Engaging in Online Activity:

Prioritising and protecting the physical and
mental health of children and young people.

FACULTY OF PAEDIATRICS
POSITION STATEMENT MARCH 2025

**ROYAL
COLLEGE OF
PHYSICIANS
OF IRELAND**

Contents

About the Faculty of Paediatrics

The Faculty of Paediatrics is the national training and professional body for paediatricians in Ireland. Paediatricians diagnose and manage health issues affecting infants, children and young people - from birth through adolescence.

Since its inception, the Faculty of Paediatrics has been a steadfast advocate for children's health. It has championed initiatives such as the establishment of a new children's hospital, the promotion of vaccination benefits, the prevention of childhood obesity, and raising awareness about the dangers of smoking and vaping. Additionally, the Faculty has highlighted the impact of homelessness and Direct Provision on children and opposed prolonged school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through these efforts, it has remained a strong and influential voice for the health, safety, and wellbeing of children (RCPI 2022).

This paper was prepared for the Faculty of Paediatrics by Dr Evanne O'Halloran (Specialist Registrar in Paediatrics) Dr Judith Meehan (Faculty Dean) and Mairead Heffron (RCPI). Approved by Faculty of Paediatrics March 2025. Approved by RCPI Council March 2025

Executive Summary

The Faculty of Paediatrics at the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland calls for increased regulation, as well as further education and research to protect the physical and mental health of children and young people when engaging in certain types of online activity.

The use of online platforms has become an integral part of the lives of many children and young people in Ireland, shaping how they communicate and interact with the world around them. However, the health of some young people is negatively impacted by certain types and patterns of online activity. This is clear to many paediatricians and other child healthcare providers. This is based on their experience in their services and indeed in wider society and is supported in the scientific literature.

We recognize that being online can offer young people valuable opportunities to socialize and stay connected with friends and to develop new friendships and support networks. It can also offer opportunities for self-expression and education. However, the potential for harmful impacts on young people's physical and mental health must be acknowledged and addressed.

This paper aims to highlight evidence of effects on physical, mental and social wellbeing of children and young people that arise from time spent online. This is not a systematic review.

Rather, we have opted to focus mainly on recent review level evidence and some longitudinal and survey data of health harms. There is agreement across the scientific literature that some children and adolescents experience negative health impacts from time spent online. These harms include anxiety, depression, self-harm, negative body-image, disordered eating, unhealthy food consumption, poor sleep, risk of obesity, as well as reduced self-esteem, social wellbeing and happiness. These harms relate to both the content on the online platforms and amount of time spent online.

Online platforms need to do more to protect children from harms, and to be accountable when things go wrong. Parents also need clear guidance on how to reduce health harms from online activity for children and young people, while supporting the appropriate positive social development of children and young people in an online society.

We also need to understand better the nuance in the data; more and better research is needed to support policy-makers, parents and young people themselves to make critical decisions that support the health and wellbeing of our children and young people.

We welcome the establishment of the Government Online Health Taskforce as an initial step to develop a public health response to harms caused to children and young people by certain types of online activity. We also welcome the opportunity to inform and support the Taskforce in its work.

We are calling for:

1   *Action on Accountability: The Government must enact and enforce comprehensive regulations that hold online platforms accountable to ensure a safe and age-appropriate environment for children and young people. This should include actions to safeguard users from harmful content and interactions, as well as ethical platform design that minimises risk of excessive use.*

2   *Public Awareness and Parental Support: Launch targeted public awareness campaigns with tailored resources for parents. These initiatives should empower parents with the tools, knowledge and confidence to guide their children in safe and appropriate use of online platforms.*

3   *Invest in Research: Prioritize funding of comprehensive research into the psychological, social, and developmental effects of online activity including social media use among children and young people. This research should inform evidence-based policy and educational initiatives.*

4   *Resources and Support for Health Professionals: Provide targeted resources and training for health professionals to ensure they are equipped to offer informed advice to families and young people regarding the risks and impacts of online activity and social media use.*

Introduction

The use of online platforms has become an integral part of the
lives of many children and young people in Ireland, shaping how
they communicate and interact with the world around them.

