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Signs that your child is addicted to social media

AS LORDS BACK A BAN FOR UNDER-16s, CAMILLA FOSTER SHARES ADVICE ON WHAT PARENTS NEED TO WATCH OUT FOR

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SOCIAL media use has become one of the most challenging battles for parents with young children and teens, but this might begin to change as the House of Lords has backed a social media ban for under-16s. Peers supported the cross-party move by 261 votes to 150, which means the Australian-style ban will have to be considered by MPs in the Commons. Technology secretary Liz Kendall announced a three-month consultation this week, which will consider the advantages and disadvantages of a ban, as well as possible overnight curfews and actions to prevent "doom-scrolling" before reporting back in the summer.



In the meantime, in this increasingly digital world it can be hard for parents to navigate what is considered "normal" social media usage and what might borderline into an addiction. To help, here is some expert-backed advice about what type of behaviours might be red flags and what you can do if you are concerned.

Defining a social media addiction

"Social media addiction is not about how much time a child spends online, but about loss of control," says Dr David McLaughlan, consultant psychiatrist at the Priory hospital, who provide addiction treatment and mental health services for young people in the UK. "It's when social media use is compulsive, hard to stop, and crowds out sleep, schoolwork, relationships or wellbeing."

What are some signs that might indicate that a child is addicted to social media?

■ 1. Loss of control: "If a child repeatedly tries to cut back but can't, or becomes distressed when access is limited, that's a key red flag," says Dr McLaughlan.

■ 2. Mood changes linked to use: “Children addicted to
social media may experience increased anxiety, low mood, irritability or negative selfcomparisons linked to online content or feedback,” says Erica De Lange, regional director of psychology services (South) at Cygnet Health Care. “These signs point to an unhealthy social media use.”
She also advises parents to look out for strong, emotional reactions when access is limited. “They may get irritable, angry, anxious or distressed when asked to log off or when the phone is taken away,” says Erica. “These heightened reactions may suggest emotional dependence rather than enjoyment.”
■ 3. Preoccupation and constant checking: “When social media dominates a child’s thoughts, even during lessons, meals, or conversations, it suggests the behaviour is becoming compulsive,” says Dr McLaughlan.
■ 4. Sleep disruption: “Late-night
scrolling, difficulty switching off, or waking to check notifications can quickly undermine both mental health and emotional resilience,” says Dr McLaughlan.
■ 5. Withdrawal from offline activities: “A loss of interest in hobbies, family time, or face-to-face friendships can indicate that online engagement is replacing real-world connection,” reflects Dr McLaughlan.
■ 6. Declining school performance: “You may start to notice an impact on school or daily functioning, in particular declining concentration, reduced school performance or difficulty completing everyday tasks,” says Erica. “This may suggest social media is taking priority over responsibilities.”
■ 7. Continuing despite harm: “When a child keeps using social media despite clear negative consequences, that’s one of the strongest addiction indicators,” highlights Dr McLaughlan.
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What are the consequences?
A social media addiction can have a significant impact on all areas of life.
“Mentally, we see higher rates of anxiety, low mood, poor selfesteem and emotional dysregulation,” says Dr McLaughlan. “Physically, sleep deprivation, headaches, eye strain and sedentary behaviour are common. “Socially, children may struggle with real-world communication, confidence, and forming secure relationships.”
How can parents distinguish normal social media use from unhealthy use?
“Healthy use tends to be balanced where children can switch off without major distress, engage in a range of activities, and maintain mood and functioning,” says Erica. “Unhealthy use is marked by conflict, secrecy, emotional dependency and negative impacts on sleep, school or relationships. The key question for parents is not ‘how much?’ but ‘what is this use replacing or disrupting?’”
What should parents do if they think their child is addicted?
Staying calm and composed could be a more effective strategy than getting all riled up.
“Start with open, calm conversations rather than punishment,” recommends Erica. “Try to understand what role social media is playing for your child, it might be about connection, comfort, distraction or escape. Set clear boundaries around use, especially around sleep, and model healthy digital habits yourself.
“If concerns persist or your child’s mental health is affected, seek support from a GP, school counsellor or mental health professional.”
■ Concerned about your child? Visit youngminds.org.uk/parent