**Facing the Social Media Challenge: A Strategic, Practical Plan for Schools to Build Healthier Adolescent Minds and Stronger Communities**

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**Table of Contents**

**Executive Summary: Facing the Social Media Challenge: A Strategic, Practical Plan for Schools to Build Healthier Adolescent Minds and Stronger Communities**

The Melissa Institute for Violence Prevention has developed a comprehensive Strategic, Practical Plan to help schools address the growing influence of social media on students' mental health, academic performance, and social development. It was prompted by our May 2025 virtual conference which was attended by over 400 professionals from nine countries. This plan offers educators, students, and parents practical tools and insights for navigating the risks and opportunities associated with social media use.

These guidelines are consistent with the American Psychological Association's 2023 Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence, which emphasizes the need for digital literacy, family engagement, and monitoring features to safeguard adolescent development.

**Key Components of the Strategic Plan:**

- Expert Insight: A presentation by Dr. Mitch Prinstein on how social media affects brain development, mental health, and behavior in youth.

- Media Resources: A curated selection of videos that includes the CNN documentary *Being 13* (a forward-looking presentation on the role of artificial intelligence in social media), and Dr. Yvonne Skipper's *Project Real* that promotes critical thinking and digital literacy to combat misinformation and disinformation.

- Data-Driven Action: Assessment tools and research findings to help schools identify patterns of use and areas of concern among students. The APA underscores the importance of age-appropriate digital literacy instruction. Their recommendations include teaching young people to critically evaluate online content, develop media literacy, and build cognitive tools to recognize and resist harmful messaging. *Project Real*, developed by Dr. Yvonne Skipper, directly aligns with these goals by helping students assess and challenge misinformation on social platforms.

- School-Based Strategies: Actionable roles for principals, teachers, students, and parents that foster collaboration, policy development, and youth-led interventions.

- Community Engagement: A call to partner with local agencies and the media to amplify the impact of these initiatives and ensure a positive community-wide response.

The document also includes appendices with a student social media assessment tool and a summary of current research findings. It emphasizes the need for balance—highlighting both the dangers and the positive potential of digital connections.

The Melissa Institute invites schools and communities to adopt, adapt, and build upon this plan and to share outcomes and feedback with us so we may continue to learn and grow together.

**Learn more: [www.melissainstitute.org](http://www.melissainstitute.org)**
**Contact: Etiony Aldarondo, Ph.D.**

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The authors have become increasingly alarmed by the widespread use of social media platforms and their impact on students' mental health and development.

In May 2025, the Melissa Institute held a Zoom conference on this topic which was attended by over 400 professionals from nine different countries. As a follow-up, we developed this Strategic, Practical Plan. We recognize that each school's intervention plan will differ due to location specific factors. However, we hope that this document will serve as a catalyst for comprehensive discussion and social action in formulating that plan.

*Please share this email with others and feel free to provide us with feedback.*

**Included in this document:**

1. **Presentation by Dr. Mitch Prinstein** – Discussion of the neurological and psychological effects of heavy social media use on youth. It highlights detrimental impacts of mental health, sleep deprivation, and addictive behavior, while also acknowledging potential benefits.

2. **CNN Documentary "Being 13"** – Hosted by Anderson Cooper. This decade old documentary remains relevant and concerning. Additional related CNN videos are also recommended.

3. **Video Presentation on Artificial Intelligence and Social Media** – Though technical, this hour-long video underscores future concerns, such as AI-generated voices and the risks posed by 24-hour AI companions. It highlights the presence of an estimated 500,000 online sexual predators and their ability to locate youth.

4. **Presentation by Dr**. **Yvonne Skipper** – Discussion of Project Real, research tested program, designed to help young people develop skills they need to recognize and challenge misinformation, disinformation, and fake news when they see it online.

5. **Research Fact Sheet (Appendix 2)** – A summary of current data on the risks and benefits of social media use among students.