However, the health of some young people is negatively impacted by certain types and patterns of
online activity. This is clear to many paediatricians, and other doctors, based on their experience
in their services and indeed in wider society and is supported in the scientific literature.

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to highlight recent review level evidence and some longitudinal and survey data of health harms.

Health Concerns

Disordered eating

Many recent reviews have found that in general there are positive correlations between social
media use and disordered eating and body dissatisfaction (Holland & Tiggemann 2016; Zhang et
al., 2021). More specifically, social media use has been to linked to body image and disordered
eating in both adolescents and young adults in many studies (Rounsefell et al. 2020; Revranche
et al. 2022; Blanchard et al. 2023; Vincente-Benito & Ramírez-Durán 2023). While some reviews
found associations to be moderate (Bonfanti et al. 2024) others called it 'significant' (Blanchard et
al. 2023). Many reviews point to the need for more longitudinal research in this area to investigate
the effects. While there may also be opportunities for social media to support recovery from
eating disorders (ED), studies note that on TikTok for example there are blurred lines between
content that is ED recovery and pro-ED content that may be harmful (Herrick et al. 2021).

- *Obesity and other physical health concerns*

In a 2019 systematic review aimed at answering the question *"What is the evidence for health and
well-being effects of screentime in children and adolescents"*, evidence was strongest for adiposity and
diet outcomes, with moderately strong evidence that higher television screentime was associated
with greater obesity/adiposity[1] and moderate evidence for an association between screentime,
particularly television screentime, and higher energy intake and less healthy diet quality. There was
weak evidence of an association between screentime (and television screentime) with metabolic
syndrome, poorer cardiorespiratory fitness, poorer cognitive development and lower educational
attainments and poor sleep outcomes. It is important to note that the weak evidence reported
here largely relates to a lack of literature rather than weak associations (Stiglic & Viner 2019).

Food advertising

[1] Excessive fat in the body that can lead to various health problems.

The World Health Organisation has urged all governments to address rising obesity rates
through population interventions which include restrictions on marketing of unhealthy
food and beverage items to children including through online media (WHO, 2012).

Food advertising has been linked to higher obesity risk via ads for high-calorie, low-
nutrient food and drinks (which influence diet and purchases) (Coleman et al., 2022;
Tsochantaridou et al., 2023). Social media influencer promotion of unhealthy food has
been shown to increase children's intake of unhealthy snacks (Coates et al., 2019).

Dangerous trends

Social media platforms, particularly TikTok, have become conduits for dangerous trends and challenges
that are designed to capture attention and generate viral engagement through likes and views. These
trends, often based on risky behaviours, encourage children and adolescents to engage in hazardous
activities with little regard for their safety. One such trend, known as the "Dragon's Breath Challenge,"
involves dipping candy in liquid nitrogen before consuming it. This activity has led to a range of serious
health issues, including severe skin burns, oesophageal injuries, and food poisoning (Fung & Wong,
2023). Another challenge, the "Blackout Challenge," has tragically resulted in multiple deaths around
the world (Glasper, 2023). This challenge encourages participants to induce temporary asphyxiation
by holding their breath until they lose consciousness, which can have fatal consequences.

Self-harm and suicide

A review of over 13 studies, overall comprising of over 43,000 young people found that social media use
and problematic screen use are significant risk factors for self-harm and suicidal behaviours (Chen et
al., 2024). Other studies have reached similar conclusions (Khalaf et al., 2023; Achangwa et al.,2022).

Mental health and wellbeing

Both systematic reviews and recent longitudinal data indicate that some children and adolescents
experience negative mental health and wellbeing impacts including anxiety and depression
associated with time spent online and/or excessive use of social media. A number of these
studies have reported these effects in relation to social media (Alonzo et al. 2021; Shannon et
al., 2022; Blanchard et al., 2023; Ahmed et al., 2024; Kerr et al. 2024, Saleem et al., 2024) while
others examine screen time more broadly (Alimoradi et al., 2022; Eirich et al., 2022; Li et al.,
2022; Santos et al., 2023), for example binge watching of online videos or streamed content.

