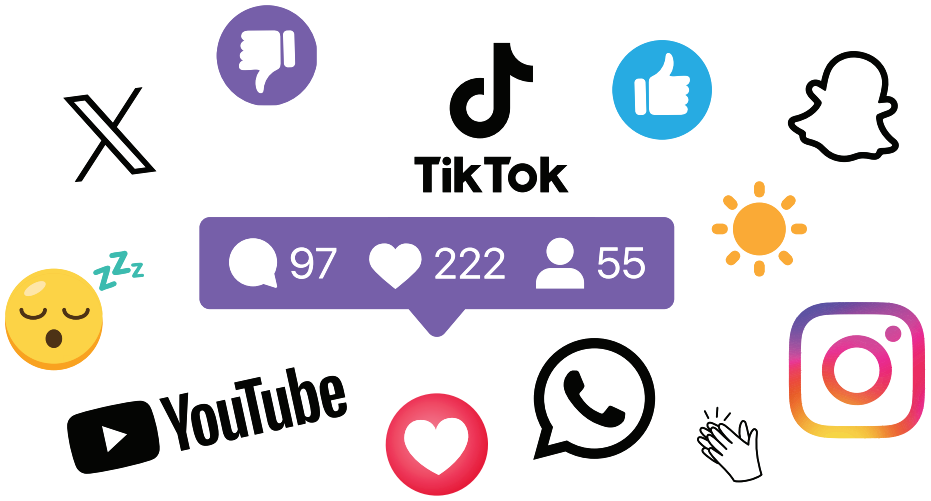
3rd Annual

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH SUMMIT

BEYOND ALGORITHMS

Real Talk on Social Media and Youth Mental Health



REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS

WHY WE GATHERED

Youth mental health is a crisis we can no longer ignore.

One in seven young people worldwide lives with a mental health condition. One in three U.S. high school students reports poor mental health most of the time. Nearly half of American teenagers believe social media has a profoundly harmful effect on themselves and their peers.

Two years ago, the Coalition's Youth Advisory Council — working with University of Rhode Island's (URI's) Dept. of Human Development & Family Science and the Chris Collins Foundation — released the region's first Youth-Driven Action Plan for Mental Wellness.

Part One of the 4-Part Action Plan: Controlling Social Media was the focus of the Coalition's 3rd annual Youth Mental Health Summit. The data underscore why youth prioritized this issue. The question is what do we do next.

The Summit was designed to foster community dialogue on this subject.

75 people gathered on May 13, 2026 at the University of Rhode Island Higgins Welcome Center — parents, educators, health providers, youth, community leaders, and state legislators — to move beyond headlines and toward solutions. The Coalition's approach: a public health, Socio-Ecological Change model (shown at left) insists lasting change must occur at every level, from the individual youth to state policy.



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

KEYNOTE ADDRESS



Jacqueline Nesi, PHD
Clinical Psychologist
& Assistant Professor
Brown University

Dr. Nesi, one of the world's leading researchers on technology and adolescent mental health, set the tone for the evening. The moral panic around social media is understandable, but panic is not a strategy. What young people and the adults who care for them need is **agency.**

Dr. Nesi opened with a values exercise — inviting participants to consider what matters most to them (connection, emotional health, presence, authenticity) and then honestly examine how their technology use supports or undermines those values. It's a deceptively simple framework that makes behavior change feel personal rather than prescriptive.
"I think of it as a first step to getting us to healthier uses of these technologies"

Values: Personal rules or principles that are important to you.

Authenticity being myself, being genuine, knowing who I am	**Balance** being intentional about my time and focus	**Connection** building and keeping close relationships, being there for friends and family, making new friends	**Emotional Health** accepting myself for who I am, mental health, self-confidence	**Gratitude** appreciating the life and things I have
Hard Work striving academically, taking steps toward my future career	**Independence** thinking for myself, making my own decisions	**Justice** standing up for what is right and fair	**Kindness** being considerate, helpful, and caring—to myself and others	**Open-Mindedness** willing to consider new ideas, listen to others, learn and grow
Physical Health taking care of myself physically, including sleep, food, and movement	**Presence** being present in the moment, giving people my full attention	**Privacy** having boundaries, respecting others' boundaries, protecting myself	**Spirituality** leaning into my faith, spirituality, and/or enlightenment	What value would you add?

