

Internet & Social Media



Social media and the internet can have both positive and negative effects on children's mental health. Parents play an important role in educating children on how to stay safe online.

While more studies are being published in this area, it is still too early to say if social media use leads to children developing mental health problems. There are often many factors at play that could affect how a child uses social media and interacts with the internet that could impact the way they may feel and behave.

Impact on mental health and wellbeing

Young people aged 11-19 with a mental health problem are more likely to use social media, than those without mental health problems.

Using social media can help some young people to access support, receive reassurance, feel connected or manage social anxiety. But for others, using social media can become compulsive and fuel unhealthy comparisons. It can expose them to bullying and see them becoming more isolated, which can lead to their mental health deteriorating.

There is currently little information on how the internet and social media impacts on the mental health, wellbeing and development of children under the age of 11. While you need to be over the age of 13 to use most social media platforms, data tells us that younger children are using social media, with 18% of 8-11 year olds reported to have a social media account.

Here are some ways in which the internet and social media can impact on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Positive impacts:

- creates a sense of social support, connectedness and positive interaction, which can boost mental health
- helps to foster and sustain relationships with friends and family, especially those who live far away
- provides a way to make new friends and connections with peers who share similar interests or experiences
- helps some young people to be more open and honest with their friends about how they think and feel
- makes some young people feel supported and less alone during tough times, as they read about other people's similar experiences
- empowers young people with disabilities or communication needs through creating a sense of community and belonging
- helps children and young people to learn how to strengthen their mental health and keep themselves well
- provides easier access to informal and formal support – help that is available at different times of the day.

Negative impacts:

- social media can make young people feel less satisfied with life and it can have an impact on their self-esteem as they may constantly compare themselves to others - this can lead to an unhealthy reliance on receiving online feedback, feelings of envy, and anxiety over missing out
 - girls are more likely to use social media to distort their body image
 - social media can have a greater negative effect on young people who are already psychologically vulnerable. For example, those who are facing other social, friendship or academic challenges, or those with a tendency to see negative meanings in conversations (common among those experiencing depression)
 - it can expose young people to bullying - this may range from sexting and sharing embarrassing images to creating fake profiles or mocking content
 - it can expose children to harmful, stressful and triggering content, such as discussions on self-harm.
- 16% of 8-11 year olds who use the internet have at some point seen content they've found "worrying or nasty"
- some with social anxiety may withdraw more and become more socially isolated.

Spotting the signs

It may be difficult to spot the signs that a child is being affected by using social media or the internet, particularly when they are younger and in school. There could be, for example, many reasons why a child's behaviour or mood has changed, but it's important for parents to consider social media and the internet as a factor that could be impacting on their mental health and wellbeing.