3rd Annual

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH SUMMIT

BEYOND ALGORITHMS

Real Talk on Social Media and Youth Mental Health

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION HIGHLIGHTS

A COMMUNITY ACTION AGENDA

Seventy-five parents, educators, health providers, youth, community leaders, and state legislators gathered on May 13, 2026 at the University of Rhode Island's Higgins Welcome Center to discuss the impact of social media on youth mental health. The roundtable discussion was part of the Washington County Coalition for Children's 3rd Annual Youth Mental Health Summit.



Why Action Is Needed

1 in 7

young people worldwide live with a mental health condition

World Health Organization

1 in 3

U.S. high school students report poor mental health most of the time

CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey

48%

HARMS | DOESN'T HARM

of teenagers say social media **harms** people their age

PEW Research Center 2025 among U.S. Teens up from 32% in 2022

Roundtable Discussions

Summit participants broke into facilitated small-group discussions. Youth were distributed across all tables to keep their voices at the center. Table discussions were anchored by the Socio-Ecological Change model that frames the Coalition's work. This model recognizes that effective community change is shaped by multiple, interacting levels of influence — individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, public policy — rather than by individual choice alone. Lasting change requires action across these various levels.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

The question for table discussion:

What strategies should we pursue — at the youth, family, school, and government levels?

What emerged was a community action agenda. The themes below were shared across multiple tables, making them the clearest signal of where this community is ready to move. The following strategies were recommended for action:

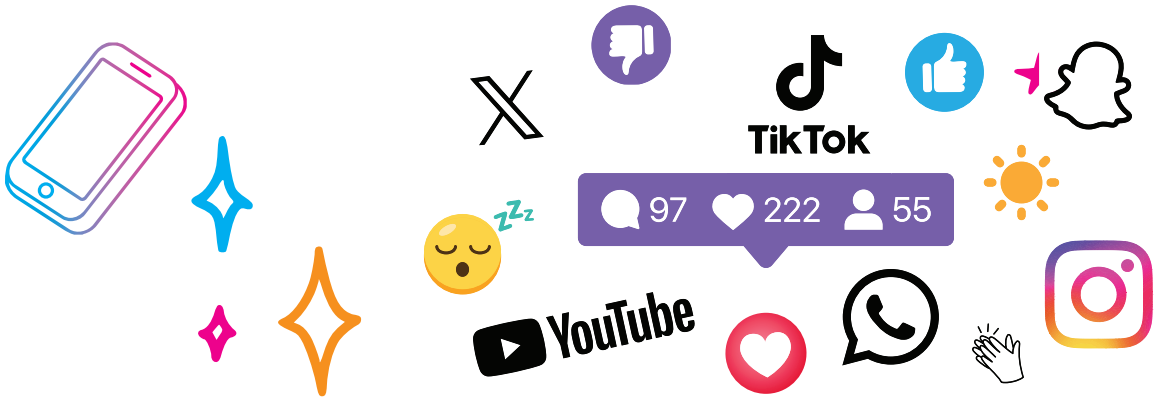
YOUTH

Actions to Support Youth

1. Build age-appropriate digital literacy skills so children and youth understand how platforms are designed to capture attention
2. Pursue alternative activities that meet the same needs social media provides (connection, creativity, recognition)
3. Advocate for age restrictions on social media and cell phone policies in schools
4. Establish incentives and personal routines to take intentional breaks from screens

Actions by Youth

1. Set personal goals grounded in values; know what you want from your digital life
2. Use FaceTime and video calls over texting to preserve tone, nuance, and human connection
3. Participate in collaborative efforts with schools and families



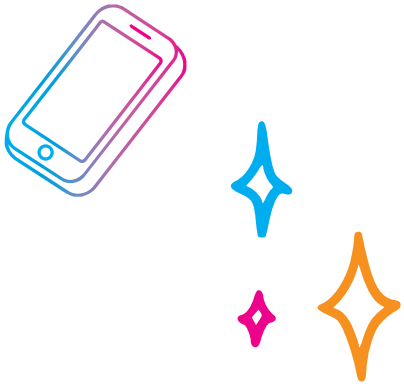
FAMILY

Actions to Support Families

1. Acknowledge systemic barriers: families with fewer resources face real obstacles to tech-free alternatives — solutions must include access to affordable childcare, after-school programs, and community activities
2. Support family education in digital literacy and tech safety
3. Involve families in developing proposed legislation and enforcement

