THE HIDDEN DANGERS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Understanding Its Impact on Child and Adolescent Mental Health

Social media has become deeply ingrained in the daily lives of young people. For many early adolescents - those between 9 and 15 years old - scrolling, messaging, and posting are now core parts of how they connect and express themselves. But a growing body of research warns that the risks are both real and widespread. This isn't just about the opportunity cost of screens or the physical implications of spending too much time on them, but also about the specific harms that have been evidenced as relating to social media.

Social media refers to online platforms where users can share information and connect with virtual communities through text, video, photos, and other content. Examples of social media platforms include YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, Signal, Reddit, and X, formerly known as Twitter.

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SOCIAL MEDIA HAS BECOME DEEPLY INGRAINED IN THE DAILY LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

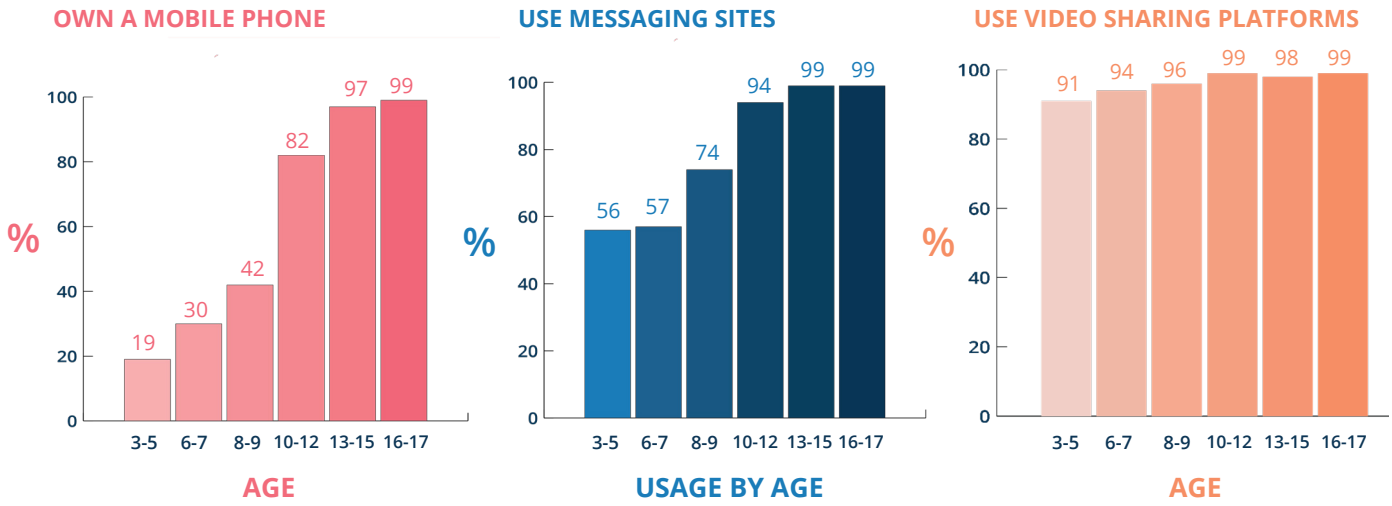


Figure 1*:* (Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, 2025)

TOP 5 ONLINE COMMUNICATION APPS/SITES USED - BY AGE GROUP

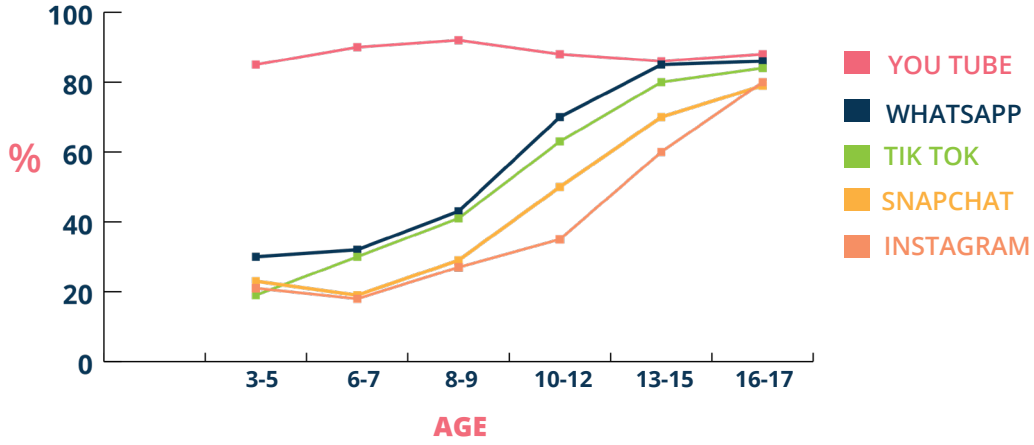


Figure 2: (Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes report, 2024)

