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APA Recommendations for Healthy Teen Video Viewing

A SUMMARY OF THE SCIENCE WITH ACTION STEPS REGARDING
VIDEO VIEWING AND ADOLESCENT WELL-BEING

Psychological and social scientists are continually investigating the potential effects of viewing video content on adolescents' well-being. Both the volume of video content and its accessibility to children and adolescents have increased dramatically in recent years. This is due primarily to the availability of video content on video streaming channels and via various online platforms (e.g., social media, gaming) on which adolescents can consume video content produced by a wide range of creators, including adolescents themselves.¹ Much of this new video content has been created without sufficient policies that are designed to protect youth and support healthy development.

Science suggests multiple ways that video content, and the platforms that host it, can help or harm teens. Addressing these issues is the responsibility of numerous stakeholders, including (but not limited to) platforms and channels hosting and distributing video content, content creators, parents, caregivers, educators, policymakers, and technology industry professionals. This report offers a series of recommendations, some of which may be enacted immediately by parents, youth, or educators. Others will require more substantial change by video hosting platforms, content creators, policymakers, and/or technology professionals. To ensure the time adolescents spend consuming content on video platforms is safe and enriching, all should review the recommendations below and consider how best to address each.

This report summarizes the extant scientific literature (as of November 2024). Note that these recommendations focus predominantly on adolescents' *viewing* of video content, rather than other video-based experiences such as direct messaging friends virtually, video chatting, or creating video content.

The recommendations below are based on the scientific evidence to date and the following considerations.

A. Video content may affect youth regardless of the format or medium in which it is viewed. Video content may be consumed through many formats. These include, but are not limited to, film, television, and short-form clips available on the internet through video sharing, streaming services, live-streaming, video hosting/marketing platforms, or social media applications. Far more research has been conducted to understand the potential effects of film and television content on adolescent well-being than has focused on newer content delivery methods. However, research to date consistently suggests that links between content and youths' subsequent well-being generalize across formats.² In other words, it is the content that matters more than the medium (i.e., film vs. television episode vs. online short) in which the content is embedded.

Emerging research reveals that video *platforms* may



contain features that exacerbate the effects of video content on adolescent well-being. For instance, platforms 1) recommend content to youth, 2) switch rapidly between short-form videos, 3) autoplay videos to extend viewing time, and/or 4) allow viewers to share reactions to what they have viewed. These platform features may magnify the effects of video content,³ and may be especially influential as they often operate without viewers' knowledge, and contribute to viewing habits that may require greater oversight or change. Increasingly, many platforms use artificial intelligence to monitor adolescents' behavior (e.g., analyzing which videos adolescents watch, which content adolescents pause over while scrolling, and what terms adolescents use to search for content).⁴ These data then are used to recommend content and advertising to teens, often to maintain adolescents' engagement online for as long as possible. These tools can be used to promote or hinder adolescent well-being.

B. Research continues to expand. Hundreds of scientific studies yield agreement on the types of content that are harmful or helpful for youth development. This research is based on investigations involving hundreds of thousands of adolescents throughout the world. A smaller number of studies provide important useful information regarding teens with minoritized racial, ethnic, sexual, or gender identities.^{5, 6, 7, 8} Even less is known regarding youth with disabilities, neurodiversity, or historical/existent mental health issues.⁹ Many studies have used designs that allow for causal conclusions. Most of this research has examined short-term associations between exposure to video content and subsequent adolescent well-being, and some has revealed long-term effects of video content.¹⁰

C. Adolescence is a gradual transition; not all youth go through the same changes or experiences at the same age.¹¹ Adolescents mature and develop competencies at different rates. Although research can inform the general developmental appropriateness of various types of video content,¹² no evidence would allow for the identification of *specific* age cutoffs for discrete types of video content within adolescence. Note that most adolescents navigate experiences with progressively less oversight from parents or caregivers as they develop and are afforded increasing autonomy to make their own choices regarding content they choose to consume and create.

D. Adolescence is a time for growth; video content can help. Adolescence is when youth learn more nuanced ways of thinking, feeling, understanding complex information, developing more sophisticated interpersonal relationships, and forming a more stable sense of self-concept and identity.^{11, 13} Content and platform features that allow youth to excel and grow toward these important milestones, enhancing their interest in exploration and expression, are generally helpful for adolescents.

E. Not all youth respond to video content in the same way. Every child is unique in their predispositions, sensitivities, and responses, which means they may react differently to the same content. This concept, often referred to as *differential susceptibility*,^{14, 15} suggests that individual differences—such as temperament, neurodiversity, exposure to stress or violence, traumatic experiences, mental health, age, or exposure to socioeconomic or structural disadvantage—can make some teens more sensitive to media than others.^{16, 17} For instance, adolescents with heightened emotional sensitivity or anxiety may find intense or complex themes more distressing, while those with body image concerns or a history of disordered eating are more likely to be influenced by content that promotes unhealthy body ideals.¹⁸

Research shows that while media affect all teens in one way or another, those who are already more at risk for certain behaviors—like aggression, for instance—might show more substantial outcomes.¹⁴ In other words, while all teens may be affected by violent content, a teen who is already predisposed to aggression may be most likely to behave violently following exposure to aggressive content.

F. Parents, caregivers, and other trusted adults play an important role in how video content affects youth.^{18, 19} Parents can take steps to help youth maximize the opportunities inherent in media use and minimize possible risks.²⁰ For instance, parents can set clear expectations, rules, and limitations on their teens' video viewing habits, and also discuss content seen on screen with their teen.^{20, 21} It's important to underscore that if parents and teens watch negative content together without subsequent discussion, it might even harm teens.²¹ Research suggests that without discussing video content together, youth are likely to interpret parents' silence



as approval of all that was portrayed.^{20, 21} The effects of negative content can be buffered if followed by discussion with adults to help teens understand what was viewed, engage in comparisons between video content and family values/preferences, and consider problem-solving or coping strategies that teens could use for experiences similar to what they viewed on screen. These discussions work best when parents or caregivers invite teens, in a non-judgmental way, to share what they think. Rather than preemptively imposing their own beliefs, parents should instead listen to their teens' thoughts and reactions in a positive, supportive manner.

Given that much of what teens watch online is unknown to parents,²² it is not possible or even desirable for parents to monitor all the content viewed by their children. It is therefore critical for regulators and policymakers to institute regulations that safeguard adolescents from harmful content and negative impacts, as has been attempted in other countries, including the United Kingdom.^{23, 24, 25} It is also critical for video literacy, a component of media literacy, to be taught in school at all levels.²⁶ In addition, video platforms can better moderate and label content based on age appropriateness, and create effective and more user-friendly parental controls.

Adolescents learn a great deal about media use and habits by observing the media behaviors of adults, particularly parents and caregivers.²⁷ Studies show that parents' own media consumption and reactions to online content can significantly shape adolescents' attitudes and behaviors toward media.^{27, 28} It is critical for parents to model healthy viewing behavior.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Limit exposure to content that encourages violent or risky behaviors and/or reinforces negative stereotypes.

Exposure to video content depicting violence, aggression, cyberhate, health risk behavior (e.g. substance use, sexual risk taking, self-harm/suicide, unhealthy body images, and dangerous trends), and negative stereotypes can be harmful to teens.^{29, 30} Each is discussed below. If teens are exposed to this type of content, it is critical that this exposure is accompanied by discussions with a trusted adult, as noted above (see point F).

Aggressive content includes narratives in which one character intends to harm another, through physical violence, targeted criticism, unkind words, cyber-aggression, and/or relational aggression, such as individuals harming others' social relationships through spreading rumors, sharing inappropriate images, or promoting the exclusion of others. Cyberhate includes discrimination and cyber-bullying. Exposure to aggressive, violent, and/or cyberhate video content is associated with teens becoming desensitized or "numbed" to aggression, leading to reduced empathy, increased aggressive



thoughts, and an increased likelihood of exhibiting aggressive behaviors toward others, particularly when provoked.³¹ Moreover, exposure to aggressive content can be associated with imitation effects in which teens may subsequently engage in similar behaviors toward others.³² Given the importance of forming healthy peer relationships during adolescence, viewing these depictions may be risky.

