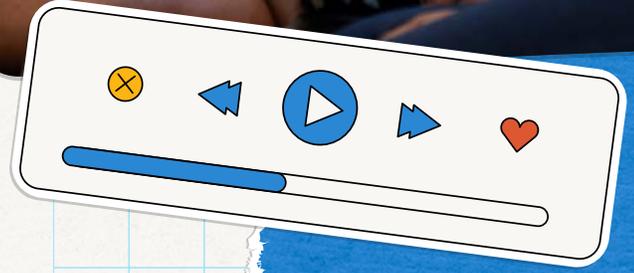
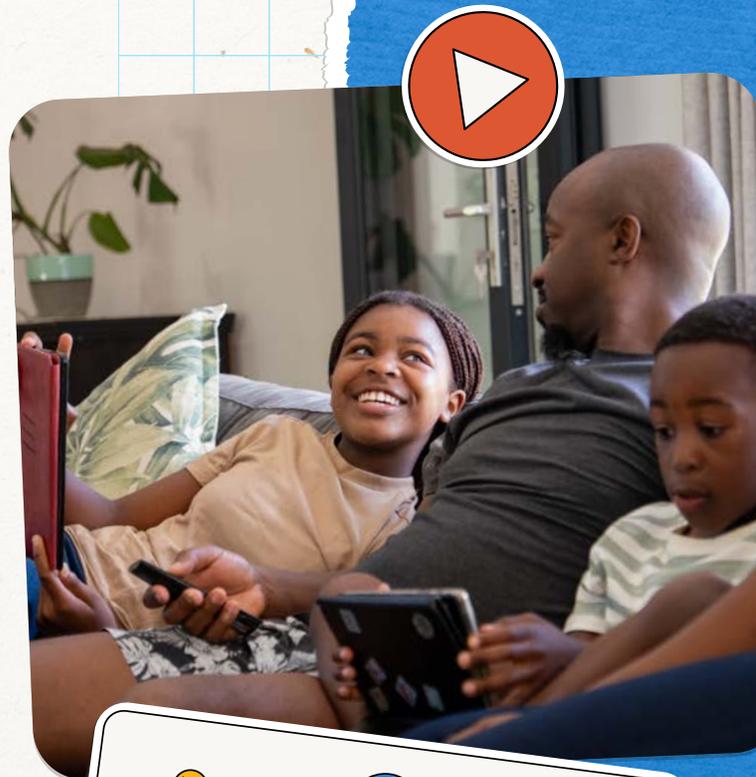


Healthy Video Viewing

A Guide for
Parents of Teens



The American Psychological Association (APA) developed this evidence-based guide to help parents navigate the complex world of teen video viewing. Drawing on decades of psychological research, we examine how video content affects adolescent development, mental health, and well-being.

Today's teens consume video content across numerous service providers, often for several hours daily. This raises important questions about the impact on attention, learning, social relationships, and identity formation. While some content can support healthy development, other types may pose risks to adolescent social, intellectual, and brain development.

This guide translates psychological science into practical strategies for parents. You'll find research-based recommendations for:

- Promoting healthy viewing habits and balanced screen time
- Fostering productive conversations about video content
- Helping your teen develop media literacy skills

Rather than focusing solely on screen time limits, we emphasize understanding how different types of content affect teen development and building skills for thoughtful media consumption.

Our recommendations come from rigorous analysis of hundreds of studies. As the digital landscape constantly evolves, core psychological principles about adolescent development provide a reliable foundation for safeguarding teens' healthy engagement with video content.

With the right guidance, you can empower your teen to thrive as a thoughtful media consumer. The APA is here to serve as a trusted resource on this important journey.

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PART 1

Key Concepts



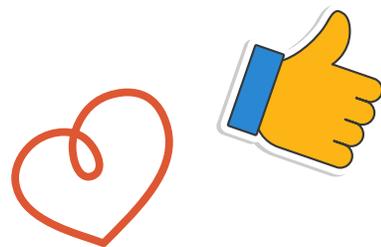
Understanding the Digital Landscape

How do video platforms engage teens?

Some video platforms offer features to enhance youths' engagement and/or to safeguard youth from inappropriate content. However, this may look different across different platforms. Some of these features could include auto-playing videos in quick succession and personalized content recommendations. Teens are in a critical stage of development where impulse control—the ability to pause and think before acting—is still maturing. During the teen years, the brain's reward centers are especially sensitive, while the parts that regulate self-control are still developing. This natural brain development can make it harder for teens to disengage from captivating content, even when they want to take a break.