PROPORTION OF 3-5 YEAR OLDS WHO USE SOCIAL MEDIA

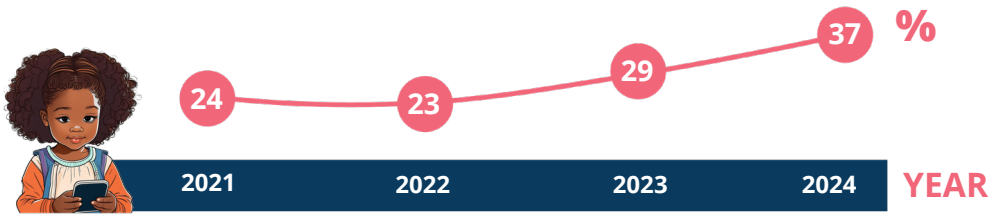
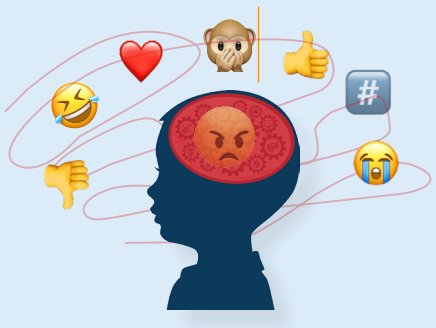


Figure 3: (Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, 2025)

RISING SCREEN TIME, RISING RISKS

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a trend that was already underway: young people are spending more time on screens than ever before. This isn't just about passive TV-watching. Instead, today's teens and preteens are drawn to interactive forms, such as social media, video games, video chat, and texting. Studies show that these increases are not benign (Mabaso et al., 2024; Pagliaccio et al., 2024, Bear et al., 2025). **Higher social media use is linked to a range of mental health symptoms, including:**

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Eating disorders
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Disruptive behaviour disorders



The Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Study found that these associations hold in both short-term and longer follow-up studies. Importantly, the adverse effects are more pronounced with social media use than with other types of screen activity (Nagata, Lee et al., 2025).

THE TYPE OF CONTENT AND THE POWER OF THE ALGORITHMS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Children, in most cases, do not actively search for harmful content (at least initially). It incrementally builds up in their feeds. The content children see on social media is very different to that of their parents. This isn't just about the harms of passive screen watching and an increase in sedentary lifestyle. Pornography is seen by children on social media sites as well as pornography sites. Social media platforms have increasingly become one of the most popular types of platforms and applications used by convicted extremists (Kenyon et al., 2022).

13 is the average age that children first see pornography

59% of children first saw pornography by accident

27% of children had seen pornography by 11

Where young people are being exposed to pornography

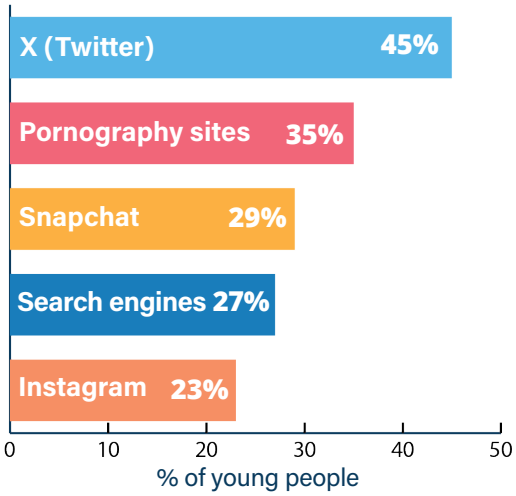


Figure 4: ("Sex is kind of broken now": Children and Pornography, 2025)

"It was an image of a politician and then that image was made up of a whole bunch of small images of genitalia. And then, because TikTok has a feature where you can zoom in, like obviously it was like pornographic content, but because TikTok's algorithms and stuff only saw the picture of (the politician) overall and not the picture when you zoomed in" – **Boy, 17.**

For many children, their journey to harmful content starts from an innocent place, and they are rapidly taken down a rabbit hole of attention-grabbing (and dangerous) content. For example:

50% - **children who have seen violence online say they came across it on someone else's profile or feed.**

35% - **report that violent content has been shared with them directly.**

25% - **worryingly, a quarter of young people viewing violent content online said the platforms had pushed or made the content available to them** (e.g. via their 'Newsfeed' or after 'For You Page').

(Youth Endowment Fund, 2024).

A study looking at whether **Tik Tok contributes to eating disorders,** compared Tik Tok algorithms belonging to individuals with eating disorders versus healthy controls. They found that algorithms belonging to users with eating disorders delivered more of the following content:

- Appearance-oriented **(+146 %)**
- Dieting **(+335 %)**
- Exercise **(+142 %)**
- Toxic eating disorder videos **(+4343 %)**

More substantial biases in users' algorithms toward these videos were associated with more severe eating disorder symptoms. Whilst users with eating disorders were slightly more likely to "like" these problematic video categories (e.g., dieting videos: +23 % versus controls), **their algorithms were far more likely to deliver these videos in the first place** (dieting videos: +335 % versus controls) (Griffiths et al., 2024).

