

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

Social media and screens have become ubiquitous in the lives of children. Figures produced by Ofcom indicated that 70% of 12–15-year-olds have a profile on social media, while the OECD reported in 2015 that 94.8% of 15-year-olds in the UK used social media sites before or after school. Social media has undoubtedly connected people around the world and provided unprecedented ways to communicate instantaneously. Yet concerns have been growing about its effects on our wellbeing, and particularly on the physical and mental health of children. With the Government set to legislate on Online Harms in the next parliamentary session, our Report considers:

- whether the growing use of social media, and screens, among children is healthy or harmful;
- the evidence base for such claims; and
- whether any new measures or controls are required.

First and foremost, providing unambiguous answers to our questions was hindered by the limited quantity and quality of academic evidence available. Social media is a relatively new phenomenon and, consequently, there is not yet a well-established body of research in this area examining its effects on children. Similarly, research on screens has tended not to focus on newer devices like smartphones. We found that the majority of published research did not provide a clear indication of causation, but instead indicated a possible correlation between social media/screens and a particular health effect. There was even less focus in published research on exactly who was at risk and if some groups were potentially more vulnerable than others when using screens and social media. Given the Government's intention to legislate in this area, we are surprised to find that it has not commissioned any new, substantive research to help inform its proposals. We recommend that, as a matter of urgency, the Government should commission research to identify who is at risk of experiencing harm online and on social media, and why, and the longer-term consequences of that exposure on children.

[...]

Children must, as far as practically possible, be protected from harm when accessing and using social media sites.

[...]

To achieve this, the Government should introduce, through new primary legislation, a statutory code of practice for social media companies, to provide consistency on content reporting practices and moderation mechanisms.

[...]

Finally, the digital literacy and resilience of children, as well as their teachers and parents, must be improved to help safeguard children from risks and harms when using social media. PSHE¹ education must be made mandatory by the Government for primary and secondary school pupils and should deliver an age-appropriate understanding of, and resilience towards, the harms and benefits of the digital world.

¹ (PSHE) = Personal, social, health and economic education. Behöver inte översättas.