



YOUNG THINKER ARTICLE

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND INTERNET ACCESS ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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Social media and its impact on young people is a relatively new concept, only in the past five to ten years have we begun to notice the influence it has over the mental health, self-esteem and the sense of self of young people. Social media can expose children to content that could easily scar them for life at ages that would never have access to that information without it. Many parents do not have a recent enough understanding of the internet to block websites or inappropriate content that their children could be exposed to, leaving children with easy access to the world's most extensive collection of knowledge. Even so, the internet has given children who have difficulty learning in school or children who have debilitating mental health an outlet. One where they can be who they are and learn what they choose, on their terms. Overall social media is such a new concept it is impossible to foresee the long term impacts this could have on the next generation of society.

Teenagers naturally compare themselves to their peers as a part of their identity formation, but social media puts that comparison on a global scale. Because algorithms on social media put socially desirable, talented and extraordinary people on more pages, many young people are left feeling not good enough no matter what they do. This feeling of lack, pressures young people into reaching for crazier, riskier and sometimes for sexual activities and posts to stand out from their peers. This competition, to be socially desirable, interesting, funny and relevant, leads to depression, anxiety, eating disorders and other mental illnesses when they can't live up to the impossible standards. These risky posts can also affect them later in life, when they may be applying for jobs, in court or trying to adopt children. Examples of inappropriate and dangerous behaviour being posted into cyberspace, can demean your character and affect your life in unforeseeable ways. When young people compare themselves to every person they see on social media it is a significant part of their growth as a person and self-esteem, which can lead to numerous mental illnesses and impact the rest of their life.

Most social media platforms have community guidelines, which stop traumatic, violent and inappropriate content from circulating, but posts get through and are sometimes disguised through coded language. When children are given unfiltered access to the internet, they have access to information about anything they may hear from siblings, news sources, classmates, parents or guardians or social media. The ability to learn anything they want seems like a good idea to many people and in some situations, it can be, but there are lifelong negative impacts that can become apparent as they grow. Exposure to violence, pornography, traumatic events and crime at young ages can change you as a person for the rest of your life. Researchers found that while serial killers and murders can come from many different backgrounds, social classes and family dynamics, a common connection between almost all murders was exposure to violent pornography at an early age. What seems like giving your child access to the internet to learn and grow, could have horrific consequences, if they are exposed to the wrong content. This is why child safety blockers are vital if you choose to give young children access to the internet. As children grow into young adults and teenagers and their identities are less easily moulded, the internet is an exceptional way to grow as a person and find your interest and who you are. Unfiltered access to the internet for children is dangerous and can expose them to mature content before their brain can process it healthily.

The sexualisation of young people, especially young women, has become an un-talked about outcome of social media. It has now become commonplace for girls as young as thirteen to post almost naked images of themselves on public accounts. Social media is a space of comparison and contortion, young people angle, edit and filter themselves to fit in with the unrealistic body standard. A standard that was created for grown adults to fit into, let alone young people, who are in a very vulnerable and fragile period of their life. This sexualisation, where they may get the most social validation teaches young people that their value as a person weighs heavily on their sexual appeal rather than any other features of themselves. This mental state is dangerous for young people, it encourages eating disorders, plastic surgery and constant ongoing low self-esteem. Many people talk about young people becoming empowered by sexualising themselves, which in some situations can be true, but most often sexualising yourself at a young age can be damaging to your sense of self-worth, identity and impact you later in life.

Many young people feel isolated from the community, like for example people with disabilities and mental illness. The internet is a platform that is very different to the rest of modern society. They can find people like them that can relate to them and make them feel less isolated, they are not judged by their appearance or ability to communicate on the spot, they have an outlet. This applies to many minorities or people who in general feel alone, the internet is a way to connect with someone who may live on the other side of the world but can still completely relate and empathise with what they're going through. The world can be a tough and frustrating place for people who do not fit in with the mould, but the internet doesn't have a mould and allows people, with all different interests, passions and abilities to find a connection.

Social media is so innovative that we are still learning new repercussions of its existence and while it continues to evolve in new and ground-breaking ways. Social media and the internet in its simplest form is a culmination of our knowledge as a species and a way to connect with anybody that can access it. While this in many ways is revolutionary to how we learn and communicate as a society, it can expose children to harmful content and force comparison and sexualisation on young people which negatively impacts their sense of self-worth as a person. However, the internet also allows for connection healthily and uniquely that can help millions of people feel less alone. In the next 10-15 years we will be introduced to an adult society that grew up on social media and we will see the long-term impact. From the mental health and actions of young people, we can understand that it is creating an entirely different world from the one before it.

The Young Thinker Forum provides an opportunity for children and young people to express their views about issues that are important to them. While the children's and young people's views do not necessarily reflect those of the Children and Young People Commissioner (CYPC), they are used to inform the work of the CYPC and provide important insights into the way that children and young people experience the world. I encourage you to consider how the views in this opinion piece may have relevance to your work and life, and to engage with children and young people as an important stakeholder group.