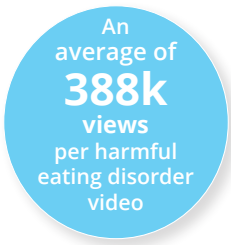


Figure 5:
(YouTube's Anorexia Algorithm, 2024)

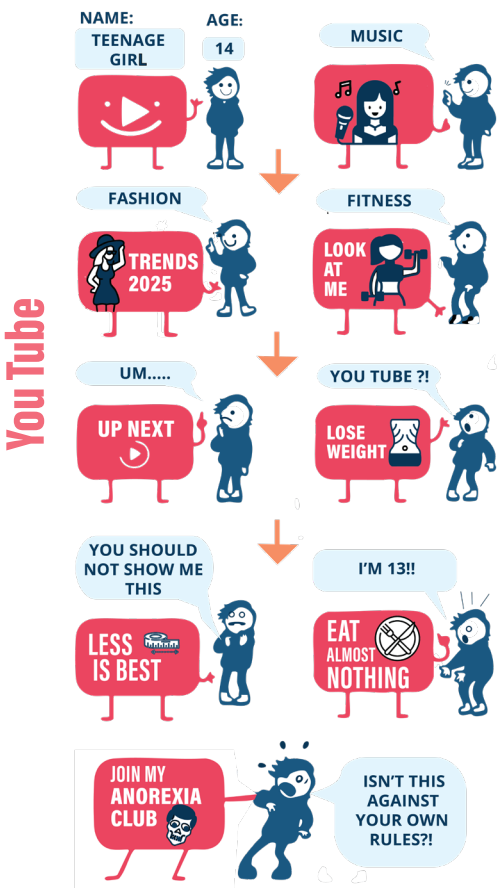


Figure 6:
(YouTube's Anorexia Algorithm, 2024)

It is important to remember that Anorexia Nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric illness, and there has been a dramatic increase in the prevalence of eating disorders in young people in the past decade. This on a backdrop of a completely oversubscribed health service that simply cannot cope with the increased demand (Darzi, 2024). There has also been a marked increase in paediatric psychiatric emergency hospital admissions. This rise has been particularly pronounced in girls aged 11-15, with a 113% increase, and for eating disorders, a 515% increase (Ward et al., 2025).

PROBLEMATIC SOCIAL MEDIA USE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

A significant portion struggles to control their use. **Globally, more than 1 in 10 adolescents (11%)** show signs of what experts call "**problematic social media use**." This term describes addiction-

like symptoms, such as:

- Inability to control usage
- Feeling withdrawal when not online
- Neglect of other activities
- Experiencing daily negative consequences due to social media

Girls are especially vulnerable, with 13% reporting problematic use compared to 9% of boys. In England, 20% of 11-year-old girls and 23% of 13-year-old girls have problematic social media usage (Boniel-Nissim et al., 2024).

The effects are far-reaching: those with problematic social media patterns report lower life satisfaction and higher rates of psychosomatic complaints, most notably, persistent bad moods and irritability. What's striking is that these negative impacts appear regardless of gender or how much social support the young person feels. This reinforces the profound impact of social media on adolescents' wellbeing (Vonk et al., 2025).

"More online protection, TikTok (and all socials) is destroying our minds and morals at a very young age, alongside exposing young eyes to highly inappropriate sexual, suicidal, violent, traumatising content that then becomes normalised." – **Girl, 17**

THE LINK TO SUBSTANCE USE AND EARLY EXPERIMENTAL DRINKING

Social media use doesn't just influence emotional health. Long-term studies show that early mobile phone ownership and social media engagement at age 11 or 12 can predict substance use over the following 18 months. The effect is even stronger for social media use than for simply having a phone (Doran et al., 2025).

Every additional hour spent on social media increases the risk of trying alcohol, nicotine, or cannabis. Research also finds that more time on social media increases the likelihood of "alcohol sipping"- early, experimental drinking that often leads to future substance use problems (Nagata, Sajjad, et al., 2024; Nagata, Shim, et al., 2025). Social media is a marketplace for teens to buy drugs. Researchers at the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction found that drug dealing is easily accessible on social media, especially on Snapchat and Reddit. These platforms facilitate drug markets that exploit their features and evade moderation.

SOCIAL MEDIA, SLEEP AND THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN

Sleep is essential for healthy adolescent development, but social media often gets in the way. Studies have shown that higher social media use is directly linked to shorter sleep duration and difficulties with sleep onset (Khan et al., 2024).

Moreover, this lack of sleep has a compounding effect: interactions between sleep deprivation and activity in specific brain regions (like the cingulate and frontal gyri) can predict both increased social media use and changes in brain function (Kiss et al., 2024).

