# Children, Smart-phones, Social media and Well-being: Students' advice on how to keep children safe online.

What can we do to help children stay safe online? In a digital age permeated by smartphones and social media, the impact on our children's well-being is a pressing concern. As a secondary school leader, I've been exploring this topic and have sought insights from my students about their relationship with technology. Their perspectives reveal a complex landscape and their generation's struggle with the positives and pitfalls of social media use.

'We would be stricter, with our own children.'

I started a lesson on safer internet use by asking my year 8 students to imagine they had their own 11 year old. What rules or restrictions, if any, would they put in place around phone and social media use? I then asked if this was the same, more lenient or stricter, than their own experiences. The majority opted to be more restrictive.

I repeated the question with 3 other year 8 classes. Each had the same outcome. I shouldn't have been surprised. Young people repeatedly tell us that their relationship with social media is not ok. For example, the Millennium Cohort Study suggests that almost half of our teenagers feel addicted to social media. This RSPH survey found that overall, young people perceive the net effect of some apps – Snapchat and Instagram in particular- as negative.
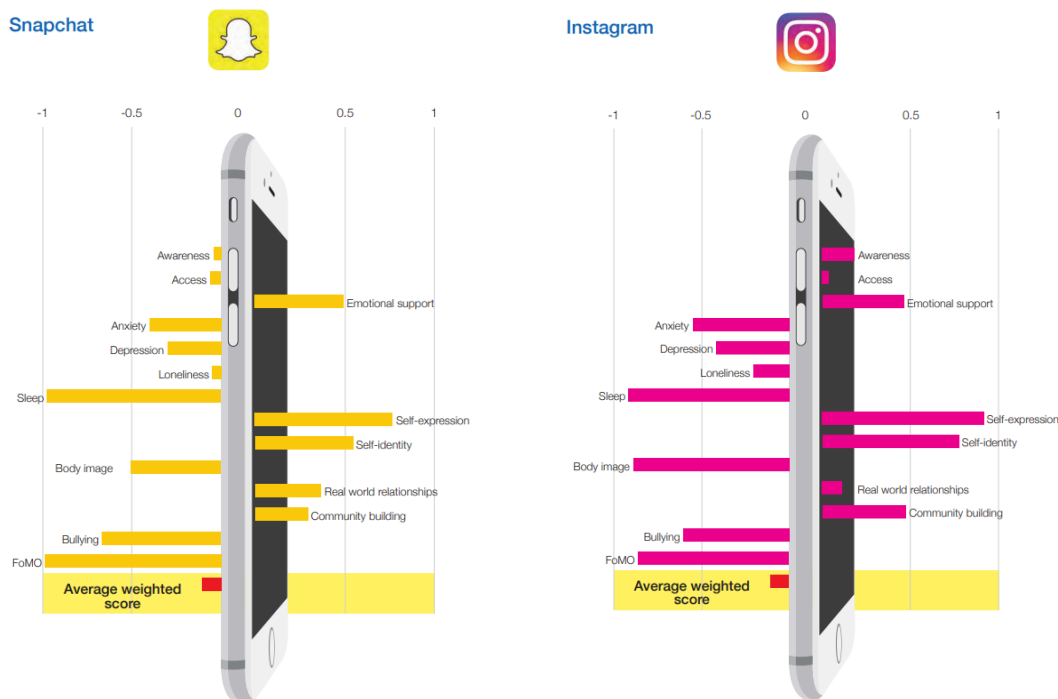
The net effect is troubling. The individual impact on some, particularly vulnerable young people even more so. My pastoral and teaching work in a secondary school gives me daily reminders of these three concerns:
- A decline in mental-health and well-being amongst young people.
- The disruptive effects of persistent technological distraction upon short-term attention and longer term development.

- The role that social media interaction plays in polarising and intensifying beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and sources of identity en route to adulthood. Troubling behaviours and conditions appear to spread via social media

It is highly plausible that access to social media via smart-phones. which utilise their front-facing cameras and constant availability, has contributed to a significant decline in teenagers' wellbeing. Jonathan Haidt (Professor at NYU-Stern) has summarised and collated analyses around this theme extensively here.