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The Driving Analogy

Dr. Nesi challenged the common comparison of social media to cigarettes. A better analogy, she argued, is driving: real benefits, serious risks, and a public responsibility to build in safeguards. She named four platform design tactics engineered to keep users engaged against their own interests: red notification badges, infinite scroll, autoplay, and streaks. "These commercial products are designed to make money, right? They are not designed to keep kids safe. They are not designed to promote their well-being. They are not designed to help kids have better relationships," emphasized Dr. Nesi.

What the Research Shows

Social media use impacts some youth more than others: those already struggling offline tend to struggle more online too. The concern isn't simply time spent, but whether use interferes with sleep, in-person relationships, or other essentials for wellbeing. "If there's one thing you take away from this, I encourage you to keep your phones outside of your bedrooms at night. I've started doing this. I think it's really powerful," noted Nesi. On the question of whether social media can be addictive, Dr. Nesi urged caution with the label: when people believe they have no agency, they often stop trying to change — which makes things worse, not better.



> **THERE ARE THINGS WE CAN DO TO USE THESE PLATFORMS IN SAFER WAYS. ALL TO SAY. WE HAVE AGENCY IN THIS PROCESS. WE HAVE AGENCY IN THE WAYS WE CHOOSE TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA.**
>
> **DR. JACQUELINE NESI, KEYNOTE SPEAKER**

Student-Led Interview



Westerly High School senior Sophia Horton (left) and South Kingstown High School sophomore Sara Clarke (right) — co-hosts of the SYNC (Sharing Your Next Conversation) Podcast — followed the keynote with a candid interview with Dr. Nesi (center) that drew some of the most memorable moments of the evening. They asked Dr. Nesi about delaying social media use, parental monitoring without destroying trust, media literacy, and whether social media is truly addictive. Dr. Nesi's consistent message: young people have more power over their digital lives than our culture tells them.

Policy Panel: The Bigger Picture

Facilitated by former Supt. Bob Hicks, the policy panel brought together an unusually powerful mix of voices: Dr. Nesi, two state legislators, a school administrator, and three youth mental health leaders. Dr. Hicks opened the discussion, noting the global context was striking: Australia, Indonesia, France, and Malaysia have already passed laws restricting youth social media access. Rhode Island, the panelists made clear, is not waiting, but taking action.



Pictured from Left to Right, Dr. Hicks, Dr. Nesi, Rep. Spears, Rep. Cotter, Rylie Whitten & Ella Procaccianti, The Prout School, Dr. Melissa Denton, Narragansett School System, and Brendan Gleason, Chariho High School.

From the Legislators

Representatives Tina Spears (District 37) and Megan Cotter (District 39) — both mothers of teenagers — described their pending legislation as “common sense seat belts” for social media. Rep. Spears’ Age-Appropriate Design Code bill would require tech companies to build products for children with children’s wellbeing in mind. Said Rep. Spears, “I see this issue in the same way as I see clean air, clean water. I want the youth of my community and our world to have all the safety provisions that our government should be supplying them.”

> "WE KNOW HOW MANY KIDS ARE THINKING ABOUT ENDING THEIR OWN LIVES BECAUSE OF WHAT THEY SEE ON SOCIAL MEDIA. IT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO ENSURE OUR KIDS HAVE THE TOOLS THEY NEED TO BE SAFE."
>
> — Rep. Megan Cotter, RI District 39



Pictured from Left to Right: Rep. Tina Spears, Rep. Megan Cotter.

Their message: the federal government is not coming to save us. It’s on states to act.

From the Schools

Melissa Denton, EdD, of the Narragansett School System described what it actually looks like to implement a phone-free school day: stakeholder engagement before state legislation is passed, a clear philosophy (“Off and away”), and a surprising discovery — students didn’t know what to do with themselves without their phones. Teachers responded by bringing out board games and other interactive activities. The social interaction that followed was, by all accounts, remarkable. Narragansett has embedded digital literacy in its Graduate Profile and uses a Building Thinking Classrooms model to keep students collaborative and device-free.

From the Youth

When asked if age restrictions for use of social media was a good idea, student panelist Rylie Whitten from The Prout School recommended holding off social media use until age 16. Whitten also raised the underappreciated issue of online gambling and pay-to-win games, where young users often don't realize they're spending real money.

Chariho High School Student Brendan Gleason described phones as creating "a toxic learning environment." He also pointed to the need for adults to model healthy use of social media.

> "OUR TEENAGE YEARS ARE WHEN WE'RE SUDDENLY LAUNCHED INTO STRUGGLES AROUND SELF-DISCOVERY, PRESSURE, AND INSECURITIES. WE NEED TO BE MINDFUL OF WHAT WE SHARE WITH IMPRESSIONABLE YOUNG PEOPLE. AT A MINIMUM, 16 IS A GREAT AGE TO START."
>
> — Rylie Whitten, The Prout School

> "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

> "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

Student panelist Ella Procaccianti, also from The Prout School, raised a point that drew audience applause: the algorithms that monetize user attention are a significant policy issue. Procaccianti expressed frustration that predatory actions of media companies targeting youth are going unchecked in the U.S. "I would love to see government intervention into how those practices are still being allowed." She also made a strong case for digital education for youth starting at a young age.

All three student leaders spoke with the authority of young people who live inside this issue every day.

On Measuring Success

Dr. Nesi offered the panel a framework for evaluation: define goals before implementing policy, identify measurable outcomes in advance, and look not just at what you're reducing but what you're promoting. "Not just subtracting — but adding. **What are we doing to replace what we've taken away?"**





ROUNDTABLE HIGHLIGHTS: A COMMUNITY ACTION AGENDA

Following the panel, Summit participants broke into facilitated small-group discussions anchored by the same Socio-Ecological Change model that frames the Coalition's work. Youth were distributed across all tables to keep their voices at the center. The question for table discussion:

What strategies should we pursue — at the youth, family, school, and government levels — to protect young people and prepare them to thrive in the digital world they actually live in?

One message came through clearly and repeatedly, from students and adults alike: strong, shared support for cell phone bans in schools and for legislative action restricting social media use for children. That consensus ran through nearly every table and set the tone for the more specific strategies that followed.

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.

From students and adults alike: strong, shared support for cell phone bans in schools and for legislative action restricting social media use for children.



YOUTH

Top Strategies:

1. Build digital literacy — understand how platforms are designed to capture attention
2. Set personal goals grounded in your values, not platform defaults
3. Pursue alternatives that meet the same needs: connection, creativity, belonging
4. Advocate for age restrictions and device-free school policies

FAMILY

Top Strategies:

1. Lean in with curiosity: “Tell me what you’re watching”, not “That’s trash
2. Discuss intentions together — what does each person want from social media?
3. Adults model healthy habits; children notice what we do, not just what we say
4. Tech-free meals, phones out of bedrooms at night — small habits, big impact
5. Acknowledge barriers: not all families have equal access to offline alternatives

SCHOOL

Top Strategies:

1. Teach digital citizenship the way schools teach sex ed — early and consistently
2. Enforce device-free policies with full staff buy-in and student partnership
3. Create screen-free recharge spaces; replace phone time with high-value alternatives
4. Train teachers in social media literacy, not just technology tools

GOVERNMENT

Top Strategies:

1. Support RI legislation on age restrictions and Age Appropriate Design Code
2. Hold tech companies accountable for algorithmic exploitation of young users
3. Regulate online gambling and pay-to-win features marketed to minors
4. Translate legislation into public health education campaigns families can act on
5. Write letters, testify at the State House — community voice changes policy

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 everyone who participated in our 3rd annual Youth Mental Health Summit and 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.

Special gratitude to Dr. Sue Adams, Vice Provost at URI, whose partnership over three years built the infrastructure for youth engagement that made this work possible — and to the youth who showed up, spoke up, and refused to let adults have this conversation without them.

This youth mental health effort was undertaken by the Washington County Coalition for Children in collaboration with the Chris Collins Foundation (Peer-to-Peer program partner) and URI's College of Health Sciences, Department of Human Development & Family Science (academic partner).

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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FOR RESOURCES AND OTHER INFORMATION

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact Susan Orban at wccc@washcokids.org

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