These brain areas are crucial for executive control (the ability to make decisions and regulate behaviour) and reward processing. What does this mean for teens? Poor sleep, triggered or worsened by time spent on social media, can alter brain function in ways that may make young people even more vulnerable to depressive symptoms (Hökby et al., 2025).

Bedroom screen use was the strongest predictor of children's exposure to mature media (Nagata, Li et al., 2025).

SOCIAL MEDIA, DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS AND SUICIDAL RISK

Perhaps the most alarming finding is the **strong association between addictive social media use and suicidal behaviour.** Tracking over 4,000 adolescents, researchers found that 31.3% were showing rising addiction to social media over four years. These teens faced a doubled risk of suicidal behaviour and emotional struggles (Xiao et al., 2025).

Higher addictive social media use isn't just a symptom of distress - it's a predictor of more severe mental health challenges, including depression, manic symptoms and anxiety (Nagata, Omar, et al,, 2025; Nagata, Zamora, et al., 2025; Bye et al., 2024; Pagliaccio et al., 2024). This was confirmed by the ongoing BrainWaves work in the UK, which found a linear relationship between higher rates of anxiety and depression and time spent networking on social media sites (Hayward & Sellman, 2024).

A systematic review has found a close link between **high levels of social media use and psychiatric disorders that involve delusions such as narcissism and body dysmorphic disorder** (Yang et al., 2025).

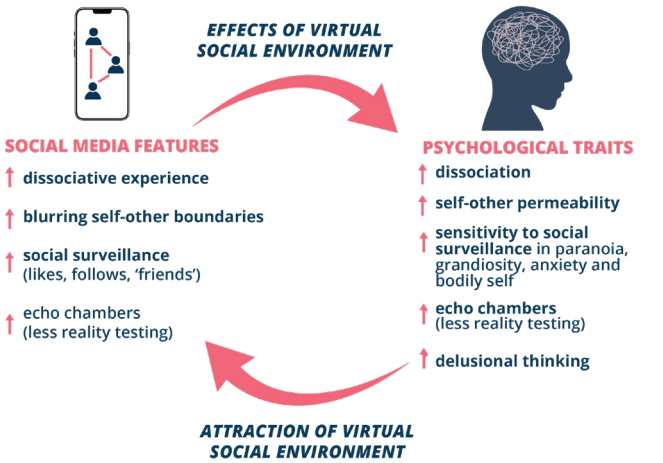
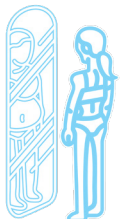


Figure 7: (Yang et al., 2025)

A simplified model of how features of social media may interact with human psychological traits. Credit: *BMC Psychiatry (2025). DOI:* 10.1186/s 12888-025-06528-6

These risks underscore the need for urgent action, particularly as digital habits develop early and become entrenched.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND EATING DISORDERS



Social media contributes to the development and exacerbation of eating disorder symptoms through perpetuating unrealistic body standards, as well as acting as a platform for aggressive marketing by the diet industry (Jimenez -Marin et al., 2020; Matos et al., 2023). And through targeted algorithms that show harmful content, including "toxic eating disorder" content, as already mentioned above (Griffiths et al., 2024).

A scoping review looking at 50 studies in 17 countries (Dane & Bhatia, 2023) showed that social media use consistently predicts:

- Body image concerns
- Disordered eating
- Poor mental health

Each extra hour on social media raises the odds of engaging in risky compensatory behaviours (like binge eating) and experiencing distress about eating. Odds ratios for these behaviours range from 1.05 to 1.55, indicating that the risk increases steadily with increased time spent online. Meanwhile, problematic social media use and excessive phone habits are linked to all types of eating disorder symptoms, with odds ratios from 1.26 to 1.82 (Chu et al., 2024).

SOCIAL MEDIA, BODY IMAGE AND COMMERCIAL PRESSURE

The pressure of social media, the constant recording of life and the comparative culture have led to increased body image concerns and cosmetic surgery. Heavy use of these platforms, especially amongst young women, increases the

likelihood of girls aspiring to cosmetic surgery as a solution to perceived body image issues (Ateq et al., 2024). Almost three-quarters of teenage girls believe that social media creates more pressure for people to look a certain way, and this sentiment is now also echoed among boys, with:

52% **of boys stating that influencers on social media create pressure to undergo cosmetic procedures to alter their appearance.**

34% **of men, globally, and**

31% **of boys, globally have stopped themselves from eating, are binge eating, or skipping meals to achieve their ideal appearance.**

27% **have adopted unsafe exercise behaviours, such as exercising more than their body can handle.**

(Slaughter-Acey et al., 2024).

