

Media Release

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“Youngest teens acting more like older teens”: Social media increasingly impacting younger Colorado youth, new statewide survey results show

While most Colorado youth are not using substances, the youngest adolescents are growing up faster and facing challenges earlier, according to a statewide survey of youth from the nonprofit Rise Above Colorado released today (Wednesday, Oct. 9, 2024).

Youth 12-13 years old are feeling less connected to their friends and school community, are spending more time on social media, and are more likely to have vaped and used marijuana, the survey shows.

Twelve- and 13-year-olds are spending an average of 2.4 hours per day on social media, up from 1.8 hours in 2020 and 2.0 hours in 2022. That puts social media use by the youngest teens at virtually the same level as 14–15-year-olds and only slightly behind those aged 16-17.

These young teens also see the risk of substance use as lower than in past years, especially when it comes to prescription medications that were not prescribed for them. A lower perception of risk is viewed as a warning sign of potential future use.

These declining perceptions of risk and increased use of substances are strongly correlated with a decline in young people’s sense of belonging and connection with others, like feeling supported by their friends and feeling connected to others at their school.

Feeling a sense of connection to others is a proven protective factor that reduces risky behavior among youth. In a concerning finding, the percentages of teens who feel supported by friends and welcomed and accepted at their school both declined since 2022 to 66% and 59% respectively.

The research shows social media use and teen mental health are strongly interrelated; youth who spend more than an hour on social media report more poor mental health days than the average. Increasing

social media use is also correlated with a perception that it is easier to access substances such as marijuana, prescription drugs, alcohol and vaping products.

The average age when teens first vape has declined from 14.7 in 2018 to 13.2 this year. A third of those who vaped reported that they first vaped before the age of 13. The vast majority said they vaped fruity, minty or sweet flavors.

A new question in 2024 asked about how often the teen respondents did not get a good night's sleep. Nearly a third reported one to two days a month of poor sleep and another third said they had three to five days of poor sleep. Nineteen percent reported that they did not get a good night's sleep six or more times per month. Increased social media usage was found to be correlated with increased sleep problems.

Despite this sobering data, the survey shows youth mental health is improving after the pandemic. Teen respondents reported an average of four days a month when their mental health was not good, meaning they experienced anxiety, stress, depression, or problems with emotions. That was down from an average of 5.6 days in 2020 and 5.0 days in 2022. They also were less likely to say that they live with someone who had a substance use disorder or mental health problems.

The online survey of 885 teens was conducted March through May of 2024 by HealthCare Research. It is the ninth edition of the survey, which is conducted every two years on behalf of Rise Above Colorado (www.riseaboveco.org), a statewide prevention organization that measurably impacts teen perceptions and attitudes about the risks of substance misuse to empower youth to make healthy choices.

Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser said: "It is encouraging to see mental health improvements among high school students, but the rising use of social media by pre-teens is deeply concerning. Research clearly shows that these platforms are contributing to mental health challenges, sleep deprivation, and even providing dangerous pathways for young people to access substances like fentanyl. We must prioritize meaningful opportunities for our kids to connect, both with each other and with their communities."

The survey also showed increasing conversations about the dangers of fentanyl and contaminated pills in schools and between parents and teens. Nine out of 10 teens continue to see risk in taking a pill acquired online or on the street and 84% said they would be likely to try to stop a friend from taking a pill because it might be laced with fentanyl.

“The latest survey results provide cause for concern, but also opportunities for youth-serving organizations to take action,” said Kent MacLennan, executive director of Rise Above Colorado. “We must continue to share the positive messages that most youth are not using substances and are passionate about engaging in extracurriculars, whether it’s sports, music, volunteering or the arts. It’s why Rise Above Colorado is promoting positive, healthy activities like our statewide sticker design contest and community-based murals.”

Comprehensive survey results are available at <https://riseaboveco.org/about.html#research>.

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About Rise Above Colorado

Rise Above Colorado is a statewide prevention organization that measurably impacts teen perceptions and attitudes about the risks of substance misuse to empower youth to make healthy connections, decisions, and change. Rise Above Colorado collaborates with teens, educators, community leaders, and prevention partners to provide credible, teen-centered data using the evidence-based Science of the Positive framework to correct misperceptions about substance use. Rise Above Colorado offers youth education including science-based information about the developing brain, the associated risks of using substances during adolescence, as well as skills to cope with stress and resist peer pressure. As a positive, healthy activity, the organization has launched a statewide sticker design contest. Youth can find information on the contest and these topics at www.IRiseAboveCO.org and the organization also offers resources for educators on its website.

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