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# **SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL HEALTH**

**IN SCHOOLS**

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# **SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS**

**Jonathan Glazzard and Colin Mitchell**

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# + ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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# + INTRODUCTION

This book addresses the role of social media and its contribution to the mental health of children and young people. It explores the positive and negative effects of social media on mental health and the responsibilities of schools, parents and other stakeholders.

Social media has revolutionised the way in which we interact. Social media use has increased in recent years, and it has become an integral part of children and young people's lives. Internet use had changed dramatically over the past two decades. From originally being a repository of information, the internet has evolved into an essential interactive tool for social collaboration. Increasing forms of connectivity between devices, people and applications is resulting in the creation of a digital universe in the third generation of the world wide web. Teachers need to keep abreast of these developments by embracing the opportunities of more advanced forms of internet-based learning.

We argue that total bans on technology in schools are not helpful because they restrict opportunities for learning. Young people live their lives online and denying them this opportunity is, in effect, cutting off their oxygen supply. However, schools need to be aware of the negative effects of the internet on children and young people. Schools play a key role in providing a digital curriculum which teaches digital citizenship, digital literacy and digital resilience. Digital literacy is the ability to be able to critically evaluate content and learn key skills to stay safe online. Digital citizenship fosters appropriate behaviour online through developing knowledge of acceptable and unacceptable online behaviours and the impact of children and young people's online behaviour on others. Digital resilience relates to knowing how to seek help, and learning from and recovering from negative experiences.

In this book we argue that the way in which young people interact with technology is continuing to change. Everyone has a right to be online and to experience the numerous benefits that this brings. It is everyone's responsibility to ensure that children and young people are protected from harm by reporting and challenging abuse. While it might not be possible to eradicate harmful content from the internet, educating children and young people about their responsibilities as digital citizens

and providing them with the skills to enable them to critically evaluate content are appropriate ways of responding to some of the challenges. Fostering young people's digital resilience enables them to bounce back from negative experiences. Schools and parents play an equal role in supporting the development of these skills. The digital industry also plays a significant role in protecting children from harm. Behaviour which is not tolerated offline should also not be tolerated online. Thus, the right of individuals to lead a digital life must be balanced against the extent to which they fulfil their responsibilities as digital citizens to the digital community.

Teachers also need to reflect on their online behaviour. What is posted online stays online and posts from several years earlier can come back to haunt people. Teachers can even lose their careers for posting comments, videos or images which bring their schools into disrepute. As a teacher you have a responsibility to use social media responsibly and to consider the impact that your posts will have now and in the future. While teachers have a right to a private life, parents, children and young people will search for profiles of teachers and, in some cases, they will use these to attempt to destroy careers. We illustrate some of the issues for teachers through case studies.

We hope that this book provides valuable insight into the effects of social media on children and young people. We argue that schools and teachers cannot solve the issues in isolation. There is a need for parents, social media companies and children and young people to take responsibility.

# + CHAPTER 1

## YOUNG PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY



### PROFESSIONAL LINKS

**This chapter addresses the following:**

- ② The national curriculum in computing states that children and young people must be taught to be responsible, competent, confident and creative users of information and communication technology.

## CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you will understand:

- + Web 3.0;
- + how children and young people interact with technology;
- + social media use among primary-aged children;
- + social media use among young people in secondary schools.

## INTRODUCTION

Young people's use of technology is affected by industry, advertising and the media. All of these stakeholders play a critical role in promoting positive child mental health. This chapter examines young people's use of social media. In addition, it examines the unique contribution that each sector makes to mental health outcomes for children and young people. Key issues are identified, and recommendations are made to support each sector to make a positive contribution to child mental health.

## TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS INCLUDING INSTANT MESSAGING PLATFORMS

Children and young people use a variety of platforms in addition to Facebook and Twitter. These include the following.

- + Instagram: a picture and video sharing app. Young people can post content and share experiences, thoughts or memories with an online community. Instagram allows live streaming.
- + Snapchat: an app that enables a user to send a photo, short video or message to their contacts. The 'snap' appears on screen for up to 10 seconds before disappearing, or there is an option to have no time limit.
- + YouTube allows users to watch, create and comment on videos. It is possible to create a personal YouTube account, create a

music playlist, and even create a personal channel, which requires individuals to have a public profile. YouTube allows live streaming.