The skincare routines and trends popularised on social media drive younger children and teens to use complex and expensive skincare products, which are not suitable for their skin and can cause long-term damage (Rackham, 2024). Acne rates among young people in the UK were among the highest globally. There was a steady increase in cases, averaging 0.27% per year over a three-decade period. By 2021, 14.6% of adolescents and young people were diagnosed with acne, a 7.4% increase from 1990 (Zhu et al., 2025). It has been suggested that this is partly due to inappropriate skincare routines (Eccles, 2024).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT IN THE REAL WORLD/VIOLENCE

Social media for young people influences and reflects their offline response. 59% of teachers attribute social media usage as a driving factor for the deterioration of behaviour in their schools (NASUWT, 2025).

A major study (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024) into social media and violence found that the most **common form of violence witnessed online is fights involving young people**.

56% **of all 13–17-year-olds reported the most common form of violence witnessed online is fights involving young people.**

35% **have seen children carrying, promoting or using weapons on their social media.**

Of those seeing weapons, the ones that appear the most frequently are

44% **kitchen knives and**

34% **zombie knives or machetes**

ONLY 6% SEEING VIOLENCE ONLINE ACTUALLY SEARCHED FOR IT

And it is the most vulnerable children who are more likely to see violent content.

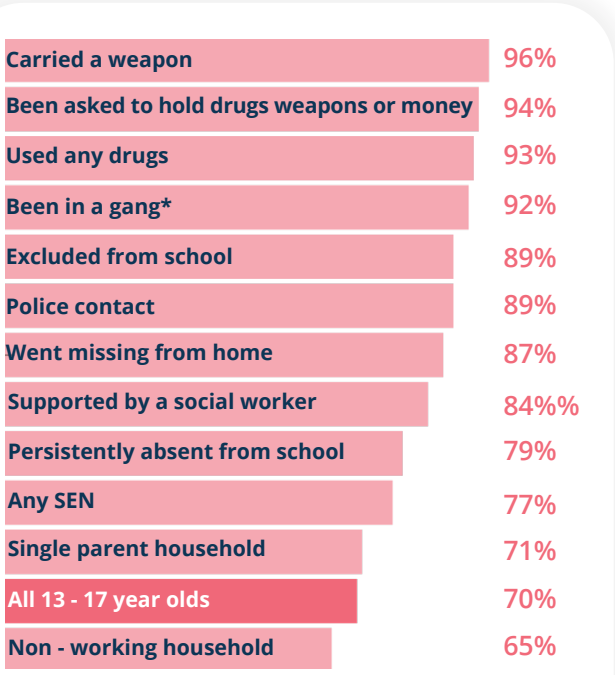


Figure 8: (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024)

"[The government] should make the internet more safe as YouTube is now swearing and saying inappropriate stuff" – **Boy, 9**

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON VULNERABLE CHILDREN

The increased exposure of vulnerable children to violent content is of great concern. These children are also more exposed to all risks of harm from social media.

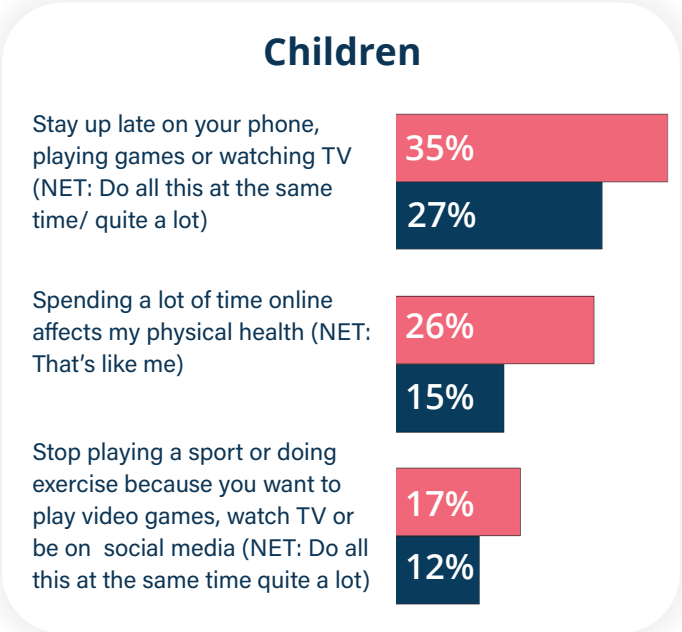
Children receiving **Free School Meals (FSM)** are more likely to participate in high-risk activities online:

	FSM	not receiving FSM
Live streaming	17%	12%
Frequent posting/ commenting on social media	21%	11%
Exposed to online harms	74%	60%
Being online makes them sad	14%	4%
Worried about their appearance	17%	8%

(Digital Wellbeing on a Budget, 2023)

It is not just their emotional wellbeing that is being impacted:

NEGATIVE FACTORS AFFECTING PHYSICAL DIGITAL WELLBEING



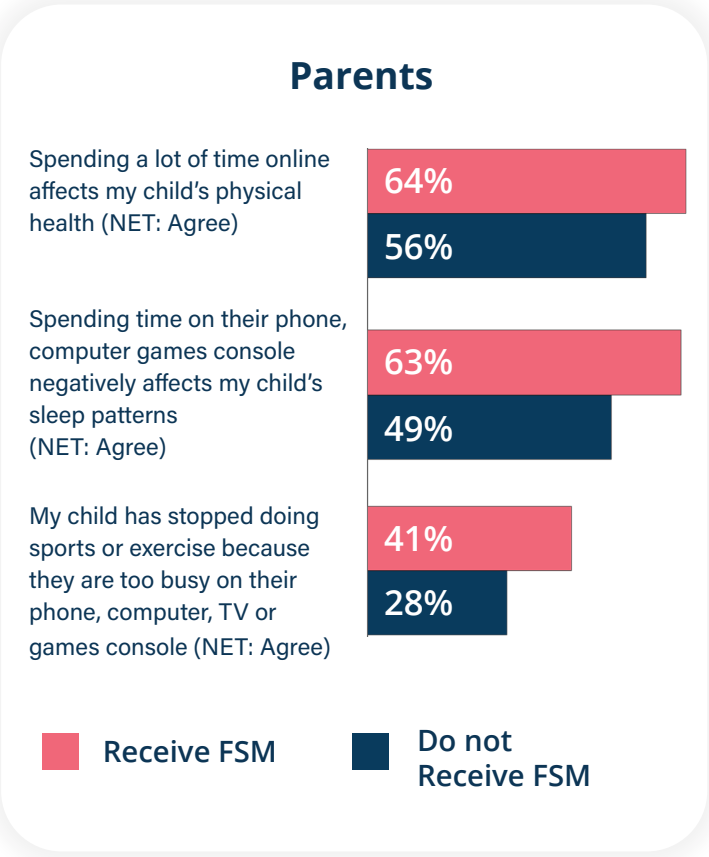


Figure 9: (Digital Wellbeing on a Budget, 2023)

Children with special educational needs and disabilities are additionally vulnerable online. Some children who had special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) have experienced online harm which appears to have been exacerbated or made more likely due to their additional vulnerabilities. This included them being taken advantage of because of their desire to maintain friendships, or challenges with reflecting on the consequences of certain actions (Reality, 2024).

Children in care, care leavers, young carers, children experiencing poverty and children with additional needs are more susceptible to online harms. These groups are more susceptible either because of their increased use of screens in comparison to other children, or because of their decreased ability to approach and interact with social media in a self-protective manner (Education Select Committee, 2024).

Vulnerable children are also at risk of child criminal exploitation via social media platforms. Johnny Bolderson, Senior Service Manager in County

Lines Support and Rescue for Catch22, described social media and online gaming as the "foundation of county lines recruitment" that have made it far easier for criminal gangs to contact vulnerable young people (Education Select Committee, 2024). Research covering almost 3000 adolescents in the UK concluded that "offline vulnerability extends to online life" (El Asam & Katz, 2018).

Senior UK police officers have publicly called for the government to ban children under 16 from social media, amid claims the platforms are "fuelling and enabling" crime.

WHY ARE ADOLESCENTS SO VULNERABLE?

AND WHY 16 IS THE EARLIEST THAT THEY SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO SOCIAL MEDIA

'Adolescence is a period of life in which our sense of self, and particularly our sense of social self, that is how others see us, undergoes a profound transition. As teenagers become more conscious of how others perceive them, they often experience increased self-consciousness and self-criticism. Social media can amplify this. With every post, like and comment, young people have to navigate a cycle of self-presentation and comparison, shaping their identities based on the curated, filtered lives fed to them by social media algorithms. Young people's evolving sense of self and what society expects of them are influenced and distorted by what they are exposed to both offline and online' (Blakemore, 2025).

Boys and girls are at risk at different times, but the current age limit of 13 years for social media platforms is unsuitable for both sexes. In girls, social media use between the ages of 11 and 13 was linked to a decrease in life satisfaction one year later. In boys, this decrease was observed between the ages of 14 and 15. These differences suggest that sensitivity to social media may be related to developmental changes, such as alterations in brain structure or the effects of puberty, which occurs later in boys compared to girls (Orben et al., 2022).

EARLY SOCIAL MEDIA ACCESS IS THE DRIVER FOR THE LINK BETWEEN EARLY SMARTPHONE USAGE AND WORSE MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

The Global Mind Project reveals that receiving a smartphone before age 13 is associated with poorer mind health outcomes in young adulthood, particularly among females. This includes suicidal thoughts, detachment from reality, poorer emotional regulation, and diminished self-worth. Today, **41% of 18–34-year-olds struggle with symptoms or diminished functioning that significantly impair their daily life** (The Youth Mind: Rising aggression and anger, 2025).