6. **Comprehensive School-Wide Strategic Plan** – Actionable steps provided to address the growing dependence among students on social media.

7. **References** – Available at [www.melissainstitute.org](http://www.melissainstitute.org).

8. **In addition, see the excellent book** Anxious Generation: How the Rewiring of Childhood is Causing Mental Health Illness*,* by Johnathan Haidt**.** He offers the following suggestive interventions:

   A) Students should not be given smart phones until high school.

   B) All forms of electronic media should be controlled (i.e. locked down) from students

during the entire school day.

   C) Children should not receive cell phones until middle school age.

   D) All electronic tools should be removed from children at least half an hour before bedtime in order to ensure adequate sleep.

   E) Schools should provide more recess time and other opportunities for student to engage in social contact without smart phone devices.

   F) Teachers and parents should monitor students' content of social media and act as good role models of social media use.

We welcome your comments and would appreciate hearing about any related actions your school or organization is taking so we may share them with others.

Sincerely,

Dr. Donald Meichenbaum, Research Director
Dr. Etiony Aldarondo, Executive Director

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## Principal's Role

There are approximately 114,000 principals in the U.S. public school system. Below is a list of principal-led initiatives to consider at the start of the school year:

1. **Announce a School-Wide Social Media Initiative** – Inform students, parents, and staff that your school will address social media use. Cite relevant research (see Appendix 2) and make Dr. Prinstein's presentation widely available.

2. **Collect Anonymous Student Data** – Use the assessment in Appendix 1 to measure students' social media use. Collect only grade level and gender information. Use this data as a foundation for faculty, parent, and student discussions. Consider sharing findings with local media to raise awareness.

3. **Form a Social Media Committee** – Include teachers, students, and parents to develop intervention ideas. Interventions should be youth-centered and adult-supported. It is vital for the students to have ownership of these programs to ensure their effectiveness.

4. **Set Uniform Device Policies** – If your school bans or limits device use, ensure consistency across all classrooms. In addition, teachers must model appropriate behavior.

5. **Create a School Website Section about Social Media** – Share student success stories, effective parenting strategies, etc. to promote a balanced dialogue about the risks and benefits of social media.

6. **Encourage Principal Collaboration** – Principals should share and evaluate interventions and communicate innovative strategies with their school boards.

7. **Utilize the Melissa Institute's Resources** – Visit www.teachsafeschools.org for tools and strategies.

8. **Demonstrate Leadership and Commitment** – Strong leadership is critical to change. As David Brooks wrote in *The New York Times*, "Social transformations follow personal transformations."

## Teacher's Role

1. **Lead Classroom Discussions** – Engage students in conversations about their social media use by providing assessment data and video materials. Address topics such as cyberbullying, conflicts with parents and the psychological impact of social media.

2. **Organize Social Media Healthy Habits Fairs** – Host fairs between classes or across schools to raise awareness.

3. **Create Visual Reminders** – Post signs, graphics, and student created art around the school illustrating the costs and benefits of social media use. Refer to [www.reachout.com](www.reachout.com) for teen-led initiatives.

4. **Discuss Manipulation by Platforms** – Share quotes from Meta and TikTok on exploiting the adolescent brain. Ask students how they feel about being manipulated and compare findings with other industries like tobacco and firearms.

5. **Explore Media Literacy** – Encourage students to question the accuracy of information and how social media affects their mood, self-esteem, and development. Teachers may also reference APA guidelines that advocate for developmental scaffolding—gradually increasing students' ability to discern reliable versus harmful online content while supporting their identity formation and emotional growth.

## School Mental Health Role (School Counselors, School Psychologists, School Social Workers)

1. **Give Psychology Away -** Provide the principal with cutting edge research findings as they appear in the published professional literature and other respectable outlets.
2. **Teach the Teachers -** Provide the teaching faculty and other school adults with a review of the relevant social media knowledge base, what to be alert for among the students, and how to approach any apparent problems. Consult with The Melissa Institute as needed to stay UpToDate.
3. **Gather Data -** Participate in the collection of anonymous student data ensuring that statistically appropriate and age-sensitive data gathering standards and procedures are followed.
4. **Participate in the Social Media Committee** – Show special attention to comparative gender sensitivity and students' rights to privacy.