QUICK TIP:

Help your teen become a savvy digital consumer by discussing how to make intentional choices about their viewing time and content. Work together to identify strategies that help them stay in control of their viewing experience.



What features shape the teen viewing experience?

Many video services incorporate social features such as reactions, “likes,” and comments that allow viewers to engage with content and connect with others. These interactive elements can significantly enhance engagement, especially for teens whose brains are naturally attuned to social feedback during this developmental stage. Studies indicate that adolescents are particularly responsive to peer feedback and social cues, making these features especially appealing for them.

Platform recommendation systems also suggest new content based on viewing patterns and engagement data like social interactions.

The combination of social features and recommendation systems can be particularly powerful during adolescence, when brains are especially attuned to social connections and susceptible to peer influence.

QUICK TIP:

Share your own experiences managing screen time with your teen. Being open about your own challenges and strategies can help normalize the effort it takes to maintain healthy digital habits and open the door for honest conversations about finding balance.

How can I stay informed about different platforms?

While video service providers constantly evolve and new ones regularly emerge, research provides a reassuring insight: the quality and nature of the content matter far more than the specific platform delivering it. Rather than trying to track every new app, platform, or provider, focus on understanding what your teen watches and why they find it engaging.

Have open discussions about their viewing choices and work together to identify content that supports their well-being. You might ask questions like: “What kinds of videos do you enjoy most?” “Do you ever see recommended videos that you’d rather not watch?” or “How do you decide when to keep watching and when to take a break?”

QUICK TIPS:

- Focus on the nature of the content rather than getting caught up in keeping track of every video service.
- Ask curious, non-judgmental questions about what your teen enjoys watching.
- Work together to develop strategies for evaluating content thoughtfully.



How is AI technology shaping video watching?

Video service providers increasingly use AI technology to analyze viewing patterns and provide personalized recommendations. This can include tracking what users search for, which videos they watch, and even where they pause while scrolling—so it’s important for teens to understand how these systems work to make informed viewing choices.

AI tools are now deeply integrated into most video editing apps, making it easy to create and edit content. Teens frequently encounter edited videos from both influencers and friends, and it can be challenging to distinguish what’s real. This is particularly impactful with appearance-focused content, where AI editing can create unrealistic body shapes and beauty standards. When teens repeatedly see these enhanced versions of both celebrities and peers, it can create pressure to pursue artificially perfected appearances.

Teens might also encounter “deep fakes”—highly realistic fake videos that have been altered by AI—which can sometimes be used to spread misinformation or harass others. Understanding how AI shapes the content they see can help teens approach videos with greater awareness and critical-thinking skills.

QUICK TIP:

Help teens develop digital literacy skills by discussing how AI influences their viewing experience. Encourage them to think critically about content they encounter and remember that they’re often seeing carefully curated and edited material, whether from influencers or friends.



Promoting Healthy Viewing Habits

What types of video content should parents be aware of?

Research has identified several categories of content that can impact teen development and well-being. Understanding these can help families make informed choices about video viewing.

Content involving aggression or conflict often shows harmful interactions through physical confrontations, hostile language, or social behaviors like spreading rumors. Research suggests that frequent exposure to this type of content may reduce caring about others and make aggressive reactions seem more normal, particularly during the sensitive developmental period of adolescence.

Health-related content requires careful attention. Videos showing substance use, risky challenges, or self-harm behaviors may influence teens' decision-making, especially during a developmental stage when peer influence is heightened. Content about relationships and body image also deserves consideration—unrealistic portrayals can shape teens' expectations and self-image. According to researchers, exposure to content promoting extreme body standards may contribute to negative self-image and unhealthy exercise or eating patterns.



Content that reinforces stereotypes about different cultural groups or identities can affect how teens view themselves and others. By contrast, videos celebrating diversity and showing authentic representations can enhance self-esteem and foster understanding across different communities. Studies show that positive, inclusive content can help build acceptance and belonging for all teens.

It's important to remember that each teen responds to content differently. Individual factors like developmental stage, personal experiences, and current circumstances influence how content affects them. Some teens may be more sensitive to certain types of content based on their unique characteristics and experiences.

