RESEARCH BRIEF

Helping Young People Thrive In Real Life and Online:

Evidence-Based Investments States Can Make Now

Young people's wellbeing suffers when digital experiences replace meaningful in-person social experiences, relationships, physical activity, play and/or learning. As policymakers consider the role of social media in young people's lives and how to support their well-being, research evidence should guide policies and investments that help young people thrive.

1 in 5

teens say they are on TikTok or YouTube **"almost constantly"**[1]

1 in 3

high school students report **feeling persistently sad and/or hopeless**[2]

Children and teens need supportive, social, and safe environments to explore and thrive.

Healthy development is built through relationships, play, and belonging. Children and adolescents need safe, supportive environments where they can build trusting relationships, develop social-emotional skills, explore their identities, and gain increasing independence.[3]

When young people lack positive in person opportunities, they turn to digital media to meet developmental needs for connection and identity. While digital spaces are a source of opportunities for learning and community, especially for young people who don't feel a strong sense of belonging with the people around them, excessive reliance on technology may displace the in-person relationships and experiences that are foundational to healthy development.[4]

Investing in positive youth development programs strengthens healthy development. Access to community spaces and out-of-school-time activities that foster meaningful relationships with peers and caring adults promotes belonging, resilience, and positive youth development while providing healthy alternatives to excessive digital media use.[5]

In-person programs and activities are critical to young people's healthy development.

Positive youth development programs create opportunities for peer connection and focused learning, positively impacting children's development. These programs can result in better social skills, academic performance, and less disruptive behaviors.[6, 7, 8]

Afterschool programs and extracurriculars may even close opportunity gaps for those in less advantaged areas or communities.[9, 10] To be most effective, out-of-school programs must be well-funded and consistently implemented, with highly trained staff to actively guide children's positive development.

Teens who struggle with mental health concerns like anxiety and depression may find comfort and connection in community spaces like a public library, where funding could help build opportunities for more structured mental health support and positive youth development programming.[11]

Participation in sports in childhood and adolescence can have benefits that span into adulthood. Sports can create opportunities for peer connection and social competency, which may protect against negative mental health outcomes like depression and boost self-esteem. Like extracurricular and school-based activities, the benefits of sports are most pronounced when staff are trained and well-equipped to model and teach teamwork and positive social skills in an environment that prioritizes fun and positive youth development.[13, 14]

Youth will still seek connection online — state investments can support safe and healthy use of social media.

Media literacy can be protective of young people's mental health. Almost half of U.S. teens report figuring out social media through trial and error, and only 18% said they received formal instruction from school or a community organization.[15] But evidence suggests that media literacy can be protective of young people's mental health, like protecting girls from developing negative self-image and lowering the risk of online exploitation and victimization.[16,17]

Youth can develop healthy social media patterns. Youth are capable of reflecting on their own social media use and can modify maladaptive patterns of use (e.g., oversharing, doom-scrolling, stress-related posting). Adolescents can articulate both the positive and negative aspects of their own social media use and evidence suggests that even younger children can shift their patterns of use once they recognize how social media impacts their mood.[18] Clinicians, educators, youth-serving professionals, and parents can target interventions to help youth recognize problematic social media use and learn strategies for mindful, purposeful engagement.[19]

18%

of youth reported receiving formal instruction from school or a community organization on **how to safely use social media.**

Being a kid or teenager is hard — increasing access to mental health services requires robust and consistent investment.

Young people continue to struggle with their mental health. In 2025, about 1 in 3 high school students reported persistently feeling sad and hopeless.[20] While this represents an improvement in recent years, an alarming number of young people are still in need of mental health support.[21]

The causes of youth's mental health struggles are complex. While it is easy to point to the rise in social media as a contributing factor to youth's mental health struggles, research paints a more complicated picture.[22, 23, 24] Reducing screen time alone will not solve the youth mental health crisis.

Children and adolescents need more access to mental health support and trusted adults who they can turn to for help. Twenty percent of adolescents have received mental health treatment, but an additional 20% say they need mental health care and can't get it.[25] Barriers to mental health care include cost, access to providers, stigma and fear, and logistics.

20%

of youth state they **need mental health care** and cannot get it.

We need to increase access to support *in the settings* where youth learn and play. Interventions like 988, school mental health professionals, mental health first aid, and supportive adults in afterschool settings, including counselors and paraprofessionals, increase access to needed, evidence-based mental health treatment by embedding them in the places where young people already are and within relationships with people they already trust.[26, 27]

Promoting Healthy Development in a Digital World Requires Investments in Youth Well-Being

Reducing social media time for children is only part of the solution. Children also need meaningful places to go, people to connect with, and things to do. States can support these needs with significant and sustained investment in programs and policies that work:

- Providing all students with access to high-quality positive youth development programs including afterschool and summer learning, nature-based programs, youth sports, play-based programs, arts, and other extracurricular activities
- Building and maintaining public spaces where youth can safely play and explore
- Strengthening the school and community mental health workforce
- Providing parents, caregivers, educators, youth-serving professionals, and healthcare providers with tools and best practices to support the healthy use of social media for young people

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Access to positive youth development programs can "crowd out" digital media use. Programming that is engaging and supportive to youth can be more enticing and naturally replace digital media activity. These programs create the conditions for meaningful social connections with peers and trusting adults and foster a sense of belonging and competence that are essential for healthy development.

Investments in equitable access to programs are essential. Nearly half of U.S. youth — nearly 22.6 million children and adolescents — don't have access to out-of-school-time programs. Investments in supportive programs and community spaces are needed to ensure that every young person has access to programs and activities that support health and well-being.

States should consider embedding mental health and digital literacy resources into community-based programs to support youth mental health and build healthy social media habits. Investing in mental health supports and digital literacy programs in the places and spaces where youth already are increases access and participation in services.

22.6M

children and adolescents — **don't have access to out-of-school-time programs.**

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