



# TEENS AND INSTAGRAM

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Instagram (IG) is a visually-led social media platform where the primary method of interaction is double-tapping an image to like it. Posts go viral due to them feeding into the dominant culture. The app allows users to post their photos / videos to their feed. Photos / videos are often edited or enhanced prior to sharing. Anyone with an IG account can see another person's account. By following the person, one is able to access their online gallery. To make posts easier to find, users make use of hashtags or captions. Locations may be shared which opens up all sorts of concerns. IG also tailor-makes feeds for the user based on their previous searches, hashtags and other users they follow. IG has three account settings to choose from namely private, business or open. Teens that access IG for popularity may choose to set their accounts up as business or open. The widest net for gaining followers and 'friends' would be an open account. But this also means anyone on the internet has access to all your posts, photos, videos thus ultimately has access to you. An open account for a teen is asking for trouble...

According to Time.com international studies have been done and IG is the worst social media network for mental health and wellbeing. While IG got points for self-expression and self-identity, it was associated with anxiety, depression, bullying and the fear of missing out

(FOMO). IG looks friendly and fun, but:

- Users have little control over what they seeing.
- The pseudo-positivity of IG encourages its users to present an attractive image to get maximum followers.
- It presents unrealistic, edited images and posts that directly speak to teens. They quickly forget that people edit their photographs.

These can lead to the risk of developing an unhealthy body image. They can also set unrealistic expectations and create feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem.

- Teens start investing more time online at the expense of communicating and interacting in real life, in sports, and in friendships.
- IG has always about looking flawless. It is not real.
- IG creates a popularity contest.

### Compare and despair

IG makes it is easy to compare the number of 'friends' you have against your peers. It is natural to compare. We compare ourselves with others in terms of abilities, social standing and even how we feel. Social media is making it a lot more difficult to avoid comparing. Researchers are even calling this the "compare and despair" of IG. The typical IG user spends most of his/her time on observing other people,

occasionally messaging but not too often posting. I.E. users spend most of their time gathering information about others. As a result, it is nearly impossible to not use this information to compare our lives with that of others.

Teens also believe others have more friends than the really do based on the number of followers a person has. The teen user may have hundreds/thousands of followers because their account is set as business or open but they only really know a handful. For the teen with fewer followers, the assumption then is that they are less liked, less connected and therefore less popular. The seduction comes into play where the 'less popular' teen must create a post which will get more followers or they must be more active on IG. Sometimes these posts have to be extreme such as bikini pics or semi-nudes. Or to change their account setting from private to business or open so as to attract more followers.

### National Online Safety gives many points parents need to know about (see the insert). Here I mention the most prominent points for me:

- Hooked on scrolling. Most social media platforms are designed to keep users engaged for long periods of time. IG does this very effectively by allowing users to scroll indefinitely. Teens and adults quickly lose track of time while

scrolling and looking for nothing in particular. Sleep gets disrupted and relationships become strained as families no longer communicate with one another but rather sit next to one another while playing on their phones.

- Direct messages (DM). DMs allows users to share posts, videos, photos, voice messages and calls with each other. Even if a teens account is set as private, anybody with an IG account is able to DM another IG user. Even if the person is not one of the teens followers, the message is still sent to them. The teen then has the option of whether or not to accept the message. As per human nature, curiosity may win and the teen is exposed to someone or something you would prefer them not knowing about or seeing.
- Influencer culture. Influencer culture is a fascinating thing. Influencers promote products, services, apps etc to the target audience. These tid-bits are not always easy to uncover as they are housed in benign looking posts and may mislead teens into wanting something promoted on their feed. For example teens may not necessarily have the financial means to make a purchase. This could lead to feeling of lower self-worth and inappropriate behaviour to find a means of acquiring the desired item.
- Mental health challenges. As mentioned previously, edited photos and enhanced photos are the norm on IG. These create false and unrealistic expectation for teens to ascribe to. Teens strive for more 'likes' by editing their photos. Body images, and subsequently mental health and wellbeing become eroded.
- Live streaming. Live streaming is another concerning feature of IG when it comes to teens. It allows users to connect with followers in real time. This has all sort of problems with regards to exposure, let alone grooming and abuse that can sneak into a teens feed.

