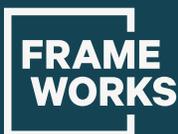# Moving from Crisis Toward Opportunity

Framing Social Media and Youth Mental Health

FRAME WORKS

A FrameWorks Institute Toolkit

Contents

Introduction

In recent years, discussions about childhood and adolescent wellbeing have increasingly centered on the role of social media. Children are encountering this technology at younger ages, while young people are exploring an ever-increasing number of platforms. Parents and caregivers, meanwhile, are under constant pressure to either adapt to or resist this new technology, often leaving them feeling overwhelmed and defensive in response.

Concerns about the impacts of new media technology on health and development are not new; crisis-based narratives about vulnerable children and media arose with the introduction of radio, television, video games, and computers. And as in the past, the assumption is that responsibility for controlling and monitoring use of new technology falls entirely on parents. Supports for families, shared responsibility, and the potential opportunities social media holds for children and young people's healthy development are sidelined in these narratives.

For instance, the current crisis-based narrative around social media and youth mental health paints adolescence as a period of danger and vulnerability, and technology use as a looming catastrophe. Media headlines and public debates often emphasize alarming statistics and tragic stories instead of explanations and solutions. This narrative reinforces harmful stereotypes of adolescents as reckless or vulnerable, and it fuels fatalism—leaving audiences feeling overwhelmed and powerless to act. By focusing almost exclusively on risk, the crisis narrative obscures the developmental opportunities of adolescence and the ways well-designed social media platforms, supportive relationships and environments, and collective action can promote wellbeing.

This playbook provides practical, research-based guidance for shifting the conversation about social media and adolescent mental health (for the purposes of this guide, adolescence refers to around age 10 to age 25). It draws on FrameWorks' in-depth and ongoing framing research on how advocates, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers can move away from unproductive crisis narratives and instead use framing strategies that highlight opportunity, agency, and collective responsibility. It also offers specific guidance for speaking to parents in ways that avoid blame and shame and instead emphasize their expertise and partnership with practitioners.

An important note: While this framing guide and mini-toolkit provides recommendations, examples, and tips on how to frame communications about social media use for your audiences, it does not provide or recommend specific solutions or supports. As a communicator in this field, you know what needs to happen to better support young people's healthy social media use. The recommendations here are about how to *talk more effectively* about those solutions. (For information about effective solutions, see the American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP] Center for Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health's webpage.)

WHAT IS FRAMING?

Framing strategies are ways of packaging and making sense of information. They involve choices about how an issue is presented—what is and isn't emphasized, how it is explained, what connections are made, and which commitments are invoked. The frames we use shape how people make sense of and respond to what we're communicating. They affect people's understanding of an issue and their attitudes about who is responsible and whether a problem can be solved. The frames we use also can shift people's support toward more effective solutions.

Before You Start
Know Your Mindsets

Cultural mindsets (or mindsets, for short) are deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how we understand the world and how we make decisions. Four top-of-mind problematic mindsets are cued by the current crisis framing around social media and youth mental health.

- **Adolescence as Danger/Risk:** This is the assumption that adolescence is a dangerous stage of life and that young people are especially vulnerable to threats like drugs and peer pressure. This leads people to focus mainly on shielding young people from risks rather than supporting their growth.

- **Family Bubble:** This is the assumption that families, specifically parents, are solely responsible for their children's outcomes. When thinking about adolescents, people see this bubble as "perforated" by the outside world but still put the onus for wellbeing exclusively on parents.

- **Threat of Modernity:** This is the perception that modern life itself—especially technology, social media, and changes in family or community structure—poses inevitable threats to adolescents. This reinforces the sense that problems are beyond our control.

- **Damage Done Is Damage Done:** This is the fatalistic assumption that negative experiences and choices during adolescence cause permanent harm that cannot be undone, making it harder for people to see adolescence as a period of resilience and opportunity for positive change.

Knowing these unhelpful mindsets helps you avoid accidentally reinforcing the crisis narrative. Always ask yourself: Are the choices I am making cuing these mindsets? What can I do instead that will steer clear of these mindsets and move my audience in a more collective and solutions-focused direction?

From Crisis to Opportunity in Five Moves

There are five central components of an effective strategy for talking about social media and youth mental health:

1. **Move from Crisis Messaging to Opportunities**
   Talk about social media as a tool with both risks *and* opportunities, and emphasize how solutions are within reach when we redesign platforms with children and youth in mind and create stronger supports from a wider range of players.

2. **Make it Collective**
   Position youth mental health and social media use as a public issue that we all have responsibility for—not just individual families.

3. **Focus on Healthy Development**
   Talk about adolescence as a period of discovery, growth, and exploration—and the role social media plays in healthy development when it is designed for adolescents.