Actions by Families

1. Lean in with curiosity, not judgment: “Tell me what you’re watching” rather than dismissing what kids are consuming
2. Sit down together to establish house rules for tech use and discuss each person’s intentions for social media — what they want to get out of it, and what to post or not post
3. Adults model healthy tech habits and alternative activities (such as sports, exercise, art, play, reading) — children notice what adults do, not just what they say
4. Establish tech-free family mealtimes to protect connection and conversation
5. Monitor phone and computer use in open areas, and keep devices out of bedrooms at night to protect sleep
6. Use apps that support screen time limits and incentives for less use
7. Build culture early: read to children, read in front of children, create space for offline imagination
8. Support community efforts for young people to play and socialize



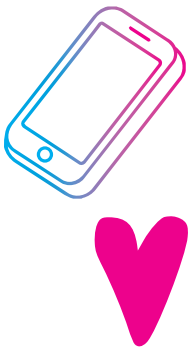
"ADULTS LEAD BY EXAMPLE – AS ADULTS ARE BEING ON THEIR PHONE AND SOCIAL MEDIA MORE OFTEN, CHILDREN, AS A RESULT, WILL BE ON THEIR PHONE MORE OFTEN."

— Brendan Gleason, Chariho High School

SCHOOLS

Actions by Schools

1. Teach digital citizenship, safety, and media literacy the way schools teach sex ed or drug awareness — starting young and continuing throughout
2. Implement and consistently enforce device-free school day policies with full staff buy-in
3. Create screen-free recharge spaces where students can take breaks and decompress in healthy ways
4. Invest in teacher professional development on social media literacy, not just technology tools
5. Invest in parent education on social media literacy and safety
6. Actively replace phone time with high-value alternatives: board games, movement, collaborative problem-solving, clubs, after-school programs
7. Maintain clear, accessible emergency communication pathways so no student ever feels unsafe without a phone
8. Collaborate with government agencies and families on the development of legislation and school policies
9. Foster genuine staff-student-family partnerships in enforcement — policies are only as strong as the adults who model and uphold them
10. Consider more peer-to-peer youth leadership opportunities
11. Consider implementing Teen Mental Health First Aid
12. Create opportunities for more student engagement in facilitated class discussions and less reliance on tech
13. Maintain data protections in Chromebooks



"TALKING ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES THE SAME WAY WE TALK ABOUT THINGS LIKE DRUGS OR SEX ED – STARTING EDUCATION ABOUT IT YOUNG AND THEN KEEPING IT CONSISTENT THROUGHOUT MIDDLE SCHOOL & HIGH SCHOOL."

— Ella Procaccianti, The Prout School

GOVERNMENT & POLICY

Actions by Government

1. Support RI legislation establishing age restrictions and safeguards for social media access and limiting cell phone use in schools
2. Advance Age-Appropriate Design Code requirements and universal regulations compelling tech companies to design for the users they actually serve
3. Hold social media companies accountable for algorithmic practices that exploit young users' attention
4. Create fines for companies that fail to enforce age limits
5. Regulate online gambling and pay-to-win game features with real-money transactions, especially those marketed to minors
6. Fund mandatory, ongoing teacher training in social media safety and literacy at the statewide level
7. Translate new legislation into accessible public health messaging — education campaigns that help families act
8. Amplify community voice: invite public input (letters, State House testimony) so elected officials hear directly from constituents
9. Establish mandatory screening protocols and provider training for pediatricians and health centers
10. Add questions on social media use and screen time to the Rhode Island Student Survey

TAKE ACTION FOR YOUTH WELLNESS

FROM STUDENTS AND ADULTS ALIKE: STRONG, SHARED SUPPORT FOR CELL PHONE BANS IN SCHOOLS AND FOR LEGISLATIVE ACTION RESTRICTING SOCIAL MEDIA USE FOR CHILDREN.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To see Summit videos, listen to the SYNC (Sharing Your Next Conversation) podcast with Dr. Nesi, or download Tip Sheets go to the Coalition's website at **www.washcokids.org**. For more information about the Summit, contact Susan Orban, Coalition Director at **wccc@washcokids.org**.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to all the Youth Mental Health Summit participants who engaged in these important conversations.

Thanks also to Summit Organizers, Allies, and Roundtable Facilitators, who helped plan and execute this important community dialogue, including Angela Boisclair, Sara Clarke, Mark Collins, Lori Duffy, Erin Earle, Nicole Faison, Brendan Gleason, Bob Hicks, Sophia Horton, Lori Ann Hiener, April Khanna, Abby Murdock, Susan Orban, Ella Procaccianti, Rylie Whitten, and Sandra Williamson.

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Washington County Coalition for Children

The Chris Collins Foundation
Shining a light on mental illness

THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE OF HEALTH SCIENCES
Human Development and Family Science

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RHODE ISLAND FOUNDATION

SCAN HERE

FOR RESOURCES AND OTHER INFORMATION

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