A study published by the University of Birmingham in February 2025, that garnered attention
for its conclusions on restrictive vs permissive school phone policies (the study found no
differences between mental wellbeing in adolescents exposed to restrictive or permissive
school phone policies), found that there were significant negative associations between lower
mental wellbeing and increasing phone and social media time (Goodyear et al., 2025).

There is some discussion of the direction of this relationship – that is whether anxiety and

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depression are predictors of increased screen usage rather than the causes of the anxiety and depression. Some reviews report small associations, but with no way to distinguish cause from effect (Odgers et al.,2020), while others report that effects exist in both directions (Orben et al.,2020). Some studies report 'small but significant' associations between social media use and an individual's wellbeing (increased depression and anxiety) (Hancock et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2021) while others find associations to be 'substantial' (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Data from some major longitudinal studies, for example the US Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study, have found an association between screen time and worse mental health, increased behavioural problems, decreased academic performance, and poorer sleep, but heightened quality of peer relationships (Paulich et al., 2021). Some analyses of this data state that they could not determine causality (Paulich), however others have found screen time (especially Video chat, texting, videos, and video games) is prospectively associated with a range of mental health symptoms, especially depressive symptoms, though effect sizes are small (Nagata et al., 2024).

Nonconsensual sharing of sexual images of youth is another specific behaviour that occurs often via social media, with reviews finding evidence of increased depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation in young people following this experience (Schmidt et al.,2024).

Some reviews have found that duration or frequency of social media use was more consistently linked with anxiety and depression in girls compared with boys (Saleem et al., 2024). Another longitudinal study found that greater depressive symptoms predicted more frequent social-media use only among adolescent girls and not among adolescent boys (Heffer et al., 2019).

Behavioural problems and attention

Studies also find small but significant correlations between screen time and behavioural or attention problems including attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder symptoms in children (Eirich et al., 2022). Longitudinal data shows that children with ADHD symptoms appear more vulnerable to developing high or problematic use of digital media and that digital media may also have effects on later ADHD symptom levels (Thorell et al., 2023).

Sleep

Use of digital media (mobile phone, computer, internet, and social media) is associated with shorter sleep duration and poorer sleep quality in late adolescence and young adulthood. (Brautsch et al., 2023; Ahmed et al., 2024; Alonzo et al., 2021). Evidence suggests that strict parental rules about smartphone and internet use before sleep may prevent negative consequences on sleep time and quality. However, once adolescents are highly engaged social media users, strict parental rules do not seem to prevent these negative influences on sleep (van den Eijnden et al., 2021).

Social wellbeing and relationships

Systematic reviews have shown social media can be used to develop new friendships with people outside of one's usual peer group, those with similar beliefs, interests and experiences, with the exclusion of barriers such as physical location (Khalaf et al., 2023; West et al., 2024). Online interaction can combat feelings of social exclusion, and loneliness, with increased self-esteem and subsequent wellbeing. Adolescents view social media as a valuable tool for gaining popularity and enhancing their social status (West et al., 2024; Sala et al., 2024). In research conducted in the US, most teenagers report that social media helps them feel more connected to their friends' lives and are more likely to perceive internet use as having a positive impact rather than a negative one (Anderson et al., 2022).

The research has also found that social media promotes a sense of freedom by offering opportunities for self-expression and identity development. For instance, adolescents can manage their online persona, showcase their creativity, and curate profiles or posts that reflect a version of themselves they wish to present (West et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, internet usage also harbours its share of drawbacks. Excessive social media use (defined in studies as more than two hours a day), has been linked to lower levels of self-esteem, social wellbeing and happiness. (Sala et al., 2024). Irish data indicates that teenagers spend up to 4.2 hours a day online (NAC, 2021).

It can also result in a heightened susceptibility to harassment or cyberbullying (Sala et al. 2024). The long-term effects of cyberbullying victimization were found to reinforce negative cognitive patterns, leading to poor body image and a negative self-perception, which ultimately contributed to depression (Senekal et al., 2023). Other reviews looking at cyberincivility among adolescents, found that social media was often used for cyberincivility, with severe health impacts for those affected including depression (Kim et al., 2024). Other reviews have found positive association between self-injurious thoughts and behaviours, and cyberincivility, including suicidal ideation among adolescents (Nesi et al., 2021).