I am convinced that there is a lot of work to do. With young people, with parents, and with schools. Developing individual strategies, highlighting choices and warning young people and their parents about the risks cannot be the only steps we take. Whilst social media access may well be causing harm to many, individual exclusion from this world may not work- at least when the numbers involved are small. Being cut off from social interaction could actually be detrimental if most of one's peers spend their time, make memories and build relationships there.

The Online Safety Act, represents another key area for action. When I asked students across years 7-13 if they thought that social media access should be restricted for those under 16, a large minority agreed. Most others argued for some kind of restriction (perhaps at a younger age). Many of those arguing against a 'ban' suggested that preteens would simply 'tick the box' to access sites which they may not be legally allowed to. Because of this (and the power of FOMO!) in their view, a ban imposed at home was unlikely to work. Hopefully, the new responsibilities placed upon internet providers and social media companies can help in this area.
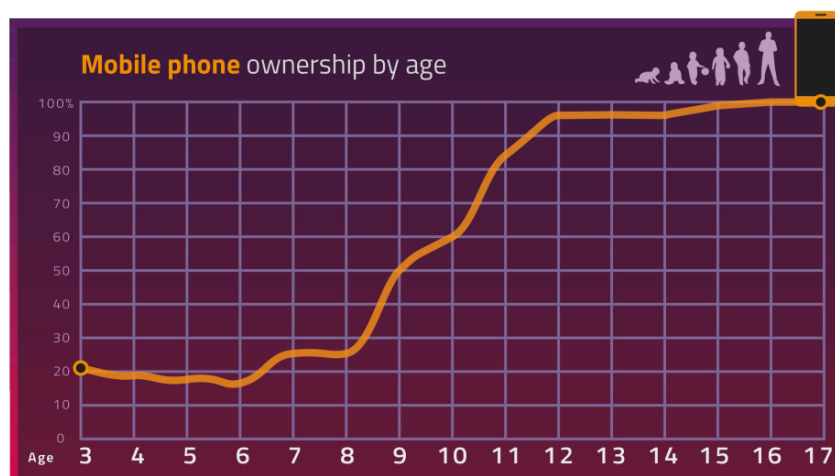
Smart phone access jumps up, in the UK, around year 6 to 7 (around age 10-11) when children start secondary school. Most of these phones are 'smart' (capable of running social media apps). My wife and I are likely to follow this trend with our daughter. Though we are seriously considering a 'brick' phone at first! I don't know what to do. We do want to be deliberate and systematic. It's hard to move backwards when freedoms and routines have become established. The decisions we make early on will matter.
I decided to find out what the students at my school thought. Perhaps what they share would be of use to parents (including me!) of younger children – before we give them their first phone.

I wrote an assembly introducing some of the key concerns around social media use and what young people, their parents, and we as a school can do. I explained that I currently think social media should be banned until 16! I then invited students to respond to an open questionnaire. Which asked them for advice for:
- parents of younger children
- young people themselves
- and their response on my social media ban polemic (which I linked to some of Haidt's arguments. Did they agree?

It was our most popular voluntary survey ever. A large number of students took the time to give thoughtful, nuanced and constructive advice.
The first question was:

'What should parents of year 6 students do to ensure their child stays safe and develops a positive relationship with the digital world?'

There are 5 things they strongly agreed upon, and 3 themes around which the disagreed. I have outlined each below, and included some complete responses, to give my students a chance to speak for themselves!

Our students agreed upon the following:

1. There should be a delayed introduction to social media: Don't allow children to access before it is legal. Consider screentime and app limits.
'Keep it simple. Phones are necessary if the child is commuting to school alone (as they likely will for secondary) to allow the parent to know where they are, that they are safe, etc. but it doesn't have to be more than that. Social media does not need to be introduced for a while (or ever). Personally I only got social media (Instagram) in Sixth Form and I only use it to find craft inspiration or to find cute cat videos to share with my friends/family. Social media can also be safe if it is used properly. Keep accounts on private and don't share anything that you are going to regret. You can keep an eye on your kids but let them have a little leniency within the rules of keeping everything on private, only sharing things with your friends etc.'

