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Research reveals links between children's social media use and anxiety

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CHILDREN who spend more than three hours a day on social media are more likely to develop mental health problems such as depression and anxiety as teenagers, according to research. The relationship between these platforms and mental health is "complex", with the effects mainly driven by disruptions to sleep, experts suggest. The link between social media use and depression was also stronger in girls, the study found.



For the study, researchers at Imperial College London looked at data from the study of cognition, adolescents and mobile phones (Scamp), which was set up in 2014.

The analysis included 2,350
children from 31 schools across London.

Youngsters completed a questionnaire on digital behaviours, mental health and lifestyles, as well as cognitive tests, when they were in year seven, aged between 11 and 12, and again when they were between 13 and 15.

The study found children who spent more than three hours on social media a day were more likely to have more symptoms of anxiety and depression as teenagers than those who spent 30 minutes scrolling each day. Researchers suggest this could be down to sleeping less, particularly on school nights, and going to sleep later.

Dr Chen Shen, of Imperial's school of public health, said: "The relationship we see is complex, so it's not as straightforward as saying that social media use directly causes poor mental health in children.

"But we see that children who use social media above a certain level when they are in year seven are more likely to develop mental health problems when they reach years nine and 10, and we believe this is largely due to sustained disruptions to sleep." The findings, published in BMC Medicine, support the development of a curriculum in secondary schools that raises awareness of digital literacy and sleep, researchers said. They also highlight that more studies may be needed as the social media landscape has changed dramatically since the data was collected between 2014 and 2018.

Dr Shen added: "As the platforms, usage and content evolve, we need continued research to understand how social media use affects children's mental health in today's digital environment."