QUICK TIPS:

- Consider your teen's individual needs and circumstances when discussing video content.
- Focus on building critical-thinking skills to help teens evaluate content themselves.
- Encourage conversations about how different types of content make them feel.

How can video content support teen development and well-being?

Video content can play a positive role in adolescent development, supporting teens as they explore their identities, develop new skills, and build relationships. Studies indicate that many types of content can contribute to healthy growth and learning.

Videos showing positive social interactions—like helping others, showing compassion, or demonstrating effective problem-solving—can reinforce important values. Exposure to these prosocial behaviors encourages teens to practice similar actions in their own lives, such as supporting peers or standing up against bullying. This is particularly valuable during adolescence, when teens are developing their social skills.



Educational content has become increasingly engaging and accessible. Many teens use videos to supplement their learning, master new skills, or explore different cultures and perspectives. When teens watch educational content together, it can spark meaningful discussions and shared learning experiences.

Content that brings joy and inspiration also plays an important role. Humorous, uplifting, or encouraging videos can enhance mood and foster optimism. Whether it's watching creative performances, enjoying lighthearted entertainment, or seeing stories of kindness, these positive viewing experiences can contribute to emotional well-being.

QUICK TIPS:

- Ask your teen to share videos they find inspiring or educational—this can spark meaningful conversations.
- Consider watching uplifting content together as a way to connect and discuss what you both value.
- Encourage teens to use video platforms as tools for learning and creative exploration.

How can I help my teen navigate influencer content?

Influencers create personal videos about their lives, interests, and expertise for large online audiences. Their content varies widely in quality and accuracy, and they can be a source of mis- and disinformation. Teens often connect with influencer content during adolescence, a time when research shows that they're naturally exploring their identities and values.

Understanding the appeal of influencers can help parents support healthy viewing habits. The importance teens give to influencers can lead to what researchers call "parasocial relationships"—one-sided emotional connections where viewers feel they know and trust an influencer personally. While some messages can be positive, it's helpful for teens to maintain perspective about the professional nature of influencer content.

Research indicates that influencer content can shape teens' perspectives and choices. Some influencers create valuable content about topics like mental health awareness, creative expression, or social causes. However, it's important for teens to think critically about influencer lifestyles and recommendations, recognizing that most content is carefully curated, may be sponsored, and may be a source of mis- or disinformation. Many influencers present idealized versions of their lives, which can create unrealistic expectations about success, appearance, or career paths.

QUICK TIPS:

- Show genuine interest in the influencers your teen follows—ask what draws them to certain content creators.
- Discuss how influencers build their audience and what goes into creating their content.
- Help teens develop critical-thinking skills about sponsored content and idealized portrayals.

How does advertising interact with video content?

Video service providers often integrate advertising into the viewing experience. According to researchers, during adolescence, when identity formation and peer influence are particularly significant, teens may be more responsive to advertising messages, especially those promoting consumer products or lifestyle choices.

The digital advertising landscape has evolved significantly. Rather than traditional commercial breaks, ads are now often seamlessly integrated into content streams. Some service providers use viewing data to personalize ad delivery, showing teens products and services related to their interests. Influencer marketing adds another layer, as content creators often incorporate product recommendations into their videos. Because teens may view these creators as trusted voices, these promotional messages can be particularly persuasive.

Research indicates that repeated exposure to advertising can shape values and behaviors. For instance, studies show that frequent exposure to food-related advertising may influence dietary choices. Additionally, advertising often emphasizes materialistic values and social comparison, which can impact how teens view success and self-worth.

QUICK TIPS:

- Have open-ended conversations about how advertising works on apps and digital platforms, including how ads are targeted based on viewing habits.
- Teens don't like to be manipulated. Help teens develop skills to identify sponsored content, even when it's subtly integrated into videos.

How can I support my teen if I'm concerned about their mental well-being?

Each teen responds differently to video content based on their unique characteristics and circumstances. While there's no universal definition of harmful content, parents should stay attentive to changes in their teen's mood, behavior, or social patterns that might suggest they need additional support.

If you notice signs of anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or significant changes in focus or sleep patterns, consider starting a gentle conversation. Studies demonstrate that supportive discussions with parents can help teens process their online experiences and develop healthy coping strategies.

