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Supporting young people through social media changes

Families can be a crucial source of support as children adjust to the new rules around social media and the impact this may have on feelings of distress as access to apps ends for people under 16.

Australian Clinical Psychology Association President Dr Erika Penney said this is a transition time for children and some may experience intense emotions or reactions as the changes take effect.

“Research has highlighted concerns about social media use and its impact on mental health for a number of young people, yet losing access to these platforms may feel really overwhelming for a young person and parents will be on the frontline responding to any heightened emotions and restoring a sense of offline connection,” Dr Penney said.

“I’d really encourage parents to validate any feelings their children might have and maybe even join them for a social media detox over the holidays. Even for children who may have had negative experiences on social media, the loss of an account may still trigger a sense of loss. Especially, if they’ve invested time curating a profile with images and points of connection with others.

“While many parents may be understandably delighted by the new rules it’s important that through the transition they really offer their children some understanding and empathy.”

Top tips for families to help support their kids:

1. Validate feelings – acknowledge distress over losing networks and offer to talk.
2. Discuss mental health supports – teens may use social media for mental health help. Ask teens if they were using social media for mental health supports and share alternative resources.
3. Encourage & maintain connection – explore group chats, email, games, video calls, or in-person meetups. Re-establishing in-person routines including playdates, sport, community events and shared meals can help reverse feelings of isolation.

Dr Penney said for parents the changes may be welcome but also overwhelming with families already generally juggling multiple priorities and concerns. Families should rest assured that these rules do not impose penalties on them or their children; compliance is the responsibility of social media companies.

“There’s no doubt these changes are going to need some time and energy investment from parents as they support kids through the transition. I’d encourage mums and dads to take a step back from some of their routine chores and invest that time in small, regular moments of offline connection to really make a meaningful difference with their children,” Dr Penney said.

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