

UWHealth: UW study: Teens, young adults benefit from doctor advice about safe social media use

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MADISON, Wis. – Teens and young adults who received a brief social media counseling session during a health care visit remembered the lessons and reported safer online behavior six months later, according to a large new study from the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

The study involved nearly 11,000 young people ages 14 to 25 and was published in the [Journal of Adolescent Health](#).

This represents the first report involving pediatric health care providers delivering a social media intervention to adolescent patients, according to Dr. Megan Moreno, professor of pediatrics, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health and adolescent health expert, UW Health Kids.

“This is the first evidence that social media counseling can be delivered quickly and effectively,” said Moreno, who is also the leader of the Social Media and Adolescent Health Research Team, or SMAHRT. “It also addressed an important educational need for pediatricians.”

In 2010 when the study began, pediatricians were asking for guidance on how to talk with patients about social media use. One survey of pediatric residents found that only 5% felt they had adequate training on the topic, according to Moreno.

Her group created a resource for providers detailing best practices, and they also helped providers practice advising patients by playing the role of patients in staged phone calls, then providing feedback and coaching to the providers in real

time.

The social media counseling was one arm of a larger study sponsored by the American Academy of Pediatrics, also called the AAP. Youth sorted to one arm of the study received counseling on [quitting smoking](#), while the “active control group” received a social media intervention.

The study took place at 120 primary care clinics nationwide and involved 249 primary care providers, of which 88% were pediatricians and 12% were nurse practitioners or physician assistants.

Of the patients who received social media counseling, 1,937 were selected for follow up and 992 were interviewed six months after the intervention. Patients recalled the counseling and reported that care providers who had received the social media counseling intervention were more likely to have counseled them on social media use.

Youth who received counseling on social media were twice as likely to report a decrease in risky behaviors, such as “friending” strangers online. They were also more likely to report discussing social media use with parents and other caregivers than youths whose providers did not receive the training, according to Moreno.

“I think there was a lot of skepticism around whether a five-minute conversation with a pediatrician would have much effect,” she said. “The answer was, ‘Yes, absolutely.’ A pediatrician isn’t going to be able to go into great detail, but if our intervention got kids to talk to their parents, that is great.”

Since the study was launched, the AAP has created a [family media toolkit](#) that helps families talk about social media safety and helps set up a plan for media use. Providers can guide families to that resource by saying, “You and your family need to have a conversation and make some rules,” according to Moreno.

“Given the U.S. surgeon general’s warning that social media use threatens the mental health of young people, this study shows that providers can play a role in keeping social media use safe,” she said.