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New WHO/HBSC report sheds light on adolescent digital behaviours across Europe, Central Asia and Canada



A new report from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, released today in collaboration with the WHO Regional Office for Europe, provides comprehensive insights into adolescent digital behaviours across Europe, Central Asia and Canada. The report, "[A focus on adolescent social media use and gaming in Europe, central Asia and Canada](#)," draws on data from almost 280,000 young people aged 11, 13 and 15 across 44 countries and regions. It offers a nuanced picture of how adolescents are engaging with social media and digital games, highlighting both concerning trends and positive aspects of digital engagement.



Key findings reveal complex digital landscape

The report uncovered several significant trends in adolescent digital behaviour:

- **Rise in problematic social media use:** The proportion of adolescents classified as problematic social media users increased from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022. Girls reported higher levels of problematic use than boys (13% vs 9%).
- **High rates of continuous online contact:** Over a third (36%) of adolescents reported continuous online contact with friends and others, with the highest rates among 15-year-old girls (44%).
- **Prevalence of daily gaming:** A third (34%) of adolescents play digital games daily, with 22% playing for at least four hours on gaming days.

- **Risk of problematic gaming:** 12% of adolescents are at risk of problematic gaming, with boys more likely than girls to show signs of problematic gaming (16% vs 7%).
- **Socio-economic disparities:** Adolescents from high-affluence families reported higher prevalence of continuous online contact and intense social media use, while those from low-affluence families had the highest prevalence of non-active social media use.

Understanding problematic social media use

The report defines problematic social media use as a pattern of behaviour characterised by addiction-like symptoms, including an inability to control usage, experiencing withdrawal when not using it, neglecting other activities, and facing negative consequences in daily life due to excessive use.



Implications and concerns

The rise in problematic social media use among adolescents raises significant concerns about potential impacts on young people. Previous research has found that problematic social media users reported lower mental and social well-being and higher levels of substance use compared to non-problematic users and non-users. This trend, if continued, could have far-reaching consequences for adolescent development and long-term health outcomes.

Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, noted: "It's clear that social media can have both positive and negative consequences on the health and wellbeing of adolescents. That's why digital literacy education is so important. Yet it remains inadequate in many countries, and

where it is available, it often fails to keep pace with young people and rapidly evolving technology.”

Positive aspects of social media use

While the report highlights the risks, it also underscores the benefits of responsible social media use. Adolescents who are heavy but non-problematic users reported stronger peer support and social connections.

As one 17-year-old boy from Poland shared, “There are many benefits of social media, especially when they are used in moderation. Among the benefits, there is connection and connectedness. Teenagers may meet others who share their passions and interests.”

Dr Natasha Azzopardi-Muscat, Director for Country Health Policies and Systems at WHO/Europe, added: “This study reveals both the promise and the pitfalls of digital engagement for our young people. It’s crucial that we take steps to protect youth to navigate the digital landscape safely and equip them to make informed choices about their online activities, maximising the benefits while minimising the risks to their mental and social well-being. In short, they should rule social media, and not have social media ruling them.”



Gaming trends and implications

The report’s findings on gaming habits also raise concerns. While 68% of adolescents were classified as non-problematic gamers, 12% were at risk of problematic gaming. A previous HBSC study examining problematic online gaming behaviour in five countries found associations with lower life satisfaction, more frequent psychological complaints, and lower peer support.

Dr Claudia Marino, one of the report authors at the University of Padova, noted: “The gender differences in gaming patterns are striking. Boys not only show higher rates of daily gaming but are also more likely to develop problematic gaming habits. This highlights the need for targeted interventions that consider gender-specific motivations and risk factors in gaming behaviour.”

A call to action

The HBSC study findings offer a roadmap for action. Key recommendations for policymakers, educators, and healthcare providers include:

- **Invest in a health promoting school environment, in which digital literacy education is embedded:** Implement evidence-based programs in schools covering responsible social media use, online safety, critical thinking skills, and healthy gaming habits.
- **Enhance mental health services:** Ensure access to confidential, non-judgmental, and affordable mental health services which can address issues arising from problematic digital technology use.
- **Promote open dialogue:** Encourage conversations about digital well-being within families, schools, and communities to reduce stigma and increase awareness.
- **Train educators and healthcare providers:** Provide specialised training to deliver effective and inclusive digital literacy education and support.
- **Enforce platform accountability:** Ensure social media platforms enforce age restrictions and create a regulatory framework encouraging responsible design of digital tools for young users.



“Ultimately, what we are seeking to achieve for young persons is a solid foundation for life in our digital age, something social media companies and young people alike are beginning to acknowledge and act upon around the world,” said Dr Kluge. “Digital literacy in the context of child development and well-being, informed by the right knowledge at the right time along with the right health and other support services, are critical. By empowering adolescents to make informed decisions about their online activities, balancing their online and offline worlds, we ultimately help safeguard and improve their overall well-being. This is crucial for ensuring a healthier, more balanced digital future for all communities, societies and countries.”



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