- Social networking

REALITY CHECK

Politicians are claiming social media apps are causing irreparable harm to our youngsters. The science, however, says otherwise

The science behind the headlines: Should children be banned from social media apps? Is digital healthcare excluding those most in need? And why more screening isn't necessarily the best approach for tackling prostate cancer.
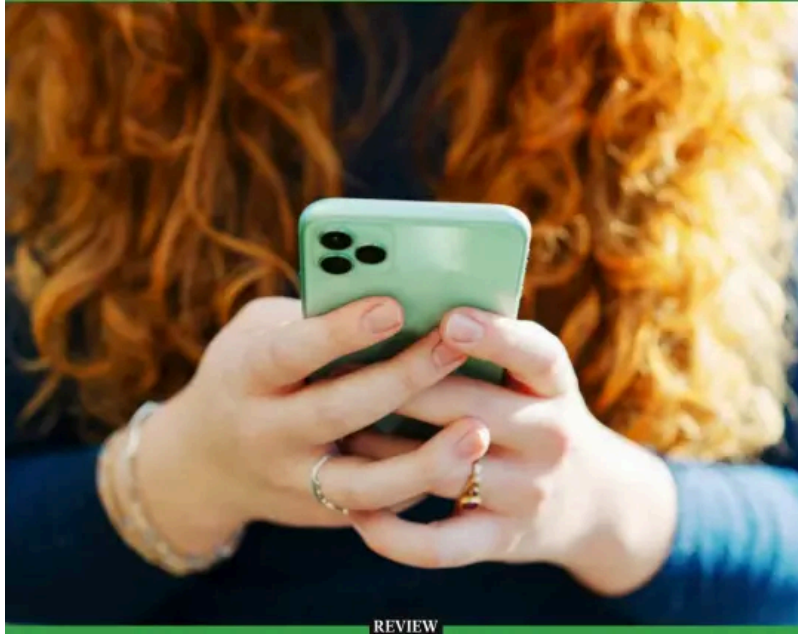
REVIEW

"Data gathered in 168 countries across 18 years suggests there's no causal relationship between the introduction of the internet and the wellbeing of young people"

What's the most effective way to protect children's mental health? The answer that's been echoed by waves of politicians across the world over the last two decades is to ban them from social media. Such calls have, understandably, seen a recent resurgence in the UK. They follow the murder of 16-year-old Brianna Ghey and the revelation that her teenage killers had frequently shared violent videos on social media apps.

As Conservative MP Miriam Cates recently argued, such a crime illustrated how such apps pose a 'serious threat' to child safety and welfare.

At first, it feels easy to agree with Cates. Speaking as a parent, we all want our children to be safe, and years of newspaper headlines have suggested that social media is the cause of a children's mental health crisis. The thing is, the best scientific evidence we have so far simply doesn't support this narrative.

IS THERE PROOF IT HARMS CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH?

Social media has been with us for some time and most users engage with it in ways that bring many positives. Young people today use it to connect to others or pursue their hobbies. And when tragedies happen – like a murder – they can use social media to show support for those affected.

The best evidence we have today suggests it's unlikely to impact their life satisfaction. In fact, global mental health survey data gathered in 168 countries across 18 years suggests there's no causal relationship between the introduction of the internet and the wellbeing of young people. These data suggest that 99.6 per cent of a child's wellbeing has nothing to do with how much time they spend on a device.

It's clear that if you're aged between 10 and 20, your social media use will increase if your life satisfaction decreases. But the opposite isn't necessarily true – in most groups, the more time a child spends on social media doesn't mean their life satisfaction will decrease. Fundamentally, there is very limited solid evidence that demonstrates social media causes mental health issues in children. And without establishing a causal link, a ban seems nonsensical – akin to banning car airbags because they're associated with car accidents.

ARE MOST CHILDREN ADDICTED TO SOCIAL MEDIA?

'Addiction' is a very loaded term. And, especially in the context of smartphones, it's used in a way that doesn't consider the difference between a bad habit and an object that's potentially harmful. After all, if you're 'addicted' to anything you frequently spend time with, you could be said to be addicted to your bed, your car or even your friends. That was the conclusion of one inventive (and tongue-in-cheek) 2021 study in which researchers took a questionnaire meant to identify people with gambling addiction and, to prove a point, made one big change: replacing the word 'gambling' with 'friends'. So questions were along the lines of: Do you often spend time with your friends in order to forget about personal problems? Do you think about your friends even when you're not with them? Have you even gone as far as ignoring your family to spend time with your friends?

If you answered yes to all of the above, it's likely you – like the majority of participants in the study – have what the researchers wryly called 'offline-friend addiction' (they were quick to point out this very concept was 'farcical'). Ultimately, social

media may lead to some bad habits in children, but it's not the same as a life-altering addiction. You'll find it much easier to get a child off Roblox than a truly addictive substance.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO ENFORCE A SOCIAL MEDIA BAN?

It's difficult to find a way of banning social media apps for children that wouldn't a) violate existing laws, or b) be morally questionable. For starters, every child, according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, has the right to have fun in the way they want to – this includes social media. That's before we question how a ban would interfere with a child's free speech. There's also no way to evaluate if such a ban would be effective, as shown by South Korea's failed 'Cinderella law'.

In 2011, the country's National Assembly became worried about children using social media and online games. So, citing fears about their mental health, sleep quality and academic performance, they forbade children from using the internet between the hours of midnight and 6am. This ban stood in place for 10 years. During that time, the result of the law became clear: it had practically no effect. It did little to limit internet use, saved children only two minutes of sleep each night and provided no change in test scores.

IS THERE A HEALTHY WAY FOR KIDS TO USE SCREENS?

It's important, as parents, to scaffold all activities that enter our children's lives. You wouldn't buy a child a bicycle and let them learn by themselves in a busy street. Social media is the same. Ideally, parents should be engaged. They should help their child self-regulate their behaviour to help them prepare for adulthood. Social media and screens will still be there when they grow up and it's crucial they acquire the skills to manage that usage in future. Unfortunately human ugliness isn't going to go away and sticking children's heads in the sand is unlikely to be the solution.