Year 12 Student
A majority advocated for delaying social media use until a later age, often citing their own positive experiences in waiting. They emphasised the importance of moderation and maturity before diving into social platforms.

Overall, almost 70% suggested delaying social media introduction or only initially using it under strict guidelines – perhaps on a family computer rather than personal device. Many warned of the problems of social media access when children are not mature enough to cope '

2. Parental Involvement and Guidance: Start conversations about the issue early. Explain restrictions. Don't let phone use monopolise children's time.
'Encourage safe technology usage with them from a younger age (make sure you guide them onto good sites or even supervise them and don't give them their own device – use a family computer for example)….When they get to year 6, don't give them an iPhone/any expensive phone – if you do, then put an age limit on certain apps (especially Snapchat and TikTok). If they ask why, explain that a whole generation is currently in the process of growing up with unfiltered internet access and it's ruining their lives (my generation!). Encourage them to go outside, interact face-to-face, have a creative hobby. Their friends will probably go on and on about the benefits of social media but tell them that it's only good in moderation – maybe show them the sites you use and your feed – maybe share a social media account with them (create a blank one they can use) so that their feed isn't leading them into an echo chamber (because it'll be your child-safe feed too). They may not even realise it's shared so they feel like they have freedom, but you'll know that they're not looking at anything damaging. I think the main advice is to use the internet in moderation, with your children, and encourage child-safe online activities. Maybe I sound really harsh, but I used to be a big advocate for social media until I found out what horrors lurk underneath it and how much of a waste of time it is.'

Year 13 Student

Students agreed on the need for parental involvement. This specifically includes setting restrictions, and guiding children's online activities. Many propose a controlled environment with limited access, parental monitoring, and discussions about online dangers.

About 80% of responses emphasised the need for parental guidance and restrictions.

3. Set stringent privacy and safety measures: Keep privacy settings high. Make sure connections are with known peers and friends. Be aware of some of the dangers and discuss these appropriately.

'Make sure there is a level of trust between the parent and their child. They shouldn't restrict their child from communicating with their friends especially after they leave primary school. I think the parents shouldn't snoop through their phones however should make sure their child understands the dangers of social media and how damaging it can be.'

Year 10 Student

Students suggest privacy settings, monitoring, and ensuring safety by restricting access to certain apps or contacts. They highlight the importance of trust while ensuring safety online.

Nearly 60% emphasised the need for privacy settings and safety measures.In particular only connecting digitally with peers who they know 'irl' (in real life). There was not a consensus on whether this meant parents should directly monitor interactions or not!

4. Open Communication:

'Start small. Only have a few contacts – family, maybe a few close friends. Developing out of club/school relationships is tricky and it can be overwhelming. Teach them how to interact with social media. Don't tell them not to do something without an explanation as it makes them more curious and more likely to do it. Teach them stranger danger on the internet. Don't talk to strangers and if they try to talk to you, cut them off – block them. Don't take their phone/Ipad/tablet/laptop etc away unless absolutely needed. Let them make mistakes, because it teaches them not to make them again. Also, make sure to look into the apps they ask for, don't just say no. If you look at it and decide it isn't suitable, explain why, this helps them understand what kind of apps to ask for in the future, so you don't end up saying an endless string of "no".'

Year 9 Student

There was a consensus on maintaining open conversations about online activities, dangers, and responsible use. Parents were encouraged to talk openly without invading their child's privacy. Around 75% of advice given stressed the importance of open conversations about social media and the reasons behind restrictive decisions.

5. Moderation and Balance:

'Follow them on social medias, enforce 'no phone' rules at meals, try to interact with them and do things together that make them less inclined to spend all day on the phone. Set an example for the child, because young people often grow up a certain way by copying what their parents do.'

Year 8 Student

Around 65% of responses stressed the need for moderation in internet use, emphasising the importance of balancing online time with real-life activities, hobbies, and outdoor interactions. A number said that parents need to model healthy phone use. This is something I am working harder on as a result!

