

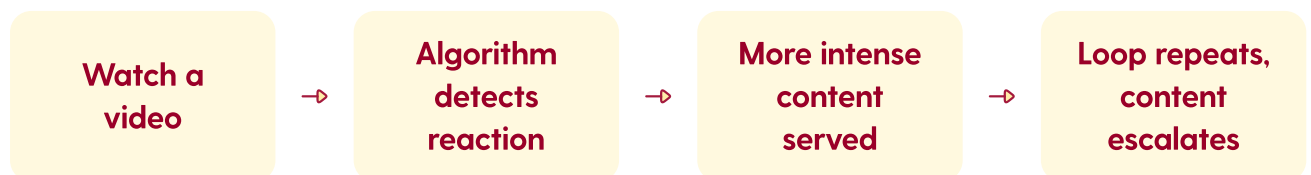
A Guide for Parents

Your Teen Isn't Scrolling. They're Being Scrolled

Engagement-driven algorithms (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube) have **one goal: keep users on the platform as long as possible**. For teens, whose brains are still developing impulse control, this creates a feedback loop that's genuinely hard to break and **it's engineered to be that way**.

How It Works

The Feedback Loop



Why Teens Are Especially Vulnerable



The Rabbit Hole Effect

One video about anxiety or body image trains the algorithm to serve progressively more extreme content, often within a single session.



Comparison and Self-Worth

Teens see curated highlights presented as being normal. The algorithm keeps surfacing comparison content because it drives the most engagement. And the loop continues.



Anxiety and Doom Loops

The most alarming news framing gets the most clicks. Teens can end up in sustained loops of anxious content without realizing how they got there.



Sleep Disruption

The algorithm has no concept of bedtime. "One more video" is intentional design. It works especially well on developing brains.

Simple Actions To Take

- 1 Sit with your teen and open their actual feed. No judgment, just curiosity
- 2 Ask: "Is this what you wanted to watch, or did you just end up here?"
- 3 Show them the controls: "Not interested," reset recommendations, content preferences
- 4 Help them understand: the feed is trained on them and they can push back

Questions To Ask Your Teen



"How do you feel after scrolling for a while?"

Builds self-awareness about content's emotional effect



"Did you choose what you watched, or did it just appear?"

Introduces the idea of intentional vs. passive use



"Is there anything you'd like to see less of?"

Puts the teen in control

Why Not Just Set Screen Time Limits?

Time limits treat the symptom, not the mechanism. **Researchers now widely agree that what teens watch matters more than how long they watch.** Time limits alone don't address what the feed serves your teen and protecting their mental health.

The goal is algorithmic literacy to help teens understand the feed isn't neutral, and they have the power to shape it.