Passive use of social media (consuming content without actively engaging (Sarmiento et al., 2020) can be associated with increased levels of social comparison, depression and anxiety. On the other hand, active users (interacting with others) may become trapped in a cycle of constantly adjusting their self-presentation to gain popularity, which ultimately restricts genuine self-expression (Shankelman et al., 2021; Anderson et al., 2022). Some studies report the "fear of missing out" phenomenon (Dhir et al., 2018), with the fear of social exclusion if disconnected from online activity. This strong urge to remain online reduces the quality of face-to-face interactions with family and friends, leading to emotional disconnection (Popat & Tarrant, 2023).

Irish children generally view the digital world positively, but some have had negative experiences. Around one in five teenagers and one in four younger children have encountered something online that upset them (NAC 2021, CyberSafeKids 2024). UK surveys show many children worry about their screen time, particularly on video-sharing platforms, online games, and social media. Their main concerns include the impact on mental and physical health, schoolwork, and family relationships. The fear of missing out, staying connected, and finding information make it hard to cut back. Many also receive notifications prompting them to return online (OFCOM, 2024).

Discussion

The findings presented above highlight both the opportunities and challenges that come with the increasing presence of online activity in the lives of Irish children and adolescents. The literature highlights associations between online screen time, especially social media use, and poor physical and mental health in young people.

There are links between increased screen time and anxiety and depression, attention problems, poor sleep, and increased risk of self-harm including suicide. Social media use is associated with body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, heightened susceptibility to harassment or cyberbullying, increased social comparison, reduced quality of face-to-face interactions with family and friends, with many children saying these platforms make them feel worse about their own lives. Children also report seeing content online that made them upset. Dangerous trends involving risky behaviours are also a concern. Across Europe, survey data indicates that growing numbers of adolescents use social media and digital gaming technologies in a problematic way; indeed, in Ireland, the proportion of problematic users is higher than the European average (Boniel-Nissim et al, 2024).

At the same time, being online offers young people valuable opportunities to socialize and stay connected with friends, to develop new friendships and support networks and offer opportunities for self-expression.

Books such as Johnathan Haidt's 'The Anxious Generation' (Haidt, 2024) have raised the profile of this discussion in the public domain in recent years. Haidt argues that major increases in anxiety in school aged children in the last 20 years have their root in social media and increasing time spent online and presents multiple studies to support this theory. However, the topic is nuanced. While some studies find an association between for example, anxiety and depression and social media use, it is not always clear whether those experiencing anxiety and depression are more likely to spend more time online consuming social media or whether the time spent online is a cause or major contributor to the anxiety and depression. Other studies observe differences in effects depending on whether the user engages in 'passive use' or 'active use'.

Digital age of consent- EU – data protection bill 2018
In the EU, parental consent is required for processing of personal data for children under 16 years, though individual countries may lower that limit to 13 years. In Ireland, the 16 years limit applies as defined under General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This means that for every child under 16 years, online service providers (e.g. a social media platform) that rely on consent as the legal basis for processing must obtain the consent of the child's parents in order to offer online services to them.

The Online Safety Code
The Online Safety Code (Comisiún na Meán, 2024) establishes enforceable regulations that require video-sharing platforms to implement measures to safeguard users, particularly children, in the online environment. The platforms are required to implement measures such as age assurance/verification systems, offer parental controls, and provide user-friendly and transparent reporting and flagging mechanisms These regulations apply to video-sharing platforms with their EU headquarters in Ireland, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Other services are regulated under the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) which enforces similar regulations. Comisiún na Meán is responsible for enforcing the DSA in Ireland.

Digital Services Act (DSA)
The Digital Services Act (DSA) is an EU regulation which came into force in EU Law in November 2022 and applies in full to all EU member states since 17 Feb 2024. It is translated into National Legislation in the Digital Services Act 2024. The DSA is designed to provide greater online safety including easier reporting of illegal content, greater transparency in content moderation, greater transparency and control on what users see in their feeds and a ban on targeted advertisement to minors on online platforms. It also stipulates that online platforms that are accessible to children should protect the privacy and security of those users, as well as their mental and physical well-being, for instance by adopting special privacy and security settings by default.

