

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Why is social media so addictive?

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Jane 00:20

This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from curious kids just like you, and we find answers. You might be listening to this episode in your car or at home, or maybe even at school, it might be coming through the stereo system if you're in your car. It might be on a smart speaker or smartphone or a special kind of tablet. But no matter how you are listening, the internet was involved in getting this podcast from our computers where we make it to your ears. Some of your adults probably grew up before the internet was widely used. But today, so much of how we get and share information and entertainment relies on the internet. And even as very young kids, you have likely been connected in one way or another. Maybe video chatting with family members who live far away, or watching movies or videos on YouTube streaming services or social media. Have you heard that phrase social media? That's what we're going to spend some time talking about today. Let's start by talking a little bit about what social media sites are. These are places on the internet that allow users to connect with other people, people they know, or total strangers may be like a sports star or an artist or a celebrity. People do that connecting online over the Internet. In a lot of social media sites like Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube, people post videos or pictures. And these can be really fun to look at. But sometimes they can also make you start to feel bad or sad or take you away from doing other things you might enjoy. You're supposed to be about 13 years old before you're allowed to use most of these platforms. But we know that many of you see your parents or other adults on it. Or you might have a friend or older sibling who uses social media. And a lot of adults are concerned about social media sites and kids. And you have sent us some questions about that. So we're going to tackle them today. Here's our guide to start walking through all of this with you.

Devorah 02:27

I'm Devorah Heitner, the author of Growing Up in Public and Screenwise, my work is helping adults understand what kids experiences are like growing up in the digital age.

Jane 02:40

So Devorah is an adult, and she's often sharing with other adults stuff about kids. But she wanted to make her role here clear.

Devorah 02:50

You all are the experts. But it's also important to have folks like me and other people doing formal research and translating that research as well for educators and parents so that they can make decisions because it is a fast moving, changing world.

Jane 03:03

And some of you are at an age now where you're starting to wonder about all this online and social media stuff. So here's what you've sent us.

Ava 03:11

My name is Ava and I'm 10 years old. I live in Thornhill, Ontario. My question is, why is social media so addictive?

Oliver 03:23

My name is Oliver. I'm 11 years old. I live in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. My question is why do people spend so much time on social media?

Nick 03:32

Hello, my name is Nick. I'm 10 years old and I'm from Queensland, Australia. My question is why is tik tok so addictive?

Jane 03:39

If you're unfamiliar with TikTok that's an app, a place online that a lot of people have on their phones, where people make videos about all kinds of things that other people then watch. A lot of the videos are really short. Some of them have catchy music, sometimes writing on the screen that you can read while you're watching. And when the video ends, it will just start again. Or you can swipe down and see a new video. These can be really fun to watch, but the way they play one after another can also make it so you just keep swiping to see what comes next, even if you aren't really that interested. And Deborah says making you keep watching is what these social media sites are trying to do.

Deborah 04:20

Social media is designed to maximize the amount of time we spend. One is that there's no ending queue. Generally, although a few companies have now started, with a lot of pressure, to try to do some ending cues every once in a while to say like are you sure you still want to be here, but those are very mild. Another aspect of social media is it's algorithmically based so it knows what you're interested in everything that you click on everything you like, it knows what you've shared with friends, so if you really like kitten videos, or squirrels going through mazes or sports replays or movie bloopers or anime videos, or remixes with your favorite musician, they know that.

Jane 04:58

How do they know that? Well, if you spend a lot of time watching a cute kitten video, or push the like button on that video, then you'll probably get shown another kitten video. And if you also spend a lot of time on that one and push like, the app starts to learn what things you will spend more time on and show you more content it thinks is similar. The more the algorithm can figure out what you will watch, the more it can entice you to stay on the site. So it is a highly developed technology that's designed to learn what will keep you watching. Deborah says there's one other thing social media sites do to keep you coming back for more. When you post something, the site will let you know how many people have watched your video or senior photo. And it even gives people a chance to push a little heart or a thumbs up button or some other symbol to let you know they like what you put on the site.

Devorah 05:55

We know the like button is super powerful because all humans want to be liked. We all want to be seen and recognized by others. And so that's another design feature that sends powerful signals to our brain like somebody sees me somebody likes me.

Jane 06:12

So you might keep checking to see how many new likes you got on a photo, or post another one to see if you can get even more likes. Devorah says it's okay to like being liked. Adults like the like button too. But when people don't get a lot of likes on something, it can make them feel bad, as if maybe they're not very popular, or likeable. And that's not true. Social media is not the same thing as real life. And it's not the same thing as having real friends who care about you. So you might need to remind yourself or even your adults, the number of likes someone gets on a post does not determine their worth. You know, the three questions that we got about social media are all from 10 and 11 year olds, and there are a lot of kids listening who are maybe five or six, or seven or eight is 10 and 11. Around the time that kids start to get interested in social media. Do you think that could be maybe why 10 and 11 year olds are starting to ask these questions?

