

The Social Media Challenge

Pediatrician **Jenny Alexander, M.D.**, finds that honest conversations and parental guidance can help parents transform the dangers of social media into opportunities for growth.



Social media is here to stay, and as more young children are introduced to the world of TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, opportunities for discovery—and heightened parental guidance—are more abundant than ever.

Rather than recommending to cut it out entirely, pediatrician Jenny Alexander, M.D., stresses the importance of monitoring social media consumption to help children and teenagers find age-appropriate entertainment without developing a scrolling addiction or attempting dangerous trends.

“Social media can be a positive thing,” says Dr. Alexander, of Alexander Pediatrics. “Kids can use it for learning, to express themselves, or to interact with friends and family. But limitations need to be set to help them understand what they’re allowed to watch and for how long.”

In addition to limiting screen time, parental controls on video-based sites can restrict what children can access, preventing them from stumbling on adult content with one touch.

“Parents should know what kids are doing online,” Dr. Alexander says. “When parents show an interest in

what their kids are watching, it can provide an open line of communication. Parents can talk to their kids about what they watched and what they liked about it. This can create a judgement-free zone as well.”

Leading the Conversation

TikTok challenges—which can range from boiling chicken in NyQuil to sliding a penny into a partially plugged-in phone charger—may sound nonsensical to adults but can be enticing to children and teenagers seeking attention by recreating dangerous trends for views.

“Children need to understand that it’s not cool to be the bad kid,” says Dr. Alexander. “Teenagers haven’t fully developed their brains and still need help distinguishing right from wrong, and what is safe from dangerous. They often feel pressured into risky behavior without understanding the consequences.”

Dr. Alexander finds that a part of the solution comes from honest, open dialogue between parents and children.

The earlier these healthy habits and judgment-free communication are formed, the stronger the trust will be when kids become teenagers and are faced with heightened pressure from peers.

“It’s hard for parents to talk openly with their teenagers if they weren’t open with them as children first,” says Dr. Alexander. “We need to be open and be there for our kids. If kids feel safe to talk about what they’re doing online, they’ll feel safe to talk about dating, social media, fears, and mental health. If they don’t feel pressure to conform to an ideal image, they’ll feel safer to come forward and be themselves.”

As the holiday season begins, there may be more time for families to engage in social media and screen time. Dr. Alexander stresses, “We should still find time to get out, stay active, and have more face-to-face interactions with our families and friends. Being safe and staying healthy is something we should teach our kids from an early age.”



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Jill Fitch, CRNP; Amanda Nummy, CRNP; Jenny Alexander, M.D.; and Michelle Kirkland, CRNP.