### Pointing fingers

The blame of the problems with new technology gets put entirely on technology. If we want to find a solution to these problems, we need to take ownership of our role in the situation and take cognisance of the technologically-driven world in which we live. There has always been a medium transmitting social pressures. Previously it was TV, newspapers and magazines. Today it includes social media and the internet. The challenge with social media is that it is accessible all day, every day, from anywhere and for as long as you like. In other words, it is not just IG that is the problem. It is the social pressures put on teens, that are part of our culture, that are then amplified by social media. Things like popularity used to be abstract, today it is quantifiable in how many friends you have on IG.

Ban it then? Let's unpack this... IG creates insecurity, social pressure around body shape, exercise, fashion and income. The effects of screen time and the risks associated with social media, whether bullying or strangers, are serious enough for parents to ban it. However we need to guard against making social media the forbidden fruit. Teens are always one step ahead of their parents. Here are some examples of conversations I came across online while researching these platforms:

- "My mom follows me on IG, but she has no clue as to who I DM. I organised a hook up at the party" Being a 'friend' of your teen on IG means you can see what they have posted. You cannot access where others have tagged them in posts, photos or videos or who your teen is direct messaging. This can only be done directly from within their account.
- "My mum gave me permission to use IG, but she has no clue about my finsta." Finsta is a second IG account teens may make use of to hide from parents and share more honest photos and captions.
- "My parents regularly search my phone, but they don't know about my decoy app." Decoy apps like Calculator and Audio Manager, allow teens to hide their photos and videos, make secret calls and message people.

The lesson to be learnt is that as technology advances, teens will never stop moving towards new apps and games. Thus banning social media just is not realistic. Social media can be beneficial in building relationships, supporting causes and joining movements. Not only can teens use social media in their favour, but they will be increasingly expected to do so. By teaching teens to use social media in a healthy way, parents can help them take charge of their online activities.

1. Set the standard. Unlike rules, which restrict negative behaviours, set standards that encourage positive behaviours. Setting high standards takes practice, and when a family agrees to live by the same standards, they keep each other accountable. Set the standard in your home e.g. no phones at the dinner table, lead by example by having a IG account with no nasty comments and do not follow any inappropriate people or sites.
2. Take screen time. Behaviour is learned. Teens will not behave inappropriately, if they are not exposed to inappropriate content. Therefore check their screen time and see what they are accessing and for how long. Also there is nothing wrong with limiting their screen time.
3. Passwords and access. Your teen should not have passwords you do not know or deny you access to their phones. As a parent, it would be wise to periodically check their WhatsApp, IG and other social platforms. This includes going into the direct messages on IG and seeing

who they are communicating with. Teens are under age therefore you as a parent are legally responsible for what goes on, on their phones.

4. Discuss the "do's" of social media, not only the "don'ts". It is more useful to discuss a post that represents your character and values versus "don't post something that will embarrass you". I say this because at the time of posting, the teen did not think their post was embarrassing or they would not have posted it in the first place. Thus discuss how to positively utilise IG to their benefit.

### So where to from here.

Parents and educators may take the stance that the solution is to simply not use it. Honestly if it is not IG, it will be something else. Social media is not going anywhere, in fact it is advancing daily. The solution lies in building resilience and self-esteem. If teens are feeling good about themselves, they will not compare so strongly or take things so personally. Social media may make us forget how good real life actually is because it perpetuates what we do not have, how we do not look, the holidays we do not take. We need to pause, get some perspective and remind our teens, and perhaps ourselves too, that living in the real world is still great.



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