



# Teen Stress, Family Support, and Social Media Use in the Whole Family Approach

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The Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs (WRI) at Rutgers University - Camden produces and highlights research leading to sound public policy and practice, and with that as a foundation, aims to convene and engage stakeholders in making the connections across research, policy, and practice in support of Southern New Jersey residents. From 2013 to 2022, WRI has conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the Pascale Sykes Foundation's Whole Family Approach initiative across 12 nonprofit collaboratives in Southern New Jersey. The Whole Family Approach is a preventative, family-led strategy that provides adults and children tools to set, plan for, and achieve goals together. Collaborating agencies work together with families with two adult caregivers to develop long- and short-term goals to thrive. WRI's evaluation of the Whole Family Approach includes:

- A longitudinal, quasi-experimental evaluation of families' changes in forming healthy relationships, child wellbeing, and financial stability.
- A process evaluation to understand how the Whole Family Approach was implemented across collaboratives, including observations, interviews, focus groups, and document review.
- Multiple focused evaluations that examine the impact of the Whole Family Approach in areas of interest including student social, emotional, and behavioral growth, service model delivery, family-community partner relationship development, and the cultural responsiveness of the Whole Family Approach.

**This short report focuses on the role of the Whole Family Approach in addressing teen stress. Adolescence is a period of rapid physical, psychological, and social changes in one's life. Scientists often refer to adolescence as a period of vulnerability and opportunity, because behaviors and experiences during this crucial developmental phase may produce long-lasting outcomes and further shape teens' life trajectories (Burnett Heyes & Hiu, 2015; Christie & Viner, 2005; Gomes et al., 2016). Youth also develop in the context of a sociocultural environment, which provides them with either protective factors or risk factors (Rew & Horner, 2003).**

For example, research continuously shows that stress is a potent risk factor among teenagers, which affects all aspects of their well-being, including a higher probability of engaging in health-risk behaviors, such as substance use, unprotected sex, and violence (Christie & Viner, 2005; Copeland-Linder et al., 2010; Rew & Horner, 2003). Low socioeconomic status, family problems, and disadvantaged neighborhoods are among the strongest stressors for teenagers, which puts them at risk for negative social, behavioral, and health outcomes (Rew & Horner, 2003).

On the contrary, family relationships are one of the major determinants of positive youth development. There is abundant evidence that caring and supportive relationships within the family are conducive to teens' healthy and successful development, even in the face of adversity, such as stress and poverty (Mistry et al., 2009; Rew & Horner, 2003). Additionally, high expectations, defined as the consistent communication that the teen can succeed in their goals, are considered an essential characteristic of the

caring relationship and a strong contributing factor to resilience (Dietsch et al., 2009).

Lastly, social media makes up a significant proportion of the youth environment as they greatly rely on it for information, entertainment, and communication (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). While social media use provides a number of benefits to teens, such as greater access to information and space for self-expression, connection, and networking, it can also induce some adverse outcomes (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Vannucci et al., 2020). For example, disrupted sleep, poor self-esteem, low perception of well-being, depression, and anxiety symptoms are among the most common associations with excessive social media use among youth (Viner et al., 2019; Woods & Scott, 2016). At the same time, for some, it also may pose a risk for traumatizing experiences including violence. (Craig et al., 2020; David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Martínez-Ferrer et al., 2018).

The main goals of successful prevention programs aimed at supporting positive youth development are to foster the protective aspects and reduce the risks by building on the strengths and resources of the child and family (Resnick, 2000). Therefore, the aim of the present project was to better understand the interconnection between stress, family relationships, and social media use among teenagers to further suggest directions for prevention efforts.

## **METHOD**

We selected data collected from March 2018 through September 2021 that pertained to stress, family relationships, and attitudes toward social media use among the teenagers who received the Whole Family Approach from the collaboratives. Specifically, we analyzed responses to scales designed to assess teenagers' perceived stress (Cohen, 1998), resilience (Constantine & Benard,

2001), and perceived social support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988), and experiences during social media use. To determine whether there were any associations among these aspects of the teenagers' lives, we performed a series of correlation analyses for both the total scales and individual scale items. A correlation indicates the strength of a relationship between two variables (e.g. stress, resilience, internet use), presented in a number ( $r$ ) ranging from 0 to 1. The closer the number is to 1, the stronger the relationship; that is, the more likely it is that a variable (e.g. stress) will change in accordance with the other variable (e.g. internet use). It is important to state that a high correlation does not indicate that one variable causes the other variable, but merely that one variable predicts a change in the other and vice versa. Next to the correlation ( $r$ ) values, we also report the values for statistical significance ( $p$ ). The lower the  $p$  value, the less likely it is that a relationship (e.g. a correlation) is happening by chance. The standard for significance for evaluation purposes is  $p = .1$ ; that is,  $p$  values lower than .1 indicate that a correlation, in this case, is likely happening due to the impact of the intervention rather than by coincidence.