4. **Lay Out Cause and Effect**
   Explain how some design choices and usage can cause harm—and how others can help adolescents' healthy development.

5. **Always Strive to Provide Solutions and Highlight Young People's Agency**
   Show that effective and equitable approaches are often within reach and young people are part of the solution.

The components of this framing strategy should be integrated across all your communications, but you should also consider the format, outlet, and audience for each communication. Some components may be more appropriate or easier to use in different contexts or with different audiences. Flexibility is key to effective framing.

1. Move from Crisis to Opportunity

Crisis framing can easily backfire. It paralyzes action because people think a problem can't be solved, even if the crisis framing raises short-term awareness. It also cues unproductive thinking about adolescence as inherently risky and vulnerable. Don't repeat the crisis narrative in order to refute it. Instead, push back against fatalism and stigma by starting with adolescence as a period of opportunity, and illustrate how that opportunity happens.

Crisis	Opportunity
"Social media is causing the youth mental health crisis and destroying a generation of young people."	*"When we're adolescents, we need opportunities to discover. Social media, like any tool, can carry benefits and risks. We can support young people's mental health while giving them opportunities to discover who they are with their development in mind."*
	"In adolescence, strong mental health requires opportunities to learn, explore, and connect in new ways. We need to maximize the benefits and reduce risks for young people's wellbeing."
	"Any technology can present both risks and benefits depending how it is designed. Social media is no different. When social media is designed with healthy development in mind, youth can connect, learn, and thrive."

- Tip: Framing with **Opportunity** does not mean avoiding discussion of the risks and harms of social media. Try not to cue unhelpful mindsets by first repeating the arguments you want to refute. Then find the balance between opportunity framing and clear explanations about potential risk and harm.

- Tip: Demonstrate how we support growth and opportunities by including clear examples of effective designs and ways to support healthy use.

- Tip: Before using the term "adolescence," define it as the period of life between ages 10 to 25, and offer age ranges for early, middle, and late adolescence.

2. Make It Collective

Instead of placing the burden of responsibility solely on parents, frame youth mental health and social media use as a shared public issue. Stress that we all—practitioners, policymakers, communities, and social media companies—have a responsibility for shaping healthier digital environments, and we all benefit when we do.

Crisis	Collective
"Parents need to do a better job monitoring and limiting their teens' screen time."	*"Relationships play a central role in social media use and youth mental health. When young people have strong, supportive relationships both offline and online, they are more likely to use social media in healthy ways."*
	"Healthy digital spaces are a shared responsibility. Practitioners, policymakers, and communities all play a role in supporting healthy social media use and shaping environments where young people can thrive. And social media companies have a responsibility for making sure healthy development is at the center of their designs."
	"Making sure online spaces support, rather than undermine, children and young people's wellbeing is something we all care about. We can make that happen when we work together and hold social media companies accountable for those spaces."

- Tip: Whenever possible, use "we/our" language instead of "they/them" to avoid othering.
- Tip: Name all the actors who have a role to play wherever and whenever it makes sense.
- Tip: Making responsibility collective does not mean you should avoid talking about parents or offering parents, practitioners, or policymakers specific solutions that match their roles.

3. Focus on Healthy Development

Position adolescence as a period of discovery, growth, and exploration. Use metaphors of navigation, experimentation, and exploration to describe how adolescents learn, test boundaries, and build identities. Show that when designed with these needs in mind, social media can play a constructive role in this developmental journey.

Crisis	Healthy Development
"Teenagers are reckless online and need to be protected from themselves."	*"Adolescence is a stage of discovery when we are experimenting with ideas, finding our sense of purpose, and making meaningful connections. Social media can be a tool for discovery when it's designed to promote positive growth."*
	"Adolescents are navigating new terrains. Social media should act as equipment for the journey, helping them learn, connect, and find their path."
	"Feeling included and connected is critical to young people's mental health. Online communities can provide affirmation, support, and understanding, helping adolescents feel less isolated and fostering a sense of belonging."

- ■ Tip: Talk about how parents and others can support healthy media use starting from an early age, while emphasizing its potential role in healthy adolescent development using the language of discovery and exploration. (See AAP's Early Childhood Development and Screen Time Toolkit for more information.)

4. Lay Out Cause and Effect

Explain how digital design choices affect child and adolescent wellbeing. Clear cause-and-effect explanations help people understand how outcomes are shaped by *systems*, not just by individual choices. Comparing and contrasting different design choices and their effects on mental health have additional explanatory power.

Crisis	Cause + Effect
"Social media use only makes teens anxious and depressed."	*"Design matters—small changes in how social media platforms work can either undermine or support youth mental health."*
	"When social media platforms use features that encourage endless scrolling, they can interfere with sleep, which in turn affects mood and wellbeing. But features that promote authentic connection and belonging can support positive growth and identity development."
	"Social media platforms can and should be designed to prioritize accurate, diverse, and age-appropriate content that support learning and healthy development. These should replace algorithms that push sensational content that can increase risks for anxiety."