Regression analysis of The Global Mind Project indicates that the age of access to social media accounts for about 40% of the link between smartphone ownership and mental health (Figure 11). Other factors include poor family relationships (13%), cyberbullying (10%), and disrupted sleep (12%). Importantly, 68% of the negative impacts from poor family relationships and 63% from cyberbullying stem from the age of the first social media account. This implies that early access to social media increases the risk of poor family dynamics and cyberbullying (Thiagarajan et al., 2025).

"More should be done to educate children about respecting other people, particularly women. I use social media every day, and I see a lot of misogynistic comments left by people my age. There are also racist and insensitive comments mocking people about their experiences and trauma." – **Girl, 16.**

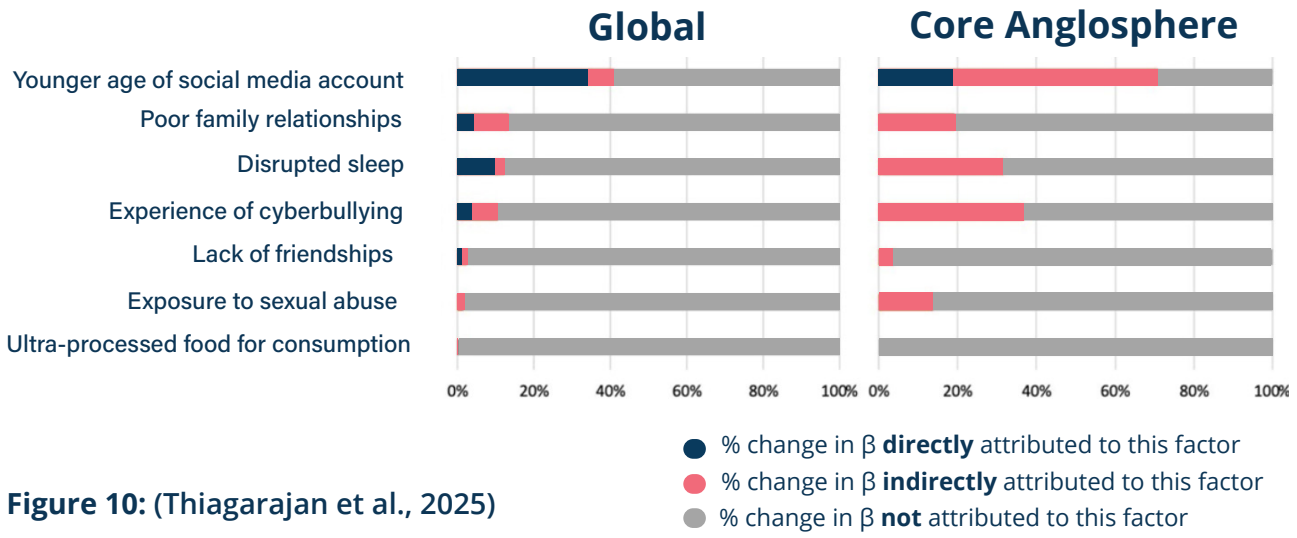


Figure 10: (Thiagarajan et al., 2025)
It continues into young adulthood as well.

Social media use at the age of 19 was also associated with a decline in life satisfaction one year later. Researchers suggest that at this age, social changes - such as leaving home or starting a job - may make individuals particularly vulnerable (Orben et al., 2022).

This decrease in life satisfaction being associated with social media use has been shown to get worse not better in a large recent survey of young people entering further education or University.

59% of university students surveyed said phones and/or social media triggers anxiety and worry.

89% of all university students feel their relationship with their phone is unhealthy, compared with

71% of secondary school students

(Redmond, 2025)

It is becoming clear that young adults have ongoing and persistent issues with social media that are not relieved by growing out of their teenage years. Indeed, if our existing young adults (so-called digital natives) are having such pervasive issues, the argument from some people around this being a 'moral panic' starts to wear very thin. It also exposes our current level of digital literacy education for young people as inadequate. As CSAM, mental health incidents and misogyny continue to increase, it is safe to say we are failing them.

PHYSICAL BRAIN CHANGES IN TEENS WHO HABITUALLY CHECK SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

A longitudinal study showed that adolescents who habitually checked social media had divergent brain development, shown on fMRI scanning, compared to those who reported lower smart device engagement (Maza et al., 2023). These changes in neural sensitivity to the anticipation of social feedback were critical brain networks associated with emotional salience, motivation, and cognitive control. These changes could have significant long-term impacts on psychological adjustment to social situations and again show how the smart device is the perfect facilitator of 'habitual checking behaviours', which we increasingly realise to be harmful and are changing the function and development of adolescent brains.

THE DANGER OF A DISTORTED ONLINE ENVIRONMENT FOR TEENS

The digital world can distort reality. Teens often use social media to escape real-life isolation, but this can deepen feelings of loneliness and confusion about identity. Experts describe a cycle called "Delusion Amplification by Social Media" (see figure 7): altered self-perceptions—like narcissism or body dysmorphia—are reinforced in the virtual space, where users create and maintain distorted identities away from real-life checks and balances (Yang et al., 2025).

These problems are not limited to mental health. As young people become more invested in their online personas, they are more likely to:

- Experience social comparison and internalise unrealistic ideals
- Become invested in appearance-focused online activities (like photo sharing and editing)
- Feel dissatisfied with their bodies and lives
- Engage in risky behaviours offline

The result is a self-perpetuating cycle of dissatisfaction, risk, and addiction.

THE ROLE OF FAMILY AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

Many parents hope that a strong support network can shield their children from the harms of social media. While supportive families and friends are always beneficial, research indicates that merely increasing perceived social support is insufficient to counteract the adverse effects of problematic social media use (Vonk et al., 2025). Instead, practical steps—such as reducing screen time at home and fostering healthy digital habits—show more promise in protecting young people's wellbeing (Nagata, Paul et al., 2024).

Parents believe that social media has the biggest impact on their children's mental health. Parents would support such moves to tackle social media, finding that nearly nine in 10 parents (86 per cent) backed raising the so-called "digital age of consent", the point at which children should be allowed onto social media, from 13 to 16 (More in Common, 2025).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND TEENS. THEY ARE MORE NEGATIVE ABOUT IT THAN WE ARE BEING LED TO BELIEVE

In a 2025 survey, **about half of teens (48%) say social media has a mostly negative effect** on people their age, up from 32% in 2022. And fewer now see social media as having a mostly positive effect: 11% say this, down from 24% in 2022 (Faverio, 2025).

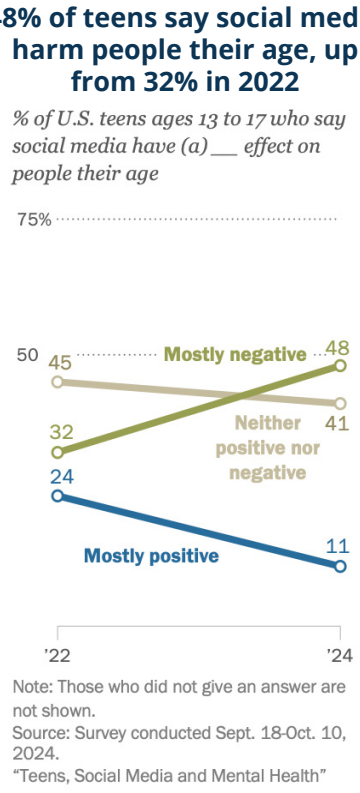


Figure 11: (Faverio, 2025)

And closer to home the picture is no different. Many young people from Gen Z regret the amount of time they spent on social media and 'overwhelmingly think social media does more harm than good to young people' (More in Common, 2025).

A poll of 16-17 year olds found that one-third believe the age limit for social media accounts should be 14 to 15, while 31% favour 16 to 17-year-olds. Only 4% said there should be no limit (Wheeler, 2025).

"Initially people want social media because all their friends have it and they feel like they're missing out. Everyone who has had it for a long time doesn't particularly like it." - **Siya, 17**

WHAT CAN WE DO?

THE EVIDENCE IS CLEAR, ROBUST AND IT CONTINUES TO GROW

SOCIAL MEDIA IS NOT A HARMLESS HABIT FOR EARLY ADOLESCENTS

The dangers are real, especially for those who use these platforms excessively or in problematic ways. As a society - government, health professionals and parents - we need to take action:

Prohibit social media
(Including messaging apps such as Snapchat and Whatsapp, as well as video such as YouTube) until **16 years old.**

Public Health Campaign led by DHSC

Education for all future parents
Around the risks of screens and social media for children and how to prevent and spot signs of harm, and where to seek support.

Promote healthy habits
Model good digital behaviour as adults and create phone-free zones or family screen-free times.

Encourage balance for all screens
Set boundaries for screen time, especially before bed, and prioritise in-person interactions and offline activities.

Watch for warning signs
Be alert to changes in mood, sleep, social withdrawal, or eating patterns, and seek help early if concerns arise.

Public Health Policy and Training led by DHSC

Public health policy
Health professionals to be actively involved in all policy processes in this space due to the direct impacts on whole-child health. This needs to be at both the level of identifying and assessing the levels of risk and also at an intervention level, to instruct better support for children with existing or emerging issues.

Education and training for all health professionals
Social media is a powerful determinant of health and its impacts on whole-child health and safeguarding are irrefutable. Therefore, all health professionals currently in training or in clinical practice should receive compulsory training on the risks of harms associated with excessive screen and social media use in children. This education will not only serve to improve the health and safety of our young and society at large but will mean clinicians will be able to instruct and improve interventions for children and their families.

Conclusion

Social media plays a growing role in shaping the minds and behaviours of young people. We must not underestimate its power - or its risks. By understanding the science and taking thoughtful, proactive steps, we can help the next generation thrive both online and offline.

The challenge is great, but so is our responsibility.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY