

UPF Colorado, USA Webinar - The Impact of Social Media on Marriage and Family

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United States -- Social media has become an integral, and often inescapable, part of our lives, and yet its innocuous public face often obscures a more threatening subtext of sexual abuse and exploitation. Just last month, United States Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued a rare public health advisory on the risks that social media may pose to young people's mental health and well-being.

These risks, as well as steps recommended to mitigate them, were among the topics discussed in a webinar sponsored by International Media Association for Peace (IMAP) on Tuesday, June 27, 2023. The panelists were three experts in the field: **Lynn Walsh**, director of the Office of the Family of the Universal Peace Federation (UPF) and Executive Committee member of the NGO Committee on the Family at the United Nations; **Madeleine McElligott**, communications and social media specialist with the National Council on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE) in Washington, DC; and **Jason Frost**, co-founder of the non-profit *WiredHuman.org*.

After a brief introduction to IMAP, Ms. Walsh began by noting that social media does have some positive impacts on marriage and family, such as the fact that a third of U.S. marriages now start online. She then outlined some of the negative impacts. For example, marital partners, distracted by their phones, spend less time in meaningful interaction; partners' monitoring of each other's online activity leads to disputes and suspicion; online porn leads to reduced marital satisfaction and stability. Ms. Walsh reported that heavy social media users are almost twice as likely to consider leaving their spouses. She suggests that couples set limits on media use and make serious efforts to communicate more to counteract potential negative consequences.

Ms. McElligott quickly opened our eyes to the dangers inherent in social media sites. She reported that our children spend an average of 4-7 hours on digital devices daily and a full one third of those between

the ages of 9-17 report having had a sexual interaction on social media. In 2022 there were more than 32 million reports of suspected child sexual exploitation online. This exploitation includes exposing children to porn, posting videos of sexual violence perpetrated on minors, and the sexualization of minors.

Some of the main culprits are seemingly innocuous apps such as Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok. What's concerning about them is that they all have very young user bases and brand themselves as kid-friendly and yet don't keep young users safe.



In a 2022 study of more than 1300 teens, it was found that more than three of four had viewed pornography online, half of them at the age of 13 or younger. According to Ms. McElligott, this pornography is also often comprised of violent, abusive, degrading and racist depictions of sex acts and can disrupt natural child sexual development. Child pornography exposure is also a catalyst for other behaviors such as child-on-child sexual behavior. NCOSE works to hold the online platforms accountable, to advocate for child-centered policies, and to educate families about the issues.

Ms. McElligott encouraged everyone to get involved in protecting our children by contacting their elected representatives, by educating themselves about the dangers, and by monitoring and limiting access in their own families.

Jason Frost, co-founder of Wired Human, with his wife, Lisa, and co-author of *The Glass Between Us*, revealed that the algorithms employed by social media sites are engineered to pull kids in and to get them hooked on social media. He shared that the best defense is building relationships and sharing values within the family, mentoring our kids, and then setting boundaries that fit the values we share. This will significantly reduce our kids' vulnerability to harmful content. "Values are the compass that guides our lives," he said, "and when we use our values to measure the content of social media, we actually have a tool that measures social media and the internet rather than the internet measuring us." Jason also advocates for limits on social media's ability to provide porn to underaged children. His organization works to bring together tech companies, educators, entertainment providers, business leaders, political leaders, and families to discuss key online child-protection standards and to work towards ending the monetization of children online.

An engaging Q and A session at the end of the program left many of our participants with the desire to explore the topic more thoroughly through further research and engagement.