HERE'S HOW TO FIND SUPPORT:

- Start with open dialogue: Ask your teen if they've encountered content that made them feel uncomfortable or negative about themselves. Make it clear you're there to listen without judgment.
- Connect with resources: The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline offers free, confidential support through call, text, or chat. School counselors and trusted teachers can also provide valuable guidance.
- Consider identity-specific support: For LGBTQ+ youth or teens from minority communities, specialized organizations like The Trevor Project offer targeted resources and understanding communities.

Remember that experiencing emotional responses to online content is normal during adolescence. By maintaining open communication and knowing where to find professional support when needed, you can help your teen navigate their digital experiences more confidently.

How can I help if my teen is engaging with concerning online trends?

During adolescence, teens are naturally more attuned to peer influence and social acceptance. According to researchers their developing brains are especially responsive to social feedback, which can make it challenging to resist participating in popular trends or conversations—even when these activities might be risky or unkind.

Understanding that this is a normal part of teen development can help parents respond effectively. Rather than reacting immediately with alarm or criticism, consider approaching the situation with curiosity and care. Research indicates that teens are more likely to engage in open dialogue when they feel understood rather than judged.

If you're feeling worried or frustrated, it's helpful to process those emotions first—perhaps with another adult you trust—before approaching your teen. This allows you to maintain a calm, supportive presence that encourages honest dialogue.

QUICK TIP:

Before discussing concerns with your teen, take time to understand the online context they're navigating. This might mean learning about current trends or viewing content from popular creators. Coming from a place of understanding rather than reaction often leads to more productive conversations.

How can families develop healthy viewing habits together?

Adults and teens alike can find video content engaging, but adults typically have more developed skills for managing viewing time and content choices. Parents can use their experience to demonstrate and discuss balanced media habits, while acknowledging that everyone faces similar challenges.

Research findings reveal that teens learn significantly from observing their parents' media behaviors. By openly discussing your own strategies for maintaining healthy boundaries with video content, you can create opportunities for collaborative learning rather than top-down directives.

Consistency between what you say and do matters more than perfection. Being open about your own efforts to maintain healthy viewing habits can make conversations about digital wellness more authentic and effective.

QUICK TIPS:

- **Make it collaborative:** Instead of focusing on restrictions, work together to find solutions. You might say, "I've been trying to be more mindful of my viewing habits—would you help me figure out how to adjust these settings?"
- **Build shared understanding:** Frame it as a common challenge. You might say, "We all choose how we spend our screen time. Let's figure out together how to stay in control of our viewing habits."
- **Create positive experiences:** Share uplifting or educational videos that you can watch and discuss together, building connections through shared viewing moments.



Balancing Online and Offline Life



How can I tell if time watching videos is having a negative impact on my teen's well-being?

How does video viewing fit into your teen's overall well-being? While research suggests there's no universal "safe" or "unsafe" amount of screen time, it's helpful to consider whether your teen is viewing excessively and how video viewing affects your teen's daily life and activities. The key is looking at the bigger picture of their development and engagement with life.

Consider these aspects of well-being:

- Time for essential activities: Are they getting enough sleep? Making time for physical activity? Maintaining in-person connections?
- Academic engagement: Can they focus on schoolwork when needed? Are they managing their responsibilities?
- Physical well-being: Watch for patterns of headaches, eye strain, or changes in eating or sleep habits.
- Emotional health: Notice if they seem increasingly anxious, withdrawn, or have trouble regulating their emotions.

It's important to remember that increased screen time might be a response to other challenges in a teen's life—like family stress, social concerns, or academic pressure—rather than the primary issue. Research suggests that understanding the context of increased viewing can help identify the real support teens need.

QUICK TIP:

Instead of focusing on time spent on screens, start conversations about how your teen is feeling overall: "How are you doing lately?" This approach often reveals more about what's really going on in their life.

How can families establish healthy viewing boundaries?

Evidence suggests that clear boundaries around video viewing can support positive outcomes in multiple areas of teens' lives, including sleep, academic performance, and social relationships. The key is approaching these boundaries as collaborative agreements rather than rigid rules.

Creating effective boundaries works best when focused on supporting your teen's overall well-being rather than simply restricting screen time. Consider what you ultimately want to protect or encourage—whether that's family dinner conversations, adequate sleep, or time for other activities.

Each teen has unique needs and circumstances. The most effective boundaries are those that consider your specific teen's developmental stage, interests, and potential sensitivities.