- + Minecraft is a game that enables users to build and create a virtual world using building blocks.
- + WhatsApp is an instant messaging app which lets users send messages, images and videos in one-to-one and group chats with their contacts.

This is not an exhaustive list and the variety of platforms will grow as new platforms are introduced. However, these are the common platforms that are used by children and young people.

## **WEB 3.0 PLATFORMS**

Web 1.0 was the first version of the internet. This provided access to websites with information, but users rarely interacted with them. Web 2.0 was a more sophisticated version of the web which enabled users to interact with content and collaborate with each other through a variety of platforms including social media. Web 3.0 is the third generation of internet-based services. It emphasises the following:

- + we live in a digital universe;
- + total connectivity between devices, data, applications and people;
- + devices interact with each other;
- + technology is placed in the hands of students who use it for learning.

In many ways, Web 3.0 is already a reality. We can enable our mobile phones to interact with our cars so that we can speak to people hands-free while we drive. We can control the heating system in our homes via our phones. We can use our mobile phones to view our homes when we are not at home through connecting them with cameras and burglar alarms at home. Data stored in one application can interact with data in another application. We can programme our toaster through our phones. In the future, there will be many more possibilities. Web 3.0 emphasises the complexity of the web and the importance of internet connectivity between devices and applications.

The implications for schools are significant. All schools are engaging in Web 1.0 by providing children and young people with access to the

internet. Some schools have not caught up with Web 2.0 because they do not provide learners with opportunities to collaborate and interact via technology. Web 3.0 will present new opportunities for schools but it will involve a culture shift. Schools must keep pace with the changes in technology use in order to ensure that the next generation have the skills they need to operate effectively and efficiently within the twenty-first century. Web 3.0 will result in the internet being available on an increasing range of devices. We already have watches which are internet enabled and there will be an increasing range of devices that will be linked to the internet. Desktop PCs and even laptops will become redundant.

Web 3.0 has implications for schools. This is the vision: everyone will interact with technology to learn and teach. Teachers will teach students, students will teach students and students will teach teachers. Parents will view school as a place for them to learn. Teachers will be everywhere and schools will be everywhere as access to knowledge will not be limited to one place (the school) and the teacher will no longer be the expert.

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- + Can technology replace the teacher?
- + What other examples of Web 3.0 are currently evident?
- + How will schools use technology in the future?

## SOCIAL MEDIA USE: PRIMARY

The *Life in 'Likes'* research found that primary school children use Snapchat, Instagram, Musical.ly and WhatsApp (Children's Commissioner, 2018). This research also found that children accessed their parents' Facebook or Twitter accounts. In primary schools, particularly in Year 4 or below, children may not check their social media accounts frequently. Some children may not have access to technology and may only have access to social media through their parents' devices. However, by Year 5 and 6 most children have access to their own mobile phone. Younger children in primary schools enjoy using technology for entertainment and experimentation purposes. By Year 6, children start using social media as a way of cementing friendships.

Popular platforms include the following:

- + Roblox is a gaming website and app that enables users to play millions of user-generated games. It is advertised as a 'social platform for play' as users can create groups and message other players.
- + Musical.ly is an app that allows you to create and share 15-second videos. Users can choose a song to accompany the video and use photo filters.

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(Children's Commissioner, 2018)

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- + Most social media platforms have a minimum age limit of 13. Should children in primary schools be allowed to have their own social media accounts?
- + What are the responsibilities of parents in relation to children's use of social media?
- + What are the responsibilities of schools in relation to educating children about social media?
- + Should primary school children have their own mobile phone?

- One in three internet users are children.
- Almost one in four of 8 to 11 year-olds have a social media profile.
- One in four children have experienced something upsetting on a social networking site.
- One in eight children have been bullied on social media.
- Almost one in four children have come across racist or hate messages online.
- Three in four parents have looked for or received information or advice about how to help their child manage online risks.

