- Child psychology

Short-form videos could be harming young kids' minds

The constant flow of these online videos, typically 15 to 90 seconds long, can lead to compulsive scrolling and create patterns that negatively affect several aspects of preteen children's lives

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Online short-form video has shifted from a light distraction to a constant backdrop in many children's lives. What used to fill a spare moment now shapes how young people relax, communicate and form opinions as Tiktok, Instagram Reels, Douyin and Youtube Shorts draw in hundreds of millions of under18s through endlessly personalised feeds.



onds) are engineered to capture the brain's craving for novelty. Each swipe promises something different, whether a joke, prank or shock – and the reward system responds instantly.

Because the feed rarely pauses, the natural breaks that help attention reset vanish. Over time, this can weaken impulse control and sustained focus. A 2023 analysis of 71 studies and nearly 100,000 participants found a moderate link between heavy short-form video use and reduced inhibitory control and attention spans.

Attention hijacked

Sleep is one of the clearest areas where short-form video can take a toll. Many children today view screens when they should be winding down. The bright light delays the release of melatonin, a hormone that helps regulate sleep, making it harder for them to drift off.

But the emotional highs and lows of rapid content make it particularly difficult for the brain to settle. A recent study found that for some teenagers, excessive short-form video use is connected to poorer sleep and higher social anxiety.

These sleep disturbances affect mood and memory,

child's stage of development. Algorithmic systems learn from a brief moment of exposure, sometimes escalating similar content into the feed. This combination of instant appearance, lack of context, emotional intensity and rapid reinforcement is what makes inappropriate content in short-form video especially problematic for younger users.

Not every child is affected in the same way, though. Those with anxiety, attention difficulties or emotional volatility seem more vulnerable to compulsive scrolling

ency around algorithms.

At home, open conversation can help children to understand their habits and build healthier ones. Parents can watch videos together, discuss what makes certain clips appealing and explore how particular content made the child feel.

Establishing simple family routines, such as keeping devices out of bedrooms or setting a shared cut-off time for screen use, can protect sleep and reduce late-night scrolling. Encouraging offline activities, hobbies, sports and time with friends also helps to maintain a healthy balance.

Short-form videos can be creative, funny and comforting. With thoughtful support, responsive policies and safer platform design, children can enjoy them without compromising their wellbeing or development. **DM**

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Photo: iStock

These apps feel lively and intimate, offering quick routes to humour, trends and connection, yet their design encourages long sessions of rapid scrolling that can be difficult for young users to manage. They were never built with children in mind, although many children use them daily and often alone.

For some preteens, these platforms help to develop identity, spark interests and maintain friendships. For others, the flow of content disrupts sleep, erodes boundaries or squeezes out time for reflection and meaningful interaction. Problematic use is less about minutes spent and more about patterns where scrolling becomes compulsive or hard to stop. These patterns can begin to affect sleep, mood, attention, schoolwork and relationships.

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These sleep disturbances affect mood and memory, and can create a cycle that is especially hard stressed or socially pressured children to break.

Beyond sleep, the constant stream of peer images and curated lifestyles can amplify comparison. Preteens may internalise unrealistic standards of popularity, appearance or success, which is linked to lower self-esteem and anxiety.

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Younger children are more susceptible

Most research focuses on teenagers, but younger children have less mature self-regulation and a more fragile sense of identity, leaving them highly susceptible to the emotional pull of quick-fire content.

Exposure to material that children were never intended to see adds risk and the design of short-form video apps can make this far more likely. Because clips appear instantly and autoplay one after another, children can be shown violent footage, harmful challenges or sexual content before they have time to process what they are seeing, or look away.

Unlike longer videos or traditional social media posts, short-form content provides almost no context, no warning and no opportunity to prepare emotionally. A single swipe can produce a sudden shift in tone from silly to disturbing, which is particularly jarring for developing brains.

Although this content may not always be illegal, can still be inappropriate for a child's stage of development.

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it and to the mood swings that follow it.

Some research suggests a cyclical relationship, where young people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, are particularly drawn to rapid content, and heavy use may intensify

the symptoms that make self-regulation difficult. Children dealing with bullying, stress, family instability or poor sleep may also use scrolling to cope with difficult emotions.

This matters because childhood is a critical period for learning how to build relationships, tolerate boredom and handle uncomfortable feelings. When every quiet moment is filled with quick entertainment, children lose chances to daydream, invent games, chat with family or simply let their thoughts wander.

Unstructured time is part of how young minds learn to soothe themselves and develop internal focus. Without it, these skills can weaken.

New guidelines

There are encouraging signs of change as governments and schools begin to address digital well-being more explicitly. In England, new statutory guidelines encourage schools to integrate online safety and digital literacy into the curriculum.

Some schools are restricting smartphone use during the school day, and organisations such as Amnesty International are urging platforms to introduce safer defaults, better age-verification and greater transparency around algorithms.

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