While more research is needed to understand this nuance, the Faculty of Paediatrics is concerned. **Our conclusion is that there is compelling indication that some children and adolescents experience negative health impacts from time spent online/use or excessive use of social media.**

Response to concerns in some jurisdictions has been to call for strong regulatory action, such as social media bans for u-16s as passed in Australia in Nov 2024. Other countries and jurisdictions are also discussing similar bans. Some hesitation or criticism of bans has been they are a blunt instrument and may be difficult to implement effectively (Australian Childs Rights Taskforce 2024), as children already have ways around age limits. For example, many platforms have official age limits of 13 years and parental consent is required up to 16 years (see box above on Digital Age of Consent). However, data shows that 82% of 8-12 years olds have their own social media/instant messaging accounts (Cyber Safe Kids 2024). Similar data is reported in the UK (Ofcom 2022). Additionally, some social media sites/apps do not require a profile to browse, e.g. TikTok. Instead of a ban, some health experts have proposed systemic regulation, safety standards and a focus on empowering children, families and carers.

Recommendations

The establishment of the Government Online Health Taskforce as an initial step to develop a public health response to potential harms caused to children and young people by certain types of online activity is a welcome step to understand and respond to the risks to young people.

EU regulation such as the Digital Services Act is also welcome. However, we remain concerned that this does not sufficiently address the issues that give rise to potential harms, and that companies providing online platforms and services are not doing enough to prevent negative health impacts to children and young people of online activity. Comprehensive mandatory regulation is essential and must be driven by public health interests. Online service providers and social media platforms must be held accountable to provide a safe and age-appropriate experience for young people. Because potential harms arise from both the content children and young people are exposed to, and the patterns of use of the technology, including time spent online, platforms should also be required to design platforms in a way that minimises risk of excessive and/or addictive use.

Recommendation 1:

Action on Accountability. The Government must enact and enforce comprehensive regulations that hold online platforms accountable to ensure a safe and age-appropriate environment for children and young people. This should include actions to safeguard users from harmful content, including advertising content (such as advertising of unhealthy food, and e-cigarette products) and interactions, as well as ethical platform design that minimises risk of excessive use.

It's clear also that many parents feel overwhelmed and confused about how to support the appropriate social development of their children in an online society, while protecting them from the negative health impacts associated with the technology. These impacts relate to both the content consumed on the platforms and amount of time spent online. Parents themselves need to understand the benefits and the risks, to be social media literate, and to feel empowered with appropriate information and tools to guide their children. Open communication and positive modelling in relation to parents' own use of online services and social media habits is also vital and advice on this should be included in supports for parents. Family based policies are crucial, but parents cannot be left alone in this – any public health strategy must also look at the platform responsibility to keep children and adolescents safe.

Recommendation 2:

Public Awareness and Parental Support: Launch targeted public awareness campaigns with tailored resources for parents. These initiatives should empower parents with the tools, knowledge and confidence to guide their children in safe and appropriate use of online platforms.

While there are clear associations between online activity and various health harms, there is also a clear need for additional research to understand nuances in the data. This will support the development and implementation of evidence-based policies and educational programmes to address these harms.

Recommendation 3:

Invest in Research: Prioritize funding of comprehensive research into the psychological, social, and developmental effects of online activity including social media use among children and young people. This research should inform evidence-based policy and educational initiatives.

Paediatricians and other health professionals who work with children and young people can play a key role in supporting the families they serve to understand and manage the benefits and risks involved with online activity. Additional resources and continuous professional development are required to support health professionals in offering this advice and support. Such resources should be developed by the HSE with health professionals and RCPI and other p rofessional bodies can support dissemination.

Recommendation 4:

Resources and Support for Health Professionals: Provide targeted resources and training for health professionals to ensure they are equipped to offer informed advice to families and young people regarding the risks and impacts of online activity and social media uses.

