepting that different generations use technology differently is a good starting point. It provides opportunities for understanding each other as technology users, to be more aware of when issues arise, and how to guide children to positive and empowering uses of technology.

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