5. **Attend to Students in Need -** Identify those students who are already known to be struggling and provide individual or small group support and education, with special attention to girls' comparative vulnerability.

## Student Engagement

1. **Involve Students Throughout the Process** – Highlight past youth-led initiatives such as March for Our Lives and #MeToo to inspire active involvement.

2. **Promote Creative Expression** – Encourage students to produce videos and peer mentoring activities around social media awareness and safety.

3. **Guide Conversations on Disinformation** – Help students recognize harmful content and provide tools to respond.

4. **Use Technology for Self-Reflection** – Have students use AI (e.g., ChatGPT) to reflect on their device use and find strategies for balance.

5. **Discuss why girls are more likely to develop mental disorders such as anxiety and depression than boys in response to social media (See discussion by Haidt).**

## Parent Involvement

1. **Invite Participation in Program Development** – Involve parents in planning and evaluation.

2. **Host Educational Events** – Show key videos and demonstrate conversation techniques during evening workshops.

3. **Share Stories** – Encourage parents to contribute their experiences, both successful and challenging, to the school's website.

4. **Model Healthy Behavior** – Parents must exemplify responsible media use.

5. **Use Assessment Tools** – Compare parent and child responses to assess differences in perception.

6. **Promote Shared Learning** – Educate parents about platform functionality, warning signs, risks of disinformation and AI. The APA encourages parents to maintain open dialogue, co-view media, and model responsible use. These practices build trust and increase the likelihood of students disclosing online risks or student distress.

7. **Advocate for Accountability** – Encourage parents to demand better safeguards from social media companies. This is a political issue.

## Community Engagement

Partner with local agencies and media outlets to amplify the campaign. Share updates online and send feedback to the Melissa Institute.

**Appendix 1: Self-Assessment Questionnaire on Social Media Use**

- Do you spend more time on social media than intended?

- Have you tried and failed to take breaks from social media?

- Do you go out of your way to maintain access to social media?

- Do you crave social media?

- Does social media interfere with essential functions like sleep, school, or exercise?

- Do you continue using it even when it causes problems?

- Do you feel distressed when away from social media?

- Do you believe you may be addicted to social media?

- Have you tried to reduce screen time but couldn't?

- Have you lied to maintain screen access?

- Does screen time interfere with other responsibilities?

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**Appendix 2: Illustrative Research Findings**

- 90% of U.S. youth use social media daily.

- Some use media for over 10 hours/day.

- Teens send up to 3,400 messages/month.

- 71% use multiple platforms.

- 25% seek mental health info online; 50% turn to the internet during "tough times."

- Heavy use of social media correlates with anxiety, depression, reduced well-being, and less sleep.

- Vulnerable youth may use social media more.

- On social media, **misinformation spreads faster, deeper, and more broadly** than true information because false content often feels more novel, emotional, or sensational-- qualities that trigger sharing in online environments designed to reward engagement, not accuracy.

- False news stories are 70% more likely to be retweeted than true stories.

- Fake news is believed about 75% of the time.

- Only about 4% of the population have the skills to systematically tell real from fake. Yet most of us think we are better at discerning it than we actually are.

- Social media can both harm and help by offering connection and peer support.

- AI's growth is exponential—e.g., ChatGPT reached 100 million users in 2 months vs. Facebook's 4 years.

- AI Bots spread both true and false information at similar rates, meaning that **humans are more responsible for the faster spread of misinformation**.

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**References:** See the complete list at www.melissainstitute.org (May 2025 Conference section)

American Psychological Association. (2023). Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence. Retrieved from https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use.