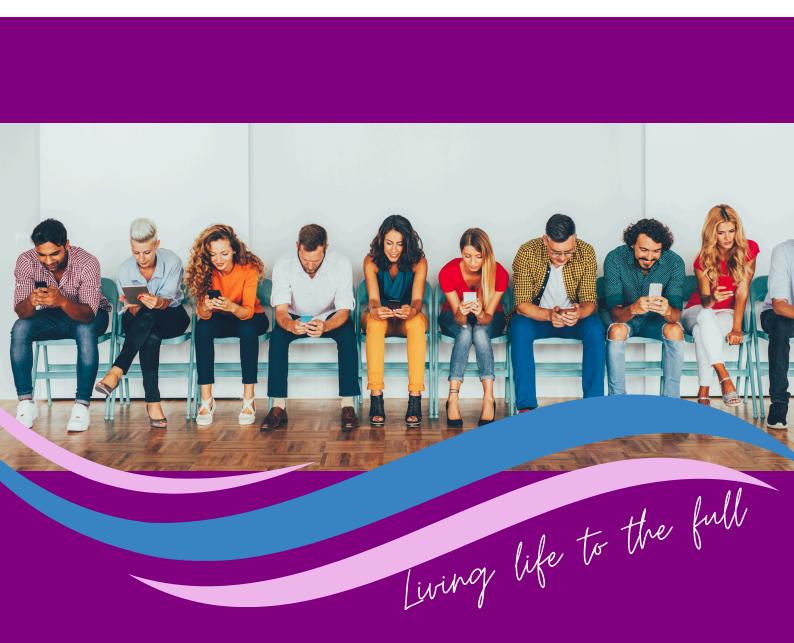# An Introduction to
Faithful Grandparenting

A Virtual World
(Young People & Social Media)
Written with Support from the Children & Youth Department

This information provides straightforward guidance on supporting and understanding the ways in which social media influences the lives and perspectives of young people

Living life to the full

We've already explored how the use of the phrase 'When I was your age' is unhelpful for children and young people today. When it comes to the online world – this is even more so the case, as even the youngest parents today find it challenging to keep up with what's going on in the world of technology!

Social media and online gaming has become an integral part of the lives of our grandchildren. Research shows that over half of 5–15 year olds spend the majority of their time online. With numbers almost reaching 90% for 12–15 year olds, it's no surprise that teenagers are heavy users of social media.

In a recent survey by the [1]BBC in Wales, children as young as 7 and 8 are using social media regularly. Responses from more than 32,000 children, aged seven to 11, suggested almost half used social media sites or apps a few times a week or every day. For children and young people today, social media is totally integrated into their daily lives. They live in both worlds – offline and online. Social media plays a crucial role in maintaining relationships with family and friends. Young people can continue to socialise and feel connected with their loved ones – anytime and anywhere.

Social media is also used to make new connections. With so many online communities available, young people can meet and interact with like-minded people who share common interests, goals, and attitudes. Young people are trying to find where they fit in the world. They're figuring out who they are and how they relate to their friends and peers. They can use social media as an outlet for creativity and self-expression.

Through social media, young people can keep up to date with and share the latest news, topics they are interested in and develop skills – beyond what's taught in school. Social media can help to broaden perspectives and expose users to different viewpoints and ideas – sometimes offering opportunities to engage in dialogue with others.

But social media can also lead to an unhealthy culture of comparison. Most of us are guilty of comparing ourselves with others and wanting to fit in. But for young people establishing their identities in the world, looking at their own lives and constantly feeling that 'they're not good enough' can have particularly damaging effects on their self-esteem.

[1] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cl4rvm78py6o

Online feeds are filled with a constant stream of 'noise'. Filters provide people with ways to create 'perfect photos and videos' which can present 'idealised' body images and lifestyles. When children and young people try to compare themselves with all this, it can have a devastating effect on how they feel about themselves.

It probably goes without saying, but social media can also provide a space for bullying (known as cyberbullying) which can even cross over into the real world, affecting relationships in real life too. Bullying can do significant harm to the emotional wellbeing of a child or young person, with lasting effects carried through to adulthood. Unlike other forms of bullying, cyberbullying can take place around the clock. The anonymity which the online world presents allow those who wish to cause young people harm to create malicious content without fear of getting caught or punished. However, many social media sites have published clear messaging on bullying, and online abuse is a criminal offence.

Social media can also be demanding. There's so much content to consume! In 2021, TikTok was the most used social media platform, with UK children spending an average of 97 minutes per day on the app. Slightly less time was spent on Snapchat and Instagram, which saw daily use at 82 and 34 minutes, respectively.

Social media sites are designed to keep users coming back. Many utilise infinite scrolling, where more and more content appears as you scroll. This means that you never quite reach the bottom of your feed and never get that cue to stop. When we have positive social interactions, our brain releases a chemical messenger – dopamine. This release makes us feel good. Social media sites exploit this, by sending us notifications for every like or share. Our brains subconsciously register these as rewards, which drives our urge to keep checking social media regularly. Spending more time on social media than is healthy can lead to a lack of sleep or leaving young people no time to focus on anything else, such as schoolwork, sports, hobbies or face-to-face interactions with their friends and family.