Devorah 07:14

Even if 10, 11 year olds don't have their own social accounts and you're supposed to be 13 and up for most of these things, they're certainly starting to be aware of it either through siblings or peers who do have access, and kids are showing each other a lot of things and even five and six year olds end up hearing songs on the playground where the origin might be a show they haven't watched or a meme they haven't seen, a video that's going around. So even if you're not personally looking at TikTok, it's in the culture enough for kids.

Jane 07:40

Devorah says around 11 or 12 years old is a good time to start working with your adults on your family's approach to social media. You can ask them what they're looking at on social media, if you see them on it. You can also ask them, if they post on social media, what they post about. Speaking of which, you should know it's okay to ask your adults what they post about you on their social media sites. If you don't feel comfortable with your adults posting about you, let them know or ask them to get your permission first. Another thing, you might want to check in with your adults about how much time they spend on these sites. Maybe you're actually kind of finding it annoying if your adult is on a phone when you want them to go outside and play with you. It's okay to let them know, after all your adults may have given you limits on screen time. And it's okay to ask them to have some limits for themselves too. Beyond the amount of time kids spend online, why else are so many adults worried about screen time?

Devorah 08:43

I think adults worry that kids will see some stuff that's not for kids on there. And that we know that that can happen. And if that ever happens if you see something that is scary for you, or you can just tell this is not for kids then just X out of it right away and let your grown up know. And then you know, if you're feeling, having feelings about it, they can help you deal with those feelings.

Jane 09:04

Any of us can see something that disturbs us or is a little bit scary or just doesn't quite sit right when we're on social media sites. But that's not the only way that it can start to make us feel bad, right? Sometimes it's just seeing other people doing things that we wish we could do. And we see that over and over again. Or maybe somebody who has lots of muscles and you wish you had lots of muscles or who has really long hair and you wish you had really long hair and it seems like everybody else has really long hair. How can we start to think about what we're seeing online and how to deal with it, even if it's not scary or bad.

Devorah 09:45

So sometimes seeing friends hanging out without you which is definitely part of social media. It can make you have hurt feelings, but when I talk to kids about how to feel better in that situation, a really good idea so one of them is watch your favorite show, or see another friend. Another one is hanging out with your pet or your parents or your siblings. A big one is put your phone away. And this actually came from fifth and sixth and seventh graders that I just talked to you. And when you're old enough to post, maybe if you're doing something that you had to make a hard choice about who to invite, for whatever reason, maybe you don't post it right away. Or maybe you think about do I want to share this because it might make people feel left out. Now in terms of seeing people who have something else, like, maybe we're watching an unboxing video, and kids are getting toys we don't have or seeing somebody who, right, their hair is really cool in some way. Maybe they have pink hair, and your parents said no to pink hair, whatever it is. For first of all, it can give us ideas of what we do like, so maybe if I'm seeing something on there, like okay, well, maybe I can't have that thing. But can I read about it? Is there something about that that inspires me? Like maybe I'm not gonna get that knight in shining armor playset. But can I write a story about a knight in shining armor, but maybe also I want to stop looking at those videos, if unboxing videos or something like that makes me feel bad, it's probably not something I should spend a lot of time on, because it's going to consistently make me feel bad. And some things just also aren't safe for kids. And some of those videos might not be super accurate, even in how they're making the people look. And so it's important, if you're not sure you can ask a grown up. School librarians and community librarians are great people to ask to like, hey, is this video accurate? You know, ask your teacher, ask a parent ask a grown up you trust. Talk to library people because they're really good at helping kids figure out is this a reliable source? Is this a good thing for kids to look at?

Jane 11:34

Coming up, we're going to talk about what Devorah just mentioned, how to make sure you're finding safe and reliable or trustworthy sources when you're online.

Jane 11:43

This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm. This week, we're answering questions about social media. Some of you were curious about why people are spending so much time on social media. And it's not just social media, there's so much available that keeps kids and adults glued to their tablets, computers and phones. You're growing up with tiny screens all around you. But this is all a pretty recent development. The first smartphones came out within the last 20 years and tablets are even newer. So the result is we're all still kind of figuring out how these technologies fit into our lives. Adults are working on setting boundaries for you and how much time you can spend on various websites and devices, while we're also trying to set boundaries for ourselves. It's complicated. But one

thing we know for sure, being online is pretty impossible to avoid completely. Adults and kids use the internet to stay in touch with friends, get new recipes, figure out how to fix things, do their jobs or homework, and sometimes even have things like doctor's appointments. So it's important to learn how to know where to find information you can trust. That's called media literacy. Let's say you see a video online and it's giving you lots of facts about volcanoes. How do you know that information is accurate? Here are a few questions you could ask yourself or have an adult help you think through. One, where is this video coming from? What is the source? Two, does this information seem to have a point of view? Is the creator trying to get you to believe something? It's important to be critical of the things you read or the videos you see online. Three, can you find other information like this on another website, maybe an educational website, so you can compare it to your original source and see if there are differences? Or if all that information is lining up? And four, can you find this information somewhere not on the internet? Our guest today Devorah Heitner has some ideas on this too.