QUICK TIPS:

- Focus on replacement rather than restriction: Help teens identify fun alternatives to excessive viewing. This might mean supporting activities that combine social connection with screen time in healthy ways, like watching cooking videos while making recipes with friends.
- Make it collaborative: Include your teen in boundary-setting discussions. Ask what limits they think would be reasonable and work together to find solutions that feel fair and achievable. This approach helps teens develop their own skills for managing screen time while respecting their growing independence.

How can I help my teen manage the pressure to stay constantly connected?

Today's teens naturally move between digital and in-person spaces as part of their social world. Many feel pressure to stay continuously engaged online, worried they'll miss important social connections or conversations. This pressure can make it particularly challenging to step away from screens, even when teens themselves feel uncomfortable about their viewing habits.

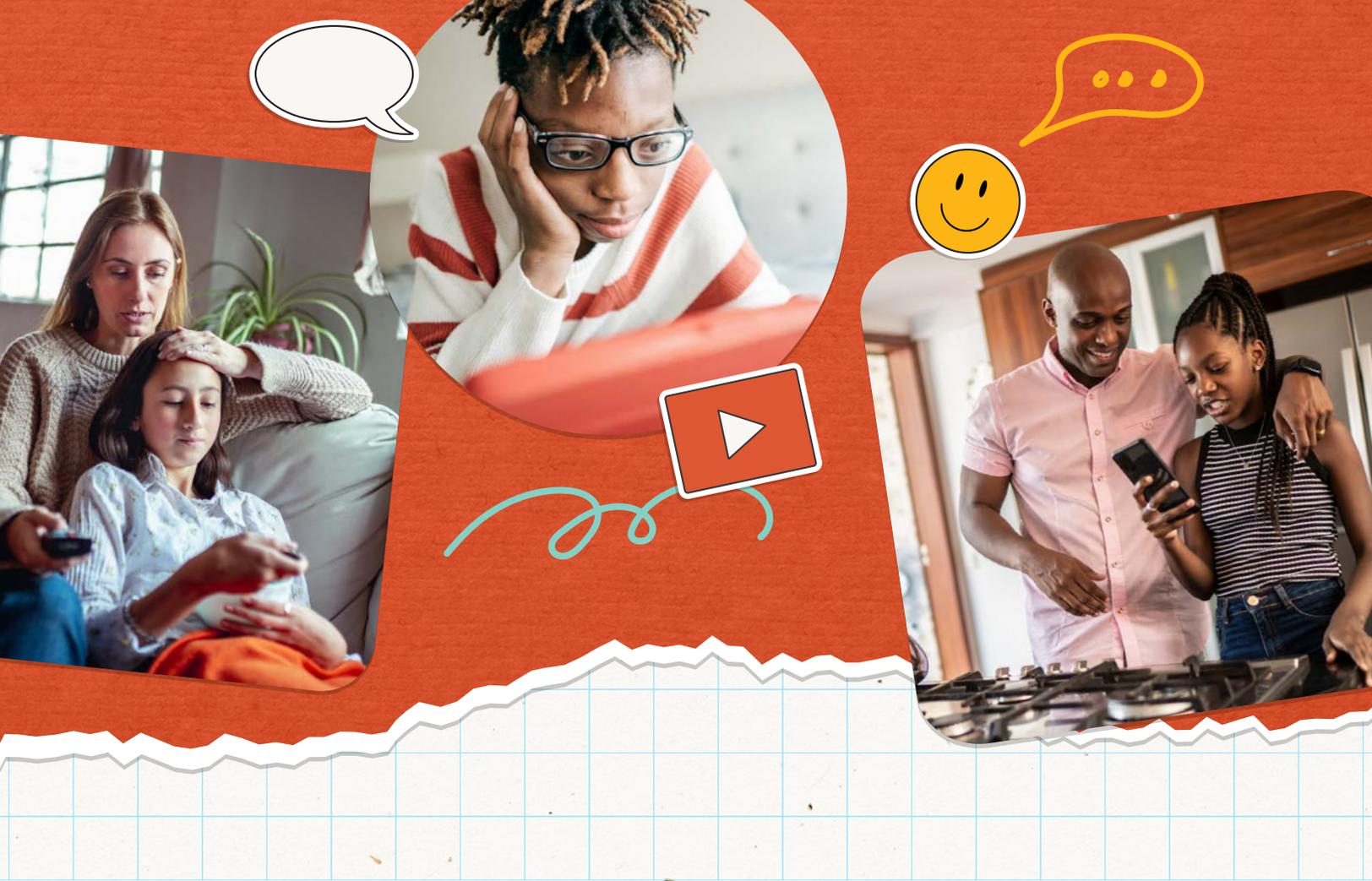
Research offers some reassuring insights: The heightened social pressure teens feel is a normal part of adolescent development, not a permanent state. During this period, parents can help teens build resilience and self-awareness. Studies show that teens who manage to limit their screen time often experience unexpected benefits—including less anxiety, reduced feelings of loneliness, and, surprisingly, less fear of missing out. The goal isn't to eliminate online experiences but to help teens develop skills for making conscious choices about their time and attention.

QUICK TIPS:

- Encourage your teen to experiment with brief viewing breaks and consider how those breaks make them feel. Many discover that what they thought helped them cope might actually be increasing their stress.
- Help teens bridge their online interests to real-world opportunities. If they enjoy certain content or communities online, explore ways they might connect with similar interests in person.

PART 2

Parent-Teen Strategies



 **How to Have
Productive Conversations
About Video Viewing**

Why It Matters

Psychological experts have found that how parents engage with teens about video content might influence its effects. When parents remain silent about problematic content, teens often interpret this as approval. However, thoughtful discussions can help teens develop crucial critical-thinking skills and healthier viewing habits. These conversations are especially important when teens encounter challenging content, from unrealistic body images to risky behaviors.

What Works Best

One effective approach combines casual co-viewing with authentic conversations. Simple silent watching isn't enough and may actually reinforce problematic messages. Instead, look for organic moments during daily activities like meals, car rides, or relaxed viewing sessions to explore these topics together. Approach it as an ongoing dialogue that evolves with your teen's digital experiences, not a series of formal discussions or lectures.



Key Strategies:

1. Position Your Teen as the Expert

- Ask them to show you their favorite channels or creators: “I’d love to hear what makes these videos interesting to you.”
- Learn from them about platform features and trends: “Could you show me how the autoplay settings work?”
- Show genuine interest in their digital world without trying to police it.
- Acknowledge that they likely know more about certain platforms than you do—this makes them more receptive to guidance in other areas.

2. Create Teachable Moments

- Notice patterns together: “I’m curious how this platform keeps suggesting similar videos. Have you noticed what triggers that?”
- Share your own viewing experiences: “When I watch videos like this, I sometimes have to remind myself it’s edited/scripted. What helps you keep perspective?”
- Discuss scenarios without judgment: “What do you think about how that situation was handled? What might work better in real life?”
- Use everyday moments to watch together casually rather than making it feel like you’re monitoring their viewing.
- Look for opportunities to explore how platforms use algorithms and other features to shape viewing habits.

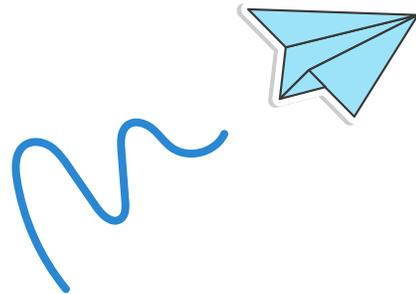


3. Keep Conversations Flowing

- Stay calm when concerning content comes up—strong reactions can shut down communication.
- Keep observations general rather than personal: “How do you think most people your age handle pressure to watch trending videos?”
- Listen more than you lecture—understanding their viewpoint first makes them more receptive to guidance.
- Create space for them to process what they’ve seen and form their own critical perspectives.
- Be patient—sometimes brief, casual exchanges can be far more effective than long discussions.

4. Navigate Challenging Content

- When problematic content appears, invite their perspective before sharing your concerns.
- Help them question what they’re seeing: “Do you think this represents real life? Why or why not?”
- Discuss how videos might be edited or scripted to draw viewers in.
- Talk about how certain content might affect people differently.
- Use these moments to build critical-thinking skills rather than simply setting rules.



Remember:

- Perfect discussions aren't the goal—what matters is maintaining an ongoing dialogue where teens feel comfortable thinking critically about content while knowing they can turn to you for guidance.
- You don't need to monitor everything they watch. Instead, focus on helping them develop the skills to navigate their digital world thoughtfully.
- Even if you start these conversations when your teen is older, research suggests these talks can still have meaningful benefits for healthy development and media consumption habits.
- Your role is to understand their experiences while helping them learn to think more critically about the content they consume.

