

Impact of social media and screen-use on young people's health

Introduction and background

Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show that young people in the UK are extensive users of the internet and of social media in particular. In 2015, 24.1 per cent of 15-year-olds in the UK spent more than 6 hours per day out of school online compared to an OECD average of 16.2 per cent. England has also witnessed a rise in mental disorders in children aged between 5 and 15 from 9.7 per cent in 1999 to 11.2 per cent in 2017. These statistics raise questions about links between use of social media and wellbeing. This inquiry set out to investigate whether growing use of social media and screens is healthy or harmful. In addition to over 170 pieces of written evidence, the inquiry took oral evidence from a wide range of stakeholders including young people. Along with this report, the Science and Technology Committee has produced a teachers' pack to facilitate discussion with young people. It is available to teachers through the Parliamentary Education Centre. It is expected that this report will help to inform the *Online Harms White Paper* which is to be published soon.

Key points

The current research base

- This chapter of the report considers the quality of the research available about links between screen use and wellbeing.
- Witnesses pointed out that 'screen use' and 'screen time' were often ill-defined without due consideration of the type of screen or what it was being used for. For example, watching age-appropriate television for an hour is different to playing a video game or being on social media for an hour.
- Methods used to quantify screen time in research are often based on self-reporting; this is problematic, as individuals do not accurately monitor the amount of time spent on unconscious behaviours such as checking their smartphone. Witnesses reported that many of the existing studies are correlational, i.e. they do not prove whether a health effect is actually caused by social media use. As CLOSER point out, 'longitudinal research using existing studies is needed to track the prevalence of social media use over time and uncover the long-term impacts on young people's health'.
- Although the government has acknowledged the need for a more robust evidence base, its approach to date has been to commission evidence reviews rather than undertake new research studies.
- Society, 62 per cent of 1,000 respondents agreed that 'social media had a positive impact on their relationship with their friends'.
- TechUK reported how the anonymity offered by an online environment enabled young people to express themselves freely and honestly.
- Social media was highlighted as a way to make new friends. Research conducted with 1,060 teenagers in the USA found that 57 per cent of those aged between 13 and 17 had made a new friend online and 68 per cent said they had 'received social media support in tough or challenging times'.
- The importance of social media for building cultural awareness was seen as important. One pupil explained how social media had created 'a place where people can talk to and find out more about people from different backgrounds'.
- Sites such as YouTube were considered by many as playing an important role in skills development. The opportunities arising through social media for collaboration and sharing were also emphasised. YoungMinds and the Children's Society stated that 'belonging to online communities can support children and young people who are isolated due to disabilities or communication needs. Professor Przybylski from the university of Oxford noted that online games with a social element could have a 'destigmatising effect especially for people with different forms of disability who might otherwise be left out'.
- A further benefit of social media highlighted by respondents was the dissemination of health advice. The Royal Society for Public Health noted how health campaigns can gain credibility through promotion on social media platforms, particularly when individuals share their own experiences.

Benefits of social media and screens

- The inquiry heard about a range of instances where social media was beneficial to young people. Firstly, it was seen as a key way of connecting with friends and family, particularly across long distances. A survey of over 3,000 young people conducted for the inquiry showed that following friends' updates was the main reason for using social media for 27 per cent of respondents.
- In research conducted by YoungMinds and the Children's