- Tip: Always add a solution to the cause + effect model so your audience knows how to address the problem and avoid fatalistic thinking.

5. Provide Solutions and Highlight Young People's Agency

Balance urgency with efficacy by emphasizing clear, concrete, and collective solutions. Make sure descriptions avoid jargon. At the same time, position adolescents as problem-solvers who can and should be active partners in creating solutions and designing better systems.

Crisis	Solution
"Social media is harming younger teens, and the only way to address this is to ban access until they are older."	*"Design changes to social media—like reducing public 'like' counts or building in reminders to get more sleep—can ease pressures on younger users and support healthier use. Better policies and accountability will help us achieve that."*
	"Features that promote authentic connection and belonging can reduce loneliness and support identity development. When we include young people's perspectives in social media design, we can build online environments that strengthen mental health for everyone."
	"Young people are active problem-solvers. When their experiences guide how platforms are designed and how policies are shaped, we get systems that reflect their needs and foster healthier development."

■ Tip: Tailor effective solutions to your audiences and their needs, whether they are individual, community-based, or policy solutions. Connect these back to systemic solutions as appropriate to expand audiences' understanding that system change is critical and there are ways to achieve it.

Conclusion

The current framing around social media and youth mental health may inadvertently be causing more harm than good. This playbook is designed to help communicators reframe the conversation about social media and youth mental health by shifting the narrative from crisis to opportunity, individual blame to collective solutions, and victimhood to agency. This new framing strategy can build public will for better policies, increased corporate accountability, and stronger supports for parents and communities that allow all adolescents to thrive.

Tools In Your Framing Toolbox

Instead of this... Try this...

Instead of...	Try...
Crisis-only framing	Balanced opportunities + risk framing
Mental health problems	Mental health and wellbeing
Parents' sole responsibility	Collective responsibility for young people
Practitioners as sole authority	Parents and practitioners as partners
Youth as passive victims	Youth as agents and problem-solvers
Social media as inevitably bad	Social media as a tool that can be designed for good
Problems without solutions	Clear, concise solutions and calls to action

Quick Tips for Talking to Parents

This tip sheet offers six framing tips to support more productive conversations and communications about screens and mental health with parents.

1. **Take a Balanced Tone**
   Acknowledge feelings of confusion, overwhelm, and guilt many parents face, then offer solutions that seem reasonable and feasible. Stress there's no one-size-fits-all answer but there is reliable guidance to help families develop their own plans for social media use.

2. **Make it a Partnership**
   Don't treat parents just as learners but as partners in ensuring their children's wellbeing. Use "we," "us," "our," and "together" as often as possible.

3. **Avoid the Current Crisis-Driven Narrative**
   Don't repeat the drastic claims about social media and technology destroying children's wellbeing, even to refute it. Keep the focus on how families—in partnership with you, health care providers, and everyone who works with young people—can effectively support their children's wellbeing.

4. **Give Positive Examples**
   Talk about the ways social media can support wellbeing by helping young people discover their identities and sense of purpose when given age-appropriate opportunities to explore.

5. **Broaden Responsibility**
   Make it clear that parents aren't in this alone—health care providers, schools, policymakers, and social media designers all play roles in making sure screen use is helpful and not harmful.

6. **Bring Youth Themselves into the Conversation**
   Support young people's ownership and agency by discussing how to involve them in creating family media plans. When young people are in the room, actively engage them in that conversation.

Bridge and Pivot: Keeping Conversations on Track

If a conversation on social media and youth mental health is getting derailed by crisis messaging and unproductive mindsets, you can steer it back on track by following a simple three-step formula.

Step 1: Analyze

Figure out which problematic cultural mindsets are presented or are being cued. Remember, the most common mindsets cued by crisis framing around social media and youth mental health are the following:

- **Adolescence as Danger/Risk**: Adolescence is a vulnerable stage of life when we inevitably make risky decisions.

- **Family Bubble:** Families are solely responsible for children's outcomes.

- **Threat of Modernity:** Modern life is inevitably dangerous.

- **Damage Done Is Damage Done:** Negative experiences earlier in life and in adolescence cause irreparable harm.

Step 2: Bridge

When someone says something that might take the conversation off course, don't immediately restate or try to rebut the assumptions in their message. Acknowledge the person you are engaged in conversation with using a "bridge" between what they said and what you want to say. Use an innocuous bridging phrase to redirect the conversation toward your message, such as:

- "Another way to look at this is ..."

- "It's important to understand that ..."

- "What's really at stake here is ..."

- "The key thing to remember is ..."