Devorah 13:50

When we're thinking about what's real or not real online, it's important to get sources from grownups that we trust. So again, you know, your teacher, your school library, and your art teacher might have some good sources, if you're looking for like inspiration for stuff to make. And also, if in doubt, there's also books, if you're having a hard time finding content that's appropriate, a lot of adult content is kind of boring, frankly, then maybe try the kids section in the library, because that's going to be more focused on specifically kid stuff. Whereas the internet is, there isn't like a young adult section and a middle school section and a kids section of the internet.

Jane 14:28

Yeah, that's true. You know, sometimes adults want to look at what you're looking at. Or they say you have to be in the living room on the family computer if you're going to be using these sites, or I need to know your password. Or you can't make your social media sites private because we need to be able to see it and so the adults in your life are going to ask you questions about what you're seeing and may want to be able to have access to what you're seeing. How should kids think about that? Because sometimes that can feel either, a little invasive, or like, come on, I'm not seeing anything bad. I would tell you if I was, why don't you trust me? Or you might even worry? Well, if one thing comes across on a site that I'm using that's bad, my parents are gonna stop letting me use it. So how can kids think about why and how their adults are trying to make sure they're safe on on the internet by seeing what they're seeing?

Devorah 15:26

I think when the grown ups want you to use the internet near them, they're doing a really good job, giving you some space to do some cool things on the computer, but also being there if the if you need them, and helping you avoid some of the really, you know, not good things that are on there. So I think that's a great way to go. And I think with YouTube, or you know, any of them more kind of wild west kind of places on the internet, that's a really good idea. Because, again, nobody's really making sure that all the stuff on there is good for kids. And so your parents are trying to keep you safe, and they want to have conversations with you about what they've seen. So if you did see a really cool architecture video, they want to be like, tell me more about skyscrapers.

Jane 16:06

Talk to the adults around you about what you want to use the internet for, and how to make sure you get to the right place. And talk to them about how to stay safe online. Never reveal your personal information online. And you also shouldn't create accounts on websites without talking to your adults. We're talking about a balance here, the internet is not good or bad. It's a tool. And just like with any other tool or new technology, you need to learn how to use it safely. I know, this is a lot. Just one more thing I promised before you can turn this off and go run around. As you start to learn about putting your own ideas online, in comments on videos or in things you post yourself. It's important to be a good online citizen. It can be really tempting to write a comment on someone's video that teases them, or is a little bit mean. After all, if it's a famous person with like a million followers, what difference does it make?

Devorah 17:00

we need to always remember that there's another person or other people on the other end of every screen communication. So whether it's a comment to our friends, or if we're using Google Hangouts to talk with our friends, when we're playing Minecraft, or Roblox or if we're, you know, making a comment on someone's YouTube channel, whether we know them or not, that's another human being. They're seeing that, other people coming there are seeing that. So we have to remember, if we don't have something nice to say it's probably best not to comment. And if something is hurting your feelings, it's always okay to leave too. If you're in a text conversation or chat or a video conversation and it's not going well and people are being mean, it's always okay to be like, I gotta go bye or just leave. Because you don't want to be part of that. Even if it's not you that's being spoken to in a mean way you don't want to be part of it.

Jane 17:47

Remember, as well, that what you write or say online can be found by people, sometimes years later. So you should probably not think that what you're putting online is completely private. If you're not okay with your parent, principals, sibling, friend or community leader seeing it, think twice about posting it. Okay, feeling overwhelmed? I don't blame you. These topics are really challenging. But it's the job of adults to help guide you through the internet. So if you're having a problem online or something is bothering you, go to an adult you trust and talk about it. That's it for today. Thanks to Devorah Heitner for helping us. She's the author of *Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive and Survive in Their Digital World*. We made this episode in collaboration with something called the Good Citizen Challenge. That's a fun way to learn more about your community, country and world through civics education. It's actually an annual project organised by an independent weekly paper here in Vermont called *Seven Days* and it's free quarterly parenting magazine, *Kids VT*. But you don't have to live in Vermont to take part. You can find out more at goodcitizenvt.com. And remember the questions we investigate on this show come from you. So if you have an idea for a show you want us to do have an adult record you on a smartphone asking your question. Be sure to include your first name, where you live and how old you are. Your adult can email the file to questions at [But Why kids.org](mailto:ButWhykids.org)? We can't answer every question we get, but we really do love to hear from you and know more about what's on your mind. But Why is made by Melody Bodette, Kaylee Mumford, Kiana Haskin and me, Jane Lindholm at Vermont Public and distributed by PRX. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious!