

ISSPHM statement on the potential harms of social media in childhood and adolescence

KEY POINTS

- Social media use by children and adolescents leads to exposure to harmful online content including disinformation, sexualised, violent content and online bullying.
- Heavy social media use is affecting sleep, physical activity, in-person social interactions, self-esteem and is linked to anxiety and depression. This risk is greater in young girls.
- Potential risks are likely greater in early adolescence (10-14 years).
- A precautionary approach should be taken.
- Social media boundaries, including delaying access or limiting its use and adult-child discussions on safe use, can help young people use social media safely.
- More research is needed on how to protect the well-being of children and adolescents on social media.

There is growing recognition of the ways in which social media use can impact on the health of our population¹. While social media use can have health-related benefits through enhanced social connectedness and improved access to health information, there is emerging evidence that the harms associated with social media use may outweigh the benefits for certain groups, especially children and adolescents.

Children and adolescents are routinely exposed to harmful online content on social media platforms such as sexualised content, gory or violent images, content that promotes eating disorders, and disinformation. Harmful online contacts with adults can give rise to risks of sexual exploitation, harassment and threats of extortion. Cyberbullying and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images are other sources of serious harm. The Planet Youth 2023 survey asked 4525 teenagers between 15-16 years of age living in Ireland about this topic and found that 33% of them had been asked to send sexually explicit content of themselves, 19% had received sexually explicit content that they had not consented to and 17% reported being bullied online.

Social media platforms are usually designed to maximize user engagement, for example, through push notifications, 'likes', algorithms and infinite scrolling. They often encourage heavy use and children and teenagers can struggle to maintain healthy limits. Results of the Planet Youth 2023 survey for Ireland show that 74% of adolescents reported spending an average of 2 hours or more per day on social media. Heavy social media use has been linked to poor mental health outcomes including symptoms of depression and anxiety, poorer sleep², online harassment, poor body image, low self-esteem³, decreased life satisfaction⁴ and the disruption of important health behaviours, like physical activity and in-person social interactions.

It is thought that the risk of harm is likely to be greater in early adolescence (typically 10-14 years)—a period of greater biological, social, and psychological transitions, than in late adolescence⁴⁻⁵. Surveys to date tend to show that girls (already at a higher risk for many mental health conditions)

are impacted to a greater degree than boys, particularly by heavy social media use⁶⁻¹¹. Differences in how they use social media have been highlighted, with boys more likely to use social media for entertainment (e.g. gaming, watching videos)⁶ while girls use social media for more hours per day on average, and tend to be more active in terms of creating content. Some evidence suggests that this type of social media use, i.e. posting content such as comments, photos and videos, is more likely to lead to feelings of inadequacy or low self-worth, due to the user more directly comparing herself with others^{7,10}.

Preliminary research suggests that a combination of social media limits and boundaries, adult-child discussion and coaching around social media use, could help young people to maintain a healthier relationship with social media¹². Boundaries might include keeping the child's bedroom device-free so that sleep is not disturbed at night or time limits on social media use. It should be noted that parental controls on social media can often be bypassed or manipulated by the user. Therefore, parent-led movements that delay access to a smartphone and social media until secondary school or later may be more effective in mitigating the potential negative impacts on early adolescents while preserving social norms for early teens (<https://delaysmartphones.org.uk/>). Guidance on parental controls is available here [a-parents-guide-to-cyber-safety-small-file-size-.pdf \(garda.ie\)](#)

Further research is urgently required to understand the most appropriate age at which to introduce a smartphone/access to social media and also to evaluate the impact of different interventions to protect the well-being of children and teenagers on social media, such as school policies on technology use, design features of smartphones and social media, etc.

In the meantime, ISSPHM is calling for a precautionary approach, given the signals of serious harm.

What is needed

1. Government policy and regulation of social media companies should be strengthened to ensure greater enforcement of age minimums, protection from harmful content and higher standards of data privacy for children. Social media companies should be held to account for their failings.
2. The government must fund, as a priority, research on the mental health impacts of social media on children and on the effectiveness of interventions to mitigate against these.
3. A public awareness campaign about the potential mental health impacts of social media on children and adolescents is required.
4. The Department of Education must ensure that digital literacy and online safety is taught in all schools. Resources are already available to support this <https://www.webwise.ie/teachers/resources/>
5. The HSE should develop guidance on the introduction and healthy use of smart phones and social media with input from children, teenagers, teachers, parents and relevant experts. Alongside this guidance, digital literacy and cyber safety resources are needed to enable parents to support their children around social media use.

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