

(201) family's special parent

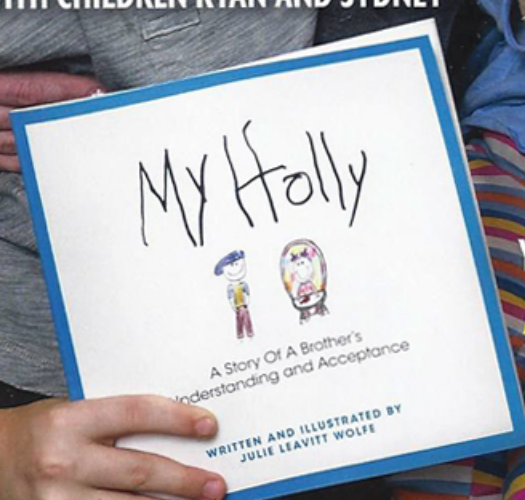
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The pros and cons of social media and special needs children

WRITTEN BY LESLIE PERLMUTTER

Most parents are thankful that they grew up before the age of social media. Social media can be a scary thing. And although it scares them too, psychologists who deal with this in their practices have advised parents to get over their fear – quickly.

Dr. Melissa Fiorito-Grafman, a neuropsychologist with offices in Ridgewood and Closter, says, "Parents need to be educated consumers. Be as knowledgeable as possible about the technology and your children, and the fear starts to slip away."

However, there are definitely pros and cons to the use of social media. If your child has special needs and/or learning differences that will affect

their impulsivity, impulse control or ability to read non-verbal cues, the use of social media can be that much scarier.

Dr. Rachelle Theise, a licensed clinical psychologist and clinical assistant professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at NYU Langone's Child Study Center, with locations in both Hackensack and New York, discusses some of the pros.

"It is an easy way for kids to be connected to their peers, at least superficially, and know what's going on outside of school," Theise says. "It allows for some time to plan what to write or comment. Kids can get guidance from an adult who can help navigate social nuances and appropriate things to say. And it allows for

"Some [children] may be impulsive about posting or sending messages or pictures to others, and they get them themselves in trouble."

Dr. Melissa Fiorito-Grafman
neuropsychologist

written expression, photos and creativity – often which are things kids with special needs excel at."

Fiorito-Grafman agrees. "One of the biggest positives about the use of social media is that it helps normalize these children's situation," she says. "They are constantly reminded that things are a little harder for them. This is something they are able to participate in the same way as their counterparts. They think, 'I can do this too.'"

Of course, there are also negatives. "If these kids say the wrong thing, it's public and there's a record of it," Theise says. "Meaning, it's harder to recover from social mishaps they make."

"There are more opportunities for social rejection or ridicule," Theise adds. "We know that those with special needs often have more trouble socially...Kids get invited places and if you're not invited and left out, it can be really hurtful to see all the pictures up online just a few hours later."

"When we were kids, there weren't so many opportunities for bullying," Theise says. "It could happen in school, but typically once you got home, you were 'safe.' Now, there's opportunity for bullying all day and night long because kids are on

social media at all hours. It's really important for parents of kids with or without special needs to do their part and monitor and limit time on social media."

Fiorito-Grafman points out that for those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), there may be a breakdown in communication.

"A lot of interpretation is necessary for social media, and those with ASD may miss a cue or misinterpret due to their inability to extrapolate information from a post," she says.

Fiorito-Grafman works with parents to help develop limits for their children.

"I tell them to use their internal GPS. Listen to yourself and what works for you and your family," she adds. Parents should be members of the same forum or platform as their child, and children should be limited to using the social media at only certain times of the day."

Both experts agree that social media has pros and cons for all children, but these may be more exaggerated for those with special needs.

"They may encounter additional roadblocks. Parents will have to be a little more cognizant and hyper-vigilant," says Fiorito-Grafman. ●