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([www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk))

The *Life in 'Likes'* research found that:

- + Children in Years 4 and 5 were experimenting with a variety of different social media platforms.
- + They had not yet developed habits of checking all their social media on a regular basis.
- + Many, particularly those in Year 4, were accessing social media on their parents' devices, and therefore had limited time to use social media.
- + Children from Years 4–7 used social media to boost their mood and make them laugh, by watching funny videos and sending funny things to their friends.
- + Those in Year 4 were attracted to the games element on certain social media, such as Roblox.
- + In Year 5 social media gave them a platform to be creative and experiment, for example by following baking tutorials.
- + Staying safe online was a priority for many of the younger children.
- + Some felt uncomfortable and bothered when their parents shared some photos of them online.
- + Social media was rarely seen a source of news about the world for children but they saw it as a way of obtaining news about celebrities.
- + Children enjoyed how social media enabled them to be 'in touch' with everyone in their lives.
- + Children in Year 6 identified that it was often hard to interpret the motivation behind comments online, and several cited examples of where they felt something meant as a flippant comment had been misinterpreted.
- + In Year 6 children started to realise that they could change how they looked online and could work out how good other people thought they looked.



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(Children's Commissioner, 2018)

## CASE STUDY

Sam was in Year 6. He owned his own mobile phone and had developed an interest in several gaming sites. He was allowed to take his phone to bed with him and had started to play games until midnight. As soon as he woke up in the morning he reached for his mobile phone to play games. He wanted to continually improve his scores. He started to avoid going out with his friends, and in the evenings he stayed in his bedroom so that he could play games. He was not allowed to use his phone at school but he did use it to play games the rest of the time. He had stopped communicating with his family during breakfast and dinner times as he interacted with the technology rather than people. On rare occasions, his parents became so frustrated at his lack of communication that they confiscated his mobile phone. During these occasions Sam appeared to be frustrated and depressed.

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- + Imagine that you are Sam's parent. How would you address the issues?
- + Is Sam's behaviour a concern?
- + What role do schools play in teaching children about the safe and responsible use of technology?

## SOCIAL MEDIA USE: SECONDARY

In secondary schools, young people use social media as a way of fitting in and connecting with others. It enables them to keep in touch with friends and not miss out on things that are going on. Some young people use social media as a way of obtaining emotional support from peers. Instagram and Snapchat are popular platforms.

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- + Some young people are dependent on obtaining likes for things that they have posted online. Is this a good thing?

- + As young people become older, they start to make comparisons between themselves and others they see online. Are there any advantages of doing this? What are the disadvantages?

- 📊 One-third of current internet users are under the age of 18.
- 📊 Three in four children aged 10–12 have their own social media accounts.

(Children's Commissioner, 2018)

The *Life in 'Likes'* research found that in the secondary phase of education:

- + Some young people felt concerned that social media could lead to addiction.
- + Young people were constantly contactable and connected, and described this as an important expectation of their friendships.
- + Girls became conscious of how they looked on photos and edited photos to improve their appearance.
- + Young people had started to make comparisons between themselves and others.
- + Both boys and girls felt that many of the things they saw on social media were unattainable to them.
- + As young people grew older, they seemed to care more about the feedback they received on the things they shared on social media.
- + As young people transitioned to secondary school, the desire for peer feedback through likes and comments seemed to become more and more important.

(Children's Commissioner, 2018)

## CASE STUDY

Saima was in Year 9. She interacted with a range of social media platforms and regularly uploaded photos and videos to share with others.

These uploads enabled Saima to share her experiences with others. She also uploaded several selfies. She had used digital editing software to improve her appearance and had adopted various poses which she had seen celebrities using. Saima had started to monitor how many likes she had received for each of her uploads. If the number of likes was too small she started to become depressed. On several occasions she challenged her friends when they had not acknowledged her posts by asking them why they had not liked them. On a couple of occasions, she ceased her friendships with others when they had not liked her posts.

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- + Is Saima's behaviour a cause for concern? Explain your response.
- + What support might Saima need?

## THE ROLE OF INDUSTRY IN RELATION TO SOCIAL MEDIA

Given the fact that the digital world is now an integral part of young people's lives (Frith, 2017), the digital industry plays an important role in children and young people's mental health. The Internet Safety Strategy (HM Government, 2017a) has emphasised the importance of digital companies adopting the principle of 'think safety first'. Thus, during the development of digital products, safety features should be part of the product design process. These features should include internet safety, cyber security and data protection. Digital companies should build simple reporting mechanisms into their products and response times to complaints should be rapid. Some companies have already introduced walled-garden versions of their digital platforms which are suitable for children; this is an example of good practice which could be rolled out across the digital sector.