Specific points of disagreement included:

1. The optimal age for social media introduction?

While most suggest delaying social media, there's some discrepancy regarding the specific age. Some suggest waiting until secondary school, around 11–13 years, while others advise
against it until the child is much older, often citing negative personal experiences.

2 Parental Control and Monitoring Levels?
There was divergence in opinions regarding the extent of parental control and monitoring. Some advocated for regular phone checks and strict restrictions, while others emphasised giving freedom with minimal interference to avoid a lack of trust.
A number of older respondents (i.e those in years 12 and 13) argued for tougher restrictions and closer monitoring, at least early on. Younger students were slightly more likely to suggest trust and communication were preferable to 'snooping'!

3. Screen Time Limits and Restrictions:
Opinions varied regarding screen time limits and app restrictions. Some suggested strict limits and restrictions, while others believed it's better to allow access to certain apps as long as there's periodic monitoring without stringent control.

What next?

I am very grateful to each of our students who took the time to give such thoughtful advice. Their responses to our second question 'What specific advice can you give to students about to get a smart phone about how (and when) to use it?' will be shared in a later piece. This will perhaps be a useful stimulus for discussion with your own children or the young people you work with.

There are already significant legislative and regulatory developments in the UK. In particular, The Online Safety Bill (2023) should help reshape the digital environment for children. The UK government states that

'Without this groundbreaking legislation, the safety of children across the country would be at stake and the internet would remain a wild west of content, putting children's lives and mental health at risk. The bill has a zero-tolerance approach to protecting children, meaning social media platforms will be legally responsible for the content they host and keeping children and young people safe online.'
UK Government

In light of this legislation, and increasing public concern/awareness, it is interesting to see internet providers continuing to enhance (and publicise) their internet safety features. See here for a helpful comparison. Furthermore, Apple, Google, Microsoft (and others) have developed a range of parental controls and tools to use with smart phones, tablets, and computers. See here for an example comparison.

Jonathan Haidt's work in examining the research relating to young people's well being and he link to particular aspects of mobile phone use and social media is though provoking. He also consistently shares critical responses to his analyses – following his page and/or twitter account is very much recommended.

Personally I am glad to see some positive action being taken, and increased awareness of the issue. However I don't think enough is happening. The digital world is a complex and bewildering one. For many of us parents, and teachers, of young people there is a risk that the steps we take are reactionary rather than proactive.

Clarity around the risks and easy access to support, along with better regulation in the first place are all much needed. I worry that in ten or twenty years time, we will look back and wonder why we didn't do more, and act faster.

In bleaker moments I keep coming back to this blunt analogy. None of us would send our children off to school with a bottle of vodka in their bags reassuring ourselves that we had made sure they knew only to drink it in moderation. Nor would knowing that not all drinkers become alcoholics or experience the worst effects of alcohol assuage our concerns.

When faced with specific and saddening examples of the negative side of smart phone and social media use, I wonder if this an approximation of what is happening now for many children, sent off to school with a smartphone in their pockets. The access and risk which they are exposed exceeds their capacity to make the best long-term decisions. For a minority the impact will be dramatic, for others, less-so, but none the less significant. As Earl Nightingale (probably) said *'We become what we think about most of the time, and that's the strangest secret.'*

I, as an adult have had to delete some apps – Facebook for example – because they were monopolising my time. My year 8's commitment to being stricter with their own children is really making me think! As are responses like this:

'There are lots of concerning outcomes of social media. For example, when I am on YouTube, while it is arguably far tamer than platforms such as TikTok, I am bombarded with content intended to keep me on the site for as long as possible. A lot of this content is designed to make me feel angry so that I'm more likely to interact with the video, and this environment isn't really healthy for anyone, especially not young people. Although YouTube does have entertaining content, whenever I go on the platform I end up wasting a lot of time and not even remembering what I watched. And I don't even consume short form content. A lot of social media sites are easy to fall down rabbit holes in, are cesspools for misinformation and just not great places to be.'

Year 11 Student when asked if social media access should be banned until 16.

If you have suggestions of useful guidance for parents, young people or schools, or if you would like to collaborate in this area, please let usknow. Via central@mggs.org or through this blog.

Thanks for reading!

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