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The link between heavy social media use and teenage anxiety

An Oxford study into teenage mental health has found that some are spending eight hours a day doom-scrolling on their phones

By Health Editor Eleanor Hayward and Technology Correspondent Mark Sellman



Research has confirmed a link between social media use and anxiety ahead of legislation being introduced in parliament to limit smartphone use in teenagers.

Experts at Oxford University are launching a ten-year study into teenage mental health called BrainWaves. They say that initial data suggests that the more time youngsters spend on social media the more likely they are to suffer anxiety and depression.

The study, involving data from 7,200 students in the UK, aims to fill the evidence gap about the link between [social media](#) and mental health. It has found that some teenagers are spending eight hours a day on their smartphones.

NHS data shows that more than one million children and teenagers under 18 are in contact with NHS mental health services, with girls more likely than boys to have problems. One in five girls aged 16 are in contact with services, and mental health problems have increased significantly in the past five years.



A private members' bill due to be introduced into parliament this week will make schools smartphone-free GETTY IMAGES

The new BrainWaves study, by a team at Oxford, Swansea University and The Day newspaper, aims to conduct long-term research involving 50,000 adolescents to build up evidence of a link between social media and mental health.

John Gallacher, a professor of cognitive health at Oxford who is leading the study, told the Financial Times that initial results “found a linear relationship between higher rates of anxiety and depression and time spent networking on social media sites.

“In the most extreme cases, we had young people reporting they were spending up to eight hours a day using these sites.”

A private members' bill will be introduced into parliament on Wednesday to tackle addictive phone use in children, including introducing a legal requirement that schools are [phone-free](#).

The Safer Phones Bill, which has cross-party support, is being tabled by the Labour MP Josh MacAlister. He said: “The evidence is mounting that children doom-scrolling for hours a day is causing widespread harm. We need the equivalent of the “seatbelt” legislation for social media use for children.

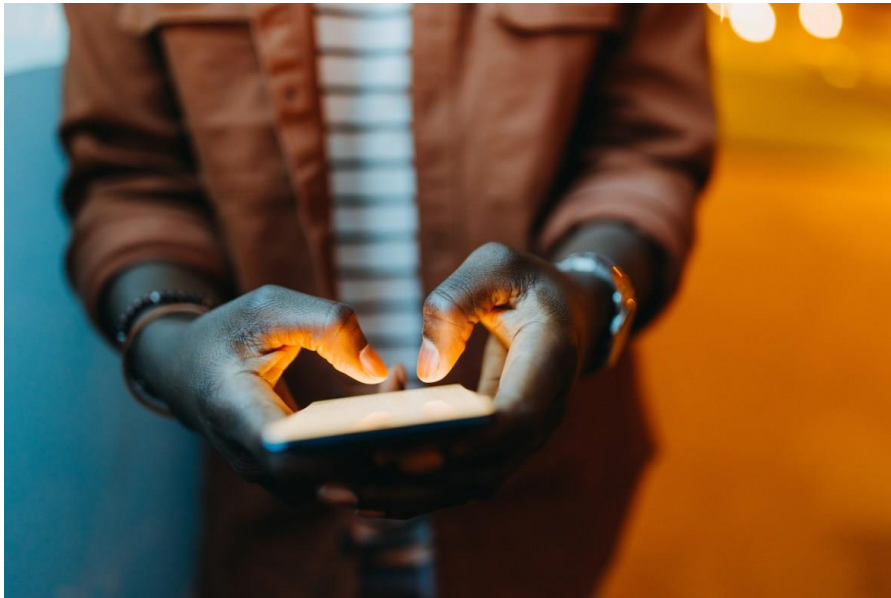
“Adults find it hard enough to manage screen time, so why are we expecting children to manage this addictive content without some shared rules? Parents are in an impossible bind over whether to ostracise their child from social media or expose them to the harms and addiction of content.

Number of children and young people accessing mental health services in the past year



Chart: The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: NHS Digital

The bill would raise the age of internet adulthood from 13 to 16, make schools smartphone-free zones, strengthen Ofcom’s powers to protect children, and commit government to review the design and marketing of phones by children.



The bill would also raise the age of internet adulthood, which is currently 13 to 16 GETTY IMAGES

The bill would raise the age of internet adulthood from 13 to 16, make schools smartphone-free zones, strengthen Ofcom’s powers to protect children, and commit government to review the design and marketing of phones by children. The bill is supported by Dame Rachel de Souza, the children’s commissioner. She said: “Children have told me repeatedly how unsafe they often feel online, and so I welcome the provision in this bill, which will help to make sure that happens for every child, every time, in and out of school.”

However Ian Russell, chairman of trustees at the Molly Rose Foundation, said that the best way to make changes would be to strengthen the Online Safety Act, adding: “Measures that divert resources from realising the act’s full potential may prove counterproductive and slow progress towards a safer digital future.”

Last month Australia announced plans for a social media ban for under-16s, and charities are calling for the UK government to follow its lead.

Struggling youth

Children and teenagers in contact with secondary mental health, learning disabilities and autism services

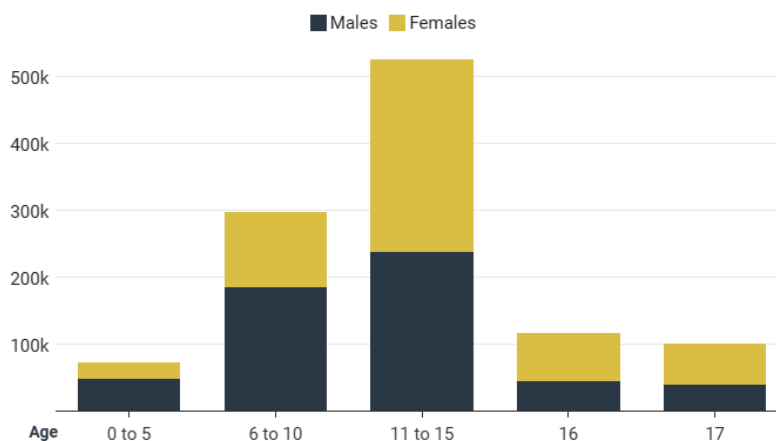


Chart: The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: NHS Digital

Anne Longfield, executive chair of the Centre for Young Lives, said: “This bill opens the door to a crucial national debate about the negative impact smartphones can have on children, and the urgent need to address those problems.

“We know many children, increasingly from a young age, are spending too much time doom-scrolling on social media apps and long periods of addictive smartphone screen time can be detrimental. Parliament now has an opportunity to reset children’s relationships with smartphones, and marginalise their impact and influence on developing young minds.”

Dr Becky Foljambe, NHS GP and founder of Health Professionals for Safer Screens, said: “As health professionals we see at first hand the harms visited on children by smartphone use and social media. It has become a major impediment to the healthy development of our young, especially among the most vulnerable. We fully support Josh’s aim to address these harms by empowering parents and children to make better and more informed decisions.”