- "Let me put that in perspective ..."

- "That speaks to a bigger point ..."

- "Let's focus on what we know can work ..."

Step 3: Pivot

Use the framing strategy to get the conversation back on track. See the table and scenarios below for examples of how to use different parts of the strategy to counter specific mindsets or crisis messages. If you need to acknowledge opposition framing, always do so after making your case.

When You Encounter This Mindset	Bridge with (example)	Then Pivot To Framing Strategies Like ...
Adolescence as Danger/Risk	"Another way to look at it is ..."	Opportunity framing; healthy development, discovery, and exploration; solutions and youth agency
Family Bubble	"The key thing to remember is ..."	Collective responsibility, healthy development and relationships, examples of other actors
Threat of Modernity	"Let's focus on what we know can work ..."	Cause and effect, platform redesign and social media companies' accountability, solutions and youth agency
Damage Done Is Damage Done	"It's important to understand that ..."	Healthy development, discovery and exploration, solutions and youth agency

Example Bridge and Pivot Scenarios

Scenario 1: Screen Time Addiction

Crisis Messenger: "Social media is addictive and dangerous and should be banned or restricted for young people under a certain age."

Framer Response: "Another way to look at this is that platforms often use design choices like endless scrolling and autoplay, that can keep kids online longer than they intended. When this excessive or impulsive use leads to negative consequences like not enough sleep or neglected schoolwork, it is called 'problematic media use,' and there are ways to address it without banning social media. We need to push social media platforms to incorporate design choices—like limiting late-night notifications—that protect wellbeing, while parents, schools, and after school activities reinforce healthy use. That way young people can still experience benefits like exploring their interests and forming important social connections."

Scenario 2: Mental Health Crisis

Crisis Messenger: "Social media is causing a mental health crisis and ruining an entire generation of kids."

Framer Response: "What's really at stake here is whether we make sure technology is always designed in ways that support children and young people's wellbeing and not undermine it. Social media can have both risks and benefits for young people's mental health. When we all work together—as communities, teachers, parents, and policymakers—we can make sure social media fosters connection, healthy identities, and overall wellbeing."

Scenario 3: Anxious Generation

Crisis Messenger: "*Anxious Generation* makes it clear that social media is making teenagers depressed, anxious, and suicidal. The science backs this up."

Framer Response: "It's important to understand that when we're adolescents we need opportunities to discover, explore, and connect with others. Decades of scientific research show that those things are critical for healthy development. Social media can provide opportunities for discovery and connection, but teenagers need to be supported to use it in healthy ways that strengthen their development. Everyone—parents, practitioners, policymakers, and the social media companies themselves—have to work together to make sure that happens. This is how …"

- Tip: Don't repeat the assertions in *Anxious Generation* or similar media or be forced to "pick a side." Directly correcting false, all-or-nothing, or oppositional information is called "myth-busting" and can backfire by inadvertently reinforcing people's previously held beliefs. Instead, stay on frame and move the conversation toward the key thing you want them to focus on—how we can work together to make social media use healthier for young people.

Scenario 4: Parental Failure

Crisis Messenger: "It's really up to parents to control their kids' screen use, and they are failing at it."

Framer Response: "The key thing to remember is that we all want to make sure young people are thriving. And while parents play a big role in guiding their children's digital lives, families can't do it alone. Healthy online spaces are a shared responsibility—health care providers, policymakers, communities, and social media companies themselves need to work together to make sure digital environments support young people's wellbeing."

Well-Framed Talking Points

These framed talking points are templates for conversations with your audiences. They can and should be adapted as needed. They should also always be paired with clear, concrete next steps so your audiences know specifically what you want them to support and can see themselves as part of the solution.

- The environments children and young people are in—including digital environments—shape their mental health outcomes. We all share responsibility for creating healthier digital spaces. This is how we work together …

- Adolescence is a laboratory of learning where we explore new ways of expressing ourselves and form new connections. Social media can be a useful tool in that lab when designed right. Here's what it should look like …

- Social media can provide important opportunities for learning and social connections but can also pose risks such as cyberbullying or sleep disruption. Our job is to maximize the benefits and reduce the harms by doing this …

- When it comes to social media and young people, there are two types of use: healthy and problematic. We can support healthy use and address problematic use by …

- Making sure social media use is helpful and not harmful for young people is a collective effort. Community solutions are one way to address problematic media use, and this is what they look like …

- Young people are key partners in shaping how digital technology evolves. Their voices and experiences should be front and center in the push to make digital spaces healthier. Here are ways to make that happen …

- Supportive, responsive relationships offline with parents, peers, and other caring adults can lead to healthier use online. We can support this by …
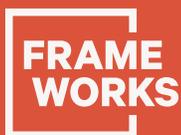
About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a non-profit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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