Social media and other digital companies have a duty to remove inappropriate content from their platforms rapidly. This includes content which is pornographic, racist, sexist, homophobic, biphobic or transphobic or violent. It also includes inappropriate advertising or live streaming and other content which normalises self-harm, suicide and eating disorders. Digital companies also need to react more rapidly to cyberbullying by suspending the digital accounts of perpetrators and by reporting abuse immediately.

## **+ CONCLUSION**

This book has highlighted ways in which social media can have detrimental effects on the mental health of children and young people. It can result in anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation and other types of mental health needs. It has also highlighted the beneficial effects of social media. Children and young people use social media in a variety of ways, including for entertainment, networking and as a source of information. The need for schools to keep abreast of developments and to embrace social media as a valuable source of learning has been emphasised.

The book has emphasised the role of schools in teaching children and young people about digital citizenship, and has highlighted the importance of teaching digital literacy and digital resilience. Schools cannot address all the issues in isolation – parents, social media companies, advertising companies and other industries play a critical role in ensuring that children and young people can stay safe online.

While this book may not have answered all your questions, it has introduced some fundamental issues which you might wish to explore further. Schools will need to adopt a whole-school approach to address the issues associated with social media and mental health. Effective whole-school approaches to mental health promote positive well-being and developmental health literacy in all members of the school community. In summary, the following key aspects need to be given consideration in relation to social media.

## **LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT**

Schools should appoint a member of staff to be responsible for developing digital citizenship, digital literacy and digital resilience. In many schools these aspects will fall under the remit of the computing lead. All staff will need training on the impact of social media use on children and young people's mental health, including the use of social media at subject-specific level. Governors should also be trained in the

issues associated with social media and the role of schools in relation to these.

## **SCHOOL ETHOS AND ENVIRONMENT**

Key to this strand of the whole-school approach is the need for schools to promote a safe environment for all members of the school community. A clear whole-school policy on social media use should be developed through consultation with children and young people, parents and school staff. School leaders should foster a culture where technology (including social media) use is viewed as an integral part of learning.

## **CURRICULUM, TEACHING AND LEARNING**

A digital curriculum should be developed which addresses digital resilience, digital citizenship and digital literacy. Children and young people should be taught to use social media responsibly and should be taught about the positive and harmful effects of social media. Schools should ensure that children and young people can critically evaluate content that they see online.

## **STUDENT VOICE**

Schools should involve children and young people in the development of a whole-school digital policy and they should be given opportunities to co-construct the digital curriculum. This will ensure that the curriculum addresses topics which they view as important. Additionally, schools should consider developing the role of peer digital champions who can act as peer mentors. The mentors could take responsibility for:

- + leading lessons in the digital curriculum;
- + providing support for younger pupils who have experienced the negative effects of social media;
- + providing mentoring on developing digital literacy skills.

## **STAFF DEVELOPMENT, HEALTH AND WELL-BEING**

All staff in school should be provided with training on how to identify and support pupils with mental health needs. Additionally, school leaders should use technology responsibly by developing clear rules on when staff can and cannot be contacted via technology. Staff may need training on how to integrate social media into subject-specific lessons.

## **IDENTIFYING NEED AND MONITORING IMPACT**

Schools should develop universal approaches to support the identification of mental health needs. Some children and young people may demonstrate visible signs of mental health needs, while others will not. Schools should consider how they will identify children who are developing or have developed mental health needs because of technology use. School-level interventions should be provided to ensure that children and young people receive appropriate support and the impact of these interventions should be monitored.

## **WORKING WITH PARENTS/CARERS**

Parents, carers and the wider family play an important role in influencing children and young people's emotional health and well-being. Schools should provide digital support for parents to enable them to understand the positive and negative effects of social media use on children and young people. Schools should provide digital literacy sessions for parents so that they can help their children to stay safe online. Additionally, schools should help parents to understand their role as digital role models so that parents are able to model appropriate online behaviours to their child.

## **TARGETED SUPPORT**

Delays in identifying and meeting emotional and mental health needs can have detrimental effects on all aspects of children and young

people's lives, including their chances of reaching their potential and leading happy and healthy lives as adults. Schools should work collaboratively with other professionals to ensure that children and young people get the support they need.

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