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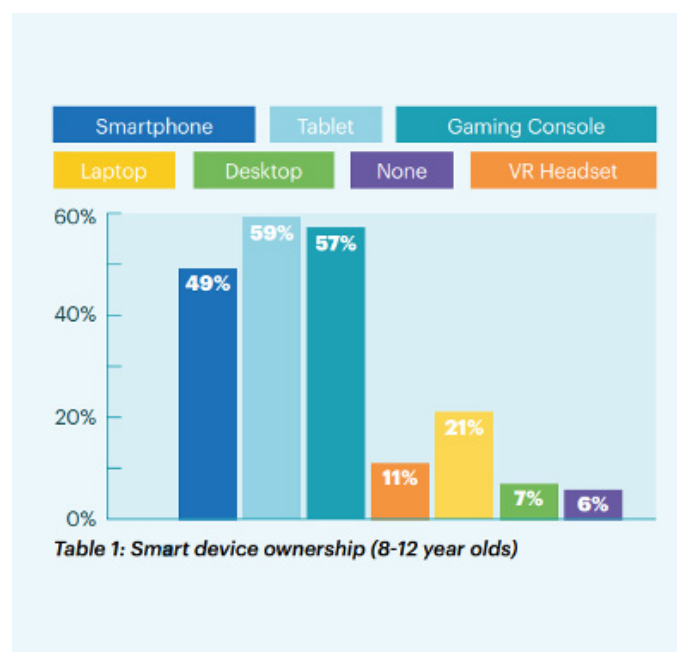
Appendix/Infographic:

Statistics on online activity

> ### 94% of 8-12 year olds In Ireland have their own smart device

CyberSafeKids – left to their own devices *(CyberSafe Kids 2024)*

- *94% of 8-12 year olds have their own smart device*
- *82% have their own social media/ instant messaging accounts*
- *35% have unrestricted online access*
- *25% have experienced cyber bullying*
- *77% of 8-12 year olds say their parents can't see what they are doing online and 83% can use devices in their bedroom.*

Hours spent online (NAC, 2021).

- *70% of children use the Internet daily, spending an average of 2.1 hours online on weekdays, and 3.4 hours online per day during weekends.*
- *Hours spent online appears to increase with age with teenagers (aged 15-17) spending up to 4.2 hours a day online (NAC, 2021)*

Smartphone | Tablet | Gaming Console
Laptop | Desktop | None | VR Headset

Smartphone 49%, Tablet 59%, Gaming Console 57%, Laptop 11%, Desktop 21%, None 7%, VR Headset 6%

Table 1: Smart device ownership (8-12 year olds)

> ### Irish teenagers (aged 15-17) spend up to 4.2 hours a day online

In the UK, Ofcom's 2024 (Ofcom, 2024) report indicates that

- *20% of 8-15-year-olds, with a social media profile on at least one platform, have set their profile age to 18 or older, putting them at a higher risk of encountering adult content.*
- *They also found that a significant number of younger children are gaming online. The proportion of 3-4-year-olds and 5-7-year-olds gaming online saw a rise of 5 percentage points and 7 percentage points, reaching 23% and 41%, respectively, in 2023.*
- *44% of 8-15-year-olds expressed concern about the amount of time they spend online. The online services they were most worried about included video-sharing platforms (VSPs) at 23%, online games at 23%, and social media at 20%.*
- *81% of all 3-17-year-olds used apps for messaging and voice/video calls, highlighting their strong preference for online interaction.*
- *Among children aged 12-17, other reported benefits included assistance with schoolwork/homework (80%), finding helpful information for personal issues (59%), and learning new skills (52%) (Ofcom, 2024).*

> ### 44% of 8-15-year-olds expressed concern about the amount of time they spend online.

A 2024 WHO Europe Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey report (Boniel-Nissim et al, 2024) found that growing numbers of adolescents seem to use social media and digital gaming technologies in a problematic (addictive-like) way.

- *Reporting on 2021/2022 survey data, 11% of adolescents were classified as problematic social media users (an increase from 7% in 2018), while almost a third (32%) were classified as intense social media users.*
- *The report found that in Ireland there were more problematic users (15%) than the European average of 11%.*

> ### 15% of children in Ireland use social media and digital gaming technologies in a problematic way. This is higher than the European average of 11%.