Adolescents' own health risk behaviors can also be significantly influenced by what they observe in video content. Exposure to substance use, dangerous dares or challenges, and self-harm/suicide can guide or compel teens' own engagement in similar risk-taking behaviors, particularly if adolescents have prior histories with these behaviors already.³³ Research shows that graphic pornographic material can distort teens' understanding of healthy relationships, dangerously inform their sexual beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors, and reinforce negative attitudes and bias toward sexual partners, especially women and members of minoritized groups.^{34, 35} Video content that emphasizes unrealistic body standards or glorifies thinness/lean muscularity contributes to adolescents' own body dissatisfaction and unhealthy weight-related behaviors among teens.³⁶ Research shows that exposure to such content is linked to disordered eating, potentially injurious levels of exercise, and low self-esteem, particularly among youth with preexisting body image concerns.³⁷ Default settings should be implemented on platforms to reduce exposure to this type of content for adolescents.

Stereotypes that include negative depictions of other cultures, opinions, or minoritized groups can perpetuate prejudice, intolerance, and social division.^{8, 38} Viewing this type of content influences teens to adopt biased views and behaviors. These effects may be exacerbated when viewed on platforms that allow viewers to share content, add comments, discussion, or "likes." By contrast, viewing pro-diversity content is associated with a stronger sense of identity among minoritized youth, and greater acceptance of racial/ethnic differences among all youth.^{8, 39} Depictions of gender-atypical individuals enhances adolescents' self-esteem, and contributes to social support and community for all adolescents.⁴⁰

Guides are available to assist parents with decisions regarding specific content and its appropriateness for youth, such as those found at Common Sense Media.

Encourage access to video content that promotes empathy, learning, emotional well-being, and joy.

Adolescent well-being benefits from depictions of prosocial behavior, such as individuals helping others or showing kindness. Research indicates that exposure to such content is associated with increased empathy and greater likelihood of teens engaging in prosocial behaviors themselves.^{41, 42, 43} Content that portrays characters who care for each other and demonstrate empathy reinforces these values, helping teens to internalize and model these behaviors in their own lives.⁴¹ Furthermore, teens benefit from content on bystander interventions for combating forms of hate and cyberbullying.⁴⁴ This type of content can encourage teens to develop stronger social bonds and a deeper understanding of the importance of helping and supporting others.⁴¹

Educational videos that assist with homework, teach new skills or hobbies, or provide insights into different cultures and experiences can empower teens to expand their knowledge and abilities. They can also prove a

tremendous asset in helping those with disabilities gain important skills and understanding of how to overcome challenges.^{45, 46} Viewing these types of videos, particularly when other peers are present, can result in positive learning outcomes and helpful discussions between adolescents.

“Joyful” content—defined as video content that elicits positive emotions such as happiness, amusement, and satisfaction⁴⁷—may also improve teens’ well-being. Research reveals that exposure to humorous videos,⁴⁸ stories of kindness, and uplifting news can increase positive affect,⁴⁹ increase optimism, and foster a sense of hopefulness.⁵⁰

Parents can encourage this type of content through engaging constructively with their child’s viewing interests and habits. Platforms can encourage this type of content through algorithms, making this type of content easily and readily accessible. Content creators can also produce more of this type of content.



Guide adolescents to choose content based on quality and accuracy, especially health-related content.

As adolescents' brains mature, so does their capacity to engage in abstract thinking, reflection, growth and exploration, and a desire to find a sense of meaning and purpose.⁵¹ Today, teens are especially likely to look to online content for answers, and thus it is critical for platforms to indicate which content is accurate and meant to be educational in nature versus content that is meant solely for entertainment, and/or not necessarily accurate.⁵²

Teens actively look for information about important physical and mental health topics (e.g., regarding balanced nutrition, exercise regimens, healthy skincare routines, self-help for depression, anxiety, and other behavioral health concerns, understanding healthy sexuality).^{53, 54, 55, 56} Video content from trustworthy sources, including advice from qualified professionals, is paramount to meet teens' needs safely and responsibly. Research suggests that although teens may find comfort in seeing others openly discuss their own physical or mental health struggles, unverified screen content may lead teens to inaccurately diagnose themselves with health conditions, engage in inappropriate treatment, and delay seeking proper help. Content from messengers who are not licensed health professionals should be marked as such, and should not be algorithmically promoted.

Particularly for teens who identify as LGBTQ+ or questioning, verified, trustworthy video content can fill a need for youth who do not have access to safe resources and conversations in their homes, schools, and communities.⁵⁷



Encourage video content that allows adolescents to develop healthy relationship skills.