Risks of social media and screens

- The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) review of the effects of screen time found that while there was 'moderately strong evidence that higher TV screen time was associated with greater adiposity at all ages', there was 'insufficient evidence for an association between adiposity and overall screen time'.
- Young people gave evidence to the inquiry about how the need to be on social media could disrupt sleep. One young person reported that 'I could confidently put a message in any of my group chats at 3 o'clock in the morning and someone would reply'. However, Professor Przybylski pointed out that the link between screen time and sleep was complex since individuals who are unable to sleep were more motivated to use digital screens to manage their sleep problems.
- There is emerging evidence that the devices used to access social media may have a negative effect on the body, as suggested by studies looking at the impact on posture and on the effect of texting on thumbs. Evidence was also cited showing that the blue light emitted from devices can suppress the hormone melatonin which aids sleep.
- There has been considerable debate about the benefits of imposing limits on screen time. However, the RCPCH reported that there was 'no strong evidence for a particular threshold in terms of a recommended number of hours of screen time in relation to adiposity'. Nevertheless, they have suggested that families should ask themselves 4 key questions, namely: is screen time in your household controlled?; does screen time interfere with what your family wants to do?; does screen use interfere with sleep?; and are you able to control snacking during screen time?
- The RCPCH reported that there was 'moderately strong evidence for an association between screen time and depressive symptoms'. A report from NHS Digital also pointed to an association between screen time and mental health. It found that 11-19 year-olds with a mental disorder were more likely to use social media every day than those without.
- Internet Matters breaks down the risks into 'three Cs'. The first of these is content. There is substantial evidence of the negative effects of pornography on children; studies have found that it has adverse effects on sexual beliefs and that it may be related to sexually deviant or coercive behaviour. Hate-speech and violent content were also highlighted as posing considerable risks, along with fake news and unsuitable advertising.
- The second 'C' is contact. This includes risks such as grooming, child abuse and child sexual exploitation. Some worrying statistics were put forward. The UK Safer Internet Centre cited a 2016 study of young people aged between 12 and 16 which found that 53 per cent had been solicited online. Witnesses emphasised that although social media was not the cause of child abuse and sexual exploitation, it enables a 'large degree of amplification and facilitation'.
- The third 'C' related to conduct, with particular concerns expressed about cyberbullying. Experiences of cyberbullying have been associated with a wide range of negative outcomes in young people including 'reduced attainment, higher absence rates, increased tobacco, alcohol and drug use, mental health issues, reduced self-esteem, suicidal ideation, and poor physical health'. Witnesses pointed out that certain groups including those with special educational needs were more likely to suffer from cyberbullying. A study by NHS Digital revealed a gender bias, with girls more likely than boys to have been bullied. Witnesses stressed the psychological impacts of an incident being repeated over and over online, as

pictures or comments are shared and re-posted to a new audience.

Resources for schools and parents

- Many witnesses to the inquiry highlighted the importance of fostering digital literacy and resilience in children and young people. The government's draft guidance related to Relationships and Health Education includes advice about online harms and states that 'pupils should be taught rules and principles for keeping safe online, including how to recognise risks, harmful content and contact and how and to whom to report issues'.
- Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) is often considered to be the best platform through which to deliver digital literacy. It will soon be made compulsory in primary and secondary schools a move supported by many witnesses to the inquiry.
- However, concerns were expressed about whether this would be done effectively. Witnesses pointed out that PSHE is not funded and that it is mostly delivered by non-specialist teachers. Furthermore, there is no single centralised resource; concerns were expressed about the fragmented nature of provision which can lead to confusion.
- Many witnesses to the inquiry expressed concerns about a lack of parental awareness and engagement. In response to this the government, in its written evidence, stated that the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) would 'undertake a review of available online safety information available to parents and identify gaps in resources'.

Key recommendations

- Social media companies should make anonymised high-level data available, for research purposes, to bona fide researchers so that a better understanding of social media's effects on users can be established.
- The government must proactively lead the way in ensuring that an effective partnership is in place across civil society, technology companies, law enforcement, and non-governmental organisations aimed at ending child sexual exploitation (CSE) and abuse online. Social media companies should have a 'duty of care' to users who are under 18.
- The Department for Education should commission research early in 2019 to evaluate existing resources on online safety and digital resilience. This should be undertaken with a view to creating guidance on, and signposting teachers towards, high-quality information and teaching resources.
- In addition to identifying the gaps in the online safety information available to parents, the government should commission the UK Council for Child Internet Safety to produce a toolkit in 2019 for parents and caregivers.
- The government should introduce a statutory code of practice for social media companies, to provide consistency on content reporting practices and moderation mechanisms. This should be accompanied by a requirement for social media companies to publish detailed Transparency Reports every six months. Furthermore, when content that is potentially illegal under UK law is reported to a social media company, it should have to review the content, take a decision on whether to remove, block or flag that item (if appropriate), and relay that decision to the individual/organisation reporting it within 24 hours. Ofcom should perform the duties of regulator.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmsctech/822/822.pdf>