There is little doubt that social media platforms will continue to grow. Social media has changed the way we all live and interact with one another. But it's not all bad. We can play a part in helping our grandchildren find ways to use social media positively. We live in a rapidly-changing age where we can communicate with our grandchildren in so many positive ways, including video chat, text messaging, and social media. So get involved – talk to your grandchildren about the Virtual World.

Here are some DOs and DONTs to bear in mind:

DO: Celebrate their achievements

Your grandchildren are doing amazing things every day! Sharing their accomplishments – whether they've just won a football game, passed an exam or test, or showcased their artwork – can be an excellent way to express your pride. However, you may want to ask their permission first. A little respect for their digital space can go a long way!

DO: Show genuine interest in their social media posts

A comment from you can mean the world to your grandkids. Show interest in what they share on social media, whether a new hobby, a selfie, or even their latest drawing. Your positive words of encouragement can boost their self-esteem and show them that you're keeping up with their lives.

Whilst that funny little photograph of a baby with mashed potato on their face might seem adorable to you, your grandchildren might not appreciate it being posted online for everyone to see. Try to resist the urge to post potentially embarrassing content publicly. Save those things for family gatherings, where you can all laugh together.

DON'T post embarrassing photos or stories

DON'T: Over-comment on posts or intrude on conversations

While engaging with your grandchildren's online content is good, avoid overdoing it. Posting too many comments, especially on conversations between friends, might feel intrusive. Ne sensitive and try to find a good balance.

DO share your own experiences online

Your grandkids are interested in your life too! Sharing your experiences, hobbies, or memories can lead to wonderful online conversations and deepen your relationship.

DON'T: Share personal information

Avoid sharing intimate details about your grandchildren, such as the name of their school, their street name, or other sensitive information. Always respect their privacy and remember that once something is online, it's there for good.

DO: Try to keep up with digital trends

Every now and then, talk with your grandchildren to help you to understand and engage with the digital trends they're interested in, be it a new social media challenge, a popular song, or a trending meme. They may even ask you to join in with them!

DO: Communicate with them in other ways

While social media is an excellent tool for staying connected, nothing can replace a phone call, a video chat, or a face-to-face conversation. Make sure to diversify your interactions with your grandchildren and don't rely solely on social media.

DO: Respect boundaries

Your grandchildren may have certain boundaries about what they're comfortable with you seeing or commenting on. If they ask you not to comment on specific posts or to refrain from adding their friends to your social media profiles, be sure to respect their wishes.

DON'T Tag without permission

In the world of social media, tagging someone in a photo, video or article links them (and their friends) directly to that post. In an online world it also suggests that they're interested in the content. It's always wise to ask permission before tagging people, as they might not want to be associated with certain content, even if it seems harmless to you.

DO: Use emojis and GIFs sparingly

While emojis and GIFs can add fun to your interactions, using them too much can be overwhelming. A smiley face or a thumbs-up is usually enough to convey your emotions 😛

DON'T: Believe everything you see online

The Internet is full of misinformation and scams, so if you see a post that seems outrageous or a message that appears suspicious, take it with a grain of salt! Be sure to check the source's reliability and verify information before trusting the content or sharing it.

DO: Set your privacy settings

Ensure your social media privacy settings are properly adjusted to maintain your own safety online. All social media platforms have settings which allow you to control who can see your posts, who can tag you, and who can send you messages.

DON'T: Post without thinking it through

It probably goes without saying, but it's easy to post something online without giving it much thought. Always take a moment to consider what you're saying before you post! Could your comments be misunderstood by your grandchildren or your family and friends – and even strangers? When in doubt, don't comment.

Being a part of your grandchildren's social media world is a privilege. Respecting boundaries, encouraging safe practices, and sharing in their joy helps you stay connected to them ways that they will appreciate and welcome.

So – get online and get involved!

For more information and top tips:
https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Internet-Matters-Tips-Online-Safety-for-Grandparents.pdf

For more detailed information on the Virtual World:
https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/social-media/

Quote:

'There is a place for social media in our children's lives. The important thing is for our children to have the skills to question what they think they see, stay positive, have downtime.'

Sue Rogers (Service Development Manager – Mental Health, NSPCC)

Activity for You & Your Grandchild
'Let's talk about Social Media

- Take some time together with your grandchildren to think about whether or not social media is a helpful or a hurtful influence. Talk to your grandchild and take time to listen carefully to what they have to say:

- Ask what your grandchild enjoys about social media. What type of accounts do they follow? What interests them the most? What do they post about?

- Ask them how they feel about getting 'likes' on their posts and what this means for them.

- Talk about the differences between admiration and jealousy. This might help them see online influencers as role models, rather than people to compare themselves to.

- Discuss how what's posted online doesn't always reflect real life. Ask them where this is most obvious. Can they tell the difference?

- Ask them if they know when photos on social media have been created with filters. How easy is it to tell? Why might someone use a filter? Does it make any difference?