Adolescent neural and social/psychological development contributes to teens' strong desire to connect with peers, become more disclosing and emotionally intimate with peers, and consequently rely on peers to explore their own sense of identity (e.g., their interests, values, body image, and self-expression).⁵⁸ Adolescence is therefore a critical period to develop relationship skills, and skill-building in adolescence is associated with interpersonal success decades later at work, in romantic partnerships, and as parents.

Video content depicting young people navigating relationships, finding healthy responses to challenging social situations, and finding amicable resolutions benefits teens' social development.⁵⁹ For instance, this might include content that depicts teens adaptively responding to bullying, dealing with offensive comments from others in a mature and healthy manner, working through mental health issues, or understanding and navigating family or peer relationship challenges. This also may include content that explores different cultures or perspectives that broaden teens' understanding of the world and encourages inclusivity and empathy. When adolescents view this content with other teens it can foster bonding experiences with others in real life, increase a sense of social connectedness, allow discussions about relationships, and help to develop community.⁶⁰ Adolescents should be encouraged to watch this type of content, and discuss it with others.

Monitor, and consider limiting, adolescents' exposure to some "influencers."

Adolescents' neural and social/psychological development contribute to heightened susceptibility to peer influence.^{61, 62} Current forms of video content include a significant presence of content creators and/or paid "influencers," or individuals who have gained large online followings for short-form, typically nonfiction content. Influencers may affect adolescents more than others, with potential to shape teens' behaviors and beliefs (i.e., by promoting lifestyles, products, opinions, engaging in provocative behavior), and can invoke helpful or harmful social comparisons.⁶³ This can include influence toward prosocial behavior and attitudes (e.g., standing up to bullying, body-positive initiatives, voting), or potentially harmful beliefs (e.g., prejudice or discrimination).

Research shows that teens often develop "parasocial relationships" with influencers, viewing them as trusted role models and even friends.⁶⁴ This can make teens more susceptible to influencer-driven advertising, often

perceiving product endorsements as personal recommendations rather than paid promotions. Research has shown influencers can be especially persuasive.⁶⁵ Sponsored content and paid endorsements should be explicitly noted, especially for influencers with adolescent audiences.

Influencers' attitudes and behaviors are predictive of adolescents' own behavior, including healthy, esteem-boosting beliefs, or unhealthy attitudes toward others and adolescents' risk-taking behavior.⁶³ The desire to fit in with online trends is particularly important as many teens look to influencers as they navigate the development of their own stable sense of identity. It is critical that platforms and caretakers take steps to shield adolescents from influencer content promoting unhealthy behavior and that influencers use their platform to promote healthy, realistic messaging if their content can be viewed by adolescent audiences.^{66, 67} Moreover, teens should be educated that it is difficult, and not always profitable, to become influencers themselves.



Educate adolescents to become wise consumers and creators of digital information.

Current media platforms make it very easy for teens to access information about news and current events. This can be beneficial in many ways, giving youth opportunities to learn about the world, cultures, peoples, and events. This content can be uplifting and educational.

However, some youth may be less capable than adults of detecting misinformation, and may be particularly vulnerable to highly emotional content that is meant to shape and sway their views.⁶⁸ Exposure to a high volume of images, real or not, displaying graphic videos of war, violence, racism, police brutality, and environmental disasters, can have negative impacts on teens' well-being.^{69, 70} Research shows that viewing these purposely sensationalized (and sometimes creator- or AI-generated) images, can lead to trauma-responses and depressive symptoms, especially for members of groups that are impacted by the events.⁷¹

Video content that allows youth to develop digital literacy skills can be beneficial to well-being, by allowing adolescents to understand how to search for reliable information, how to spot deep fakes, how algorithms work to keep them engaged with specific content, and how to identify, discuss, and process their own feelings when engaging with content, including locating content that increases positive emotion and connection.⁷² In addition to safeguards put in place by platforms and policymakers, education systems can also use existing resources to implement digital literacy as a part of curricula in schools and other community settings, such as libraries and youth centers. For instance, digital media literacy curricula could include tactics to counter AI-generated deep fakes, misinformation, manipulation, and other harmful trends within video content.



Online platforms hosting video content should modify built-in features that can impact adolescent well-being.