Why This Approach Works

Research indicates that teens benefit most from parents who show genuine curiosity about their digital world while providing thoughtful guidance. By combining casual co-viewing with open discussion, you help teens:

- Develop stronger critical-thinking skills about media content
- Feel more comfortable coming to you with concerns
- Learn to question and evaluate what they watch
- Build healthier media consumption habits
- Maintain open communication about their digital experiences



How to Help Your Teen Develop Media Literacy Skills



Why It Matters

Research shows that both teens and adults can be significantly affected by emotionally charged video content, particularly around conflict, social issues, or environmental crises. The rise of AI technology has made this landscape even more complex—videos can now be altered or entirely AI-generated, creating convincing but false narratives. Understanding how to evaluate content has become an essential skill for digital well-being, especially when content relates to personal experiences or identity.

What Works Best

The most effective approach builds on teens' natural curiosity and skepticism. Rather than simply warning about misinformation and other manipulative content, help teens develop their own evaluation skills through active exploration and discussion. Start by acknowledging that distinguishing accurate information from misleading content can be challenging for everyone, not just teens.



Key Strategies:

1. Foster Natural Skepticism

Teens often already question what they see online. Build on this tendency by exploring their thinking: “What makes you trust certain creators more than others? How can you tell when something might not be showing the full story?” Share your own experiences of discovering misleading content and how you learned to verify information.

2. Make Verification a Habit

Help teens develop practical verification strategies that feel natural rather than burdensome. When they share interesting content with you, show interest while modeling critical thinking: “That’s fascinating—let’s see what other sources say about this.” Discuss how to check claims across multiple reliable sources and recognize signs of AI-generated or manipulated content.

3. Process Emotional Responses

Emotional reactions to content can be valuable indicators but shouldn’t be the only guide. Help teens understand why certain videos might trigger strong feelings: “Why do you think this content affected you so much? What aspects of it feel most important?” This can lead to deeper discussions about how content creators use emotional triggers to engage viewers.

4. Connect With Learning

Many schools now teach media literacy—how to analyze, evaluate, and think critically about the information we get from different media sources, from social media posts to news articles to TV shows. Build on these lessons by asking about what they’re learning: “What strategies have you discussed in school for evaluating online information? How do you use those when watching videos?” This reinforces classroom learning while showing you value their growing expertise.

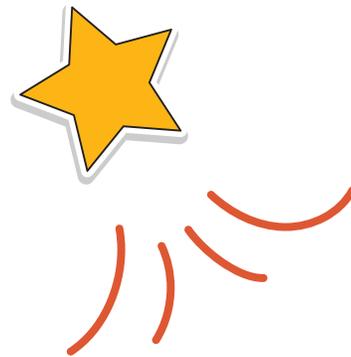
Helpful Resources

While developing these skills, explore credible resources together:

- The [American Psychological Association](#) has modules on the psychology behind misinformation and shares research-based strategies for media evaluation.
- [Common Sense Media](#) offers practical guides for evaluating digital content.
- School librarians and media specialists can often recommend additional resources.

Remember:

The goal isn't to make teens cynical but to help them become thoughtful consumers of information. These skills develop gradually through practice and discussion. It's okay to admit uncertainty and learn verification strategies together—this models the lifelong learning needed to navigate our evolving digital landscape.



This guidance is based on the scientific literature, as of November 2024, on teens' viewing of video content. It does not cover other online activities, such as direct messaging, video chatting, or creating video content. Hundreds of scientific studies provide clear evidence on what content tends to be helpful or harmful, but more research is needed to understand how such content affects various groups, including teens with minoritized racial, ethnic, sexual, or gender identities and those with disabilities, neurodiversity, or mental health issues.

Parents hold power for guiding teens as they navigate video content, but content creators, video service providers, educators, and policymakers also hold responsibility. To learn more about the science behind the report and the role of other stakeholders, explore <https://healthyviewing.apa.org>.

The development of this parent guide was supported by funding from YouTube.

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Suggested Citation

American Psychological Association. (2020). *Healthy Teen Video Viewing: A Guide for Parents of Teens*. Retrieved from <https://healthyviewing.apa.org/Healthy-Teen-Video-Viewing.pdf>



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