In order to ascertain that the data would represent an equivalent point in the intervention for all participants, we selected the survey period that yielded the highest participation. That is, we selected the responses from participants who were at the 18-month mark of their engagement with the Whole Family Approach. This yielded data from a total of 12 teenage participants. Based on the power coefficient of 0.80, the sample size was sufficient to detect strong correlations (0.70 and above) as statistically significant.

## RESULTS

### STRESS & FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Teenagers' stress was related to aspects of family relationships, such as caring relationships, support, and high expectations at the 18-month follow-up. The strongest finding revealed that teenagers who indicated that they could talk about their problems with their family reported significantly less stress ( $r_s = -.702, p = .011$ ). Other results did not reach statistical significance (considered  $p < 0.05$ ), but they pointed towards a similar trend. Those teenagers who reported that their family tries to help them ( $r_s = -.540, p = .07$ ) and that they have a caregiver who believes in their success ( $r_s = -.505, p = .094$ ) also reported less stress.

### STRESS & SOCIAL MEDIA USE

There was a strong relationship between stress and teenagers' reports on social media use at the 18-month follow-up. More specifically, teenagers who reported higher stress also reported that their social media use could result in a fight due to what had happened online ( $r_s = .581, p < .05$ ). Teenagers who reported a high possibility of a fight due to their online activities also indicated significantly less confidence in their ability to handle personal problems ( $r_s = .602, p = .038$ ).

### FAMILY RELATIONSHIP & SOCIAL MEDIA USE

There was a series of associations between family relationships and teenagers' statements on social media use at the 18-month follow-up. There was a strong, significant trend in which teenagers who reported more caring relationships within the family (e.g., "In my home, there is a parent or some other adult who notices when I am upset") also indicated that their using social media would not make them feel better about themselves necessarily ( $r_s = -.799, p = .002$ ). Although not at a significant level, these teenagers also did not express that social media would increase their number of friends ( $r_s = -.523, p = .081$ ) or their level of closeness to existing friends ( $r_s = -.504, p = .095$ ). Teens who indicated more caring relationships in the family also reported less often

they would feel nervous going to school because of their online activity ( $r_s = .541, p = .069$ ) or that their social media use could result in a fight ( $r_s = -.560, p = .058$ ).

There was a similar pattern of associations between supportive family relationships and social media use among teenagers. For example, teenagers who reported that they have supportive relationships within the family (e.g., "I get the emotional help and support I need from my family"; "I can talk about my problems with my family") and those who have an adult at home who has high expectations for them, were significantly and strongly less likely to say that their social media use could result in a fight ( $r_s = -.798, p = .001$ ;  $r_s = -.610, p = .035$ , respectively). Though not significantly, supportive relationships at the home also seemed to point to teenagers relying less on social media use to feel better about themselves ( $r_s = -.525, p = .079$ ) and feeling less anxiety around going to school following social media use ( $r_s = -.548, p = .065$ ).

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The results of this study reveal the associations between stress, family relationships, and social media use among teenagers whose families received services based on the Pascale Sykes Foundation's Whole Family Approach. Teenagers who reported caring and supportive relationships, as well as high expectation messages within the family, indicated significantly lower stress and lower probability of certain negative experiences due to their social media use. Additionally, those who reported caring and supportive relationships within the family expressed less reliance on social media use for developing a positive self-image, acquiring friends, and feeling closer with their friends. In turn, according to the teens' reports, higher perceived stress appeared strongly related to a higher probability of fighting due to online activity. Further, a higher likelihood of fighting due to online activities was associated with lower confidence in the ability to handle personal problems.

Therefore, the results of this study suggest that promoting caring and supportive relationships as well as high expectations within the family of the teenagers may protect teenagers against blows to their self-image, bolster confidence in their abilities to resolve problems, and reduce the likelihood of potentially negative social experiences. Given the direct association between family relationships,

stress, and social media use, prevention efforts that enhance caring and supportive communication between the caregivers and teens and messages acknowledging teens' ability to succeed can collectively promote positive development among youth.

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