Autoplay features can be problematic for teens who are still developing impulse control, potentially leading to excessive screen time and exposure to content that may not align with their developmental needs.¹¹ Moreover, video content offered on platforms that allow for viewer feedback (e.g., likes, comments) and/or that have algorithmically-suggested content should prioritize the healthy development and positive growth of teens over maximizing the time teens spend viewing.⁷³ This could include limiting the amount of suggested content, having auto-play features disabled by default, checking in with users about timing (such as the “Are you still watching/listening?” prompts), reducing notifications, hiding “likes” to teen-posted video content, and eliminating nighttime prompts. Observing that other viewers have offered positive reactions to videos can increase the harm that comes from negative content or the benefit that comes from prosocial content.⁷⁴ In particular, exposure to the types of potentially harmful content indicated above should not be recommended by algorithms. This includes algorithms leading to questionable advertising, information, and influencers. Conversely, algorithms designed to promote diverse perspectives, featuring and promoting characters from various backgrounds and viewpoints, can empower youth and be beneficial for their well-being.

Adolescent total time viewing video content should be carefully considered.

Excessive time viewing video content is related to later problems across biological, psychological, and sociological health, including, but not limited to poorer sleep,⁷⁵ headaches,⁷⁶ eye strain,⁷⁷ irritability,⁷⁸ distractibility,⁷⁹ psychological distress (e.g., loneliness, depression, withdrawal, anxiety, attention problems, aggression), and risk of Gaming Disorder, Internet Use Disorder, and/or Problematic Interactive Media Use Disorder.^{80,81} Moreover, excessive screen time contributes to lost opportunities in other activities that are critical for adolescent development, including sleep,⁷⁵ physical exercise, exploration of and engagement with hobbies, interests, and talents, and in-person social interactions. More must be done by video hosting platforms, and caretakers to discourage excessive screen time, including platforms' periodic examination of engagement-prolonging design features to ensure they are enhancing rather than harming development.

Teach adolescents about the risks introduced by AI-content generators.

Research on the effects of AI-generated content is emerging, yet clearly AI is quickly transforming the digital world, bringing both new opportunities and significant challenges for adolescents.⁸² Adolescents can learn how to question the content and images they see given how easy it has become to generate false, damaging, or biased information online, including deceptive images and video content.

AI-generated images make idealized and unattainable body standards even more common. These AI-created images often show unattainable body shapes and features that are not real, contributing to harmful social comparisons. Research shows that even before the rise of AI, many young women felt pressure to post highly sexualized images online to get attention and validation.^{36, 37, 83} Now, with AI tools readily available, adolescents can manipulate their own images to reflect these idealized, often unachievable body standards, further distorting their sense of self. These tools can also be used to create deep fakes and videos depicting others inappropriately that can also be used in cyber-aggressive attacks.

Emerging concerns regarding AI-generated content also include the proliferation of misinformation given that most AI platforms do not consistently prioritize verified, high quality information.^{82, 84} Moreover, AI-generated content can increase the perpetuation of biases given that the vast majority of information available to guide it is scraped from already existing internet content which has been created by, and depicts, majority populations. Prior to integration of these tools into teen accounts, platforms should take steps to ensure they are safe and the most harmful uses are restricted, while also ensuring that AI-generated or manipulated content is identifiable.

Limit exposure to advertisements and encourage ad-free content on platforms used by adolescents.

Adolescents are vulnerable to the influence of advertisements, particularly on digital platforms where ads are targeted to their interests.⁸⁵ Research shows that advertising, especially for material goods and unhealthy products, contributes to unhealthy consumption patterns.⁸⁶ For example, adolescents who frequently see advertisements for unhealthy food are more likely



to engage with that content and make poor dietary choices.^{87,88}

This is especially concerning as video content has increasingly highlighted individualistic and materialistic values (e.g., fame, materialism) for the past 50 years, while during this same time, community values (e.g., a sense of community/belonging, shared tradition, benevolence) has gradually been depicted less frequently.⁸⁹ Research has shown that viewing this video content has been linked with teens' subsequent values.^{90,91}

To create healthier media environments for adolescents, platforms designed for youth should consider removing advertisements and restricting data collected from young users that is used for advertising purposes.

Parents and policymakers should collaborate to reduce exposure to advertising that promotes materialism and unhealthy behaviors. Developing algorithms that minimize the visibility of advertisements in adolescent-targeted content can also be a valuable tool in creating a more positive, ad-free digital experience for young viewers. Parents should also speak with their teens about the undue influence of advertising so that they are aware of the potential impact on their behavior.

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