

## **Association for Young People's Health response to the All Party Parliamentary Group's Social Media Inquiry**

**August 2018**

The Association for Young People's Health (AYPH) is the leading independent voice for young people's health in the UK. AYPH bridges the worlds of policy, practice and evidence to promote better understanding of young people's health needs and to advocate youth friendly health services. AYPH is a membership organisation representing a range of professionals working to improve young people's health.

This response was drafted by AYPH in response to the call for evidence for the inquiry into ***'Managing the impact of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing'*** run by the APPG on social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

We are providing evidence relating to the following broad topics;

### **a) The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health and Wellbeing**

We welcome the solution focussed approach of the Committee. In terms of evidence on the positive and negative impacts of social media, it is important to note that it is very difficult to accumulate robust research data on this. Fast paced technological developments combined with young people's fluid and changing approach to use of social media makes it almost impossible to pin down causality.

Against the background of the research limitations, recent reviews tend to conclude that there may be negative effects on self-esteem and body image for some vulnerable young people (Richards, Caldwell and Go, 2015). However, others also identify positive outcomes on health, such as an increased ability to interact with others for some young people confined to home or those who find face to face communication difficult. In their recent review on *'Teens, technology and friendships'*, the Pew Research Centre concluded there were widespread positive benefits on interconnectivity and identity, and on educational opportunities, creativity and possibilities for championing young peoples' rights (Lenhart *et al.*, 2015). It seems likely that a number of these features may be linked to positive mental health and wellbeing. A study carried out on adolescents in the UK has shown that moderate use of digital technology (up to 6 hours per day) is not associated with negative mental health outcomes (Przybylski and Bowes, 2017) and may in fact be beneficial for wellbeing, in a connected world. The picture is thus mixed.

The health system and other private and charitable organisations are increasing using digital technology to support health and wellbeing. As we promote apps to support people's mental health and actively encourage people to engage with the health system online AYPH's view is that we must have an approach to social media which is nuanced and reflects the positive and negative potential impacts of its use.

## **b) A healthy relationship with social media**

A recent Office of National Statistics survey on internet access showed that 91% of young people aged 16-24 use the internet for social networking (Hagell, Shah and Coleman, 2017). Enabling young people to be more connected with family and friends, share common interests and creativity, be more involved in the community be made aware of volunteering activities and political activism, and have access to health information and support networks, are all positive impacts of social media. Therefore we would argue that it is possible to have a positive relationship with social media and it is not always the case of mitigating negatives.

The key elements to a healthy relationship with social media seem to be the ability to switch off from it occasionally, appreciate the 'self-presentational' elements of other people's posts, not allow it to interfere with sleep, stay safe online and be resilient to negative content and messages. Studies carried out on adolescents in the United States show that media use after bed and awakenings by a mobile phone at night were associated with lower adolescent sleep efficiency and decreased sleep duration (Fobian, Avis and Schwebel, 2016; Twenge, Krizan and Hisler, 2017). Guidelines on the healthy use of social media should therefore encourage young people to switch off and stop using social media one hour before bedtime. In addition, notifications should be switched off throughout the day but particularly at night as there is evidence to show that notifications encourage compulsive use of social media by young people (Baroness, Alexandra and Jenny, 2018). Young people need to understand that not everything is true online – for example images which have been adapted or people who are not who they say they are. Guidelines on the healthy use of social media should also focus on how young people can stay safe online – by sharing content appropriately in a way that does not compromise safety, and enable young people to build resilience towards to negative content messages.

AYPH believes that it is important that guidelines on healthy social media usage do not solely focus on time limits but also take into consideration young people's intentions and specific activities when using social media. We also suggest that almost all recommendations about healthy relationships with social media apply just as much to adults around young people, as to the young people themselves. Indeed, it could be argued that the behaviour being modelled by other adults is a more important influence and guide to behaviour than somewhat distant guidelines from health authorities concerning sensible use.

## **c) Responsibility and regulation**

The responsibility of managing the impact of social media on young people does not lie solely with young people but also with wider stakeholders from different sectors. Some of these stakeholders include digital technology firms, the government, schools, public health professionals and families of young people. All stakeholders working with young people have responsibility to support young people to manage their social media use and be safe online.

### ***The role of digital technology firms***

Technology firms that are responsible for creating social media platforms have a prime responsibility for creating profits for their shareholders. Social media platforms make profits

by encouraging new users and by encouraging greater use, which is not always in the best interests of young people's health and wellbeing. It is unfair for digital technology firms to create persuasive digital technologies and then for society to expect young people to reduce their use of these technologies.

Fundamental changes to digital platforms are required to encourage healthier use of social media by young people, as highlighted in the 5Rights report entitled '*Disrupted Childhood- The cost of persuasive design*' (Baroness, Alexandra and Jenny, 2018). Some of these changes include making it as frictionless to get offline as it is to get online, having notifications turned off as the default and signposting young people who are struggling with their social media use to appropriate services. The *Life in Likes* report on social media use amongst 8-10 year olds highlights that 3 out of 4 children aged 10-12 have their own social media accounts (Children's Commissioner, 2018). If social media companies uphold that they are unsuitable for under 13s they need to be better at enforcing the lower age limits and also supporting parents and schools to do this.

### ***The role of government***

Government can play a key role in;

- Supporting digital literacy as part of the school curriculum to educate children on how they are being influenced by social media and how to use social media in a way that promotes their wellbeing
- Regulating digital technology firms through legislation on young person impact assessments of new and current persuasive design features, which will enable young people to make informed decisions about the features they choose to use on social media.
- Ensuring all professionals who work with young people have appropriate training on the opportunities and risks of social media for young people, and are able to signpost to appropriate services if further help for problematic social media use is required.

### **d) Innovation and solutions**

- We would advocate for **young people's needs and views** to be put at the centre of innovations and solutions for social media use that promote wellbeing. This would involve directly speaking to young people and involving them in the development of solutions. Voluntary sector organisations such as AYPH could help facilitate this.
- Improving young people's **digital literacy through Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE)** in schools will play an important role in promoting digital skills and healthier social media usage. Effective social media education need to include educating young people about some of the truths behind what people tend to post on social media and enable them to understand how they are being influenced by this. For example, including education on how people tend to post positive images and experiences more frequently, which may be heavily edited, compared to negative images or messages, provides a false impression of other young people's lives and wrongfully creates the feeling of fear of missing out (FOMO).

- **Technological innovation** can play an important role in developing apps which can monitor young people's social media usage, providing weekly trends and can also warn young people against excessive usage. Apps such as *Offtime*, which have different modes such as "work" "family" or "me" time, can enable young people to have access to functions they require without getting distracted. Other apps such as *Moment* also allow people to set daily limits on device usage. Similar applications that are tailored to young people should be based on evidence-based guidelines on healthy usage of social media. This self-regulation method of social media usage can empower young people to better manage their social media usage.

## Summary

Social media use can have positive and negative impacts on young people's wellbeing. Healthy use of social media should follow evidence based guidelines, particularly around night time use. However the role of behaviour being modelled by adults should not be ignored. We cannot expect young people to limit or significantly change the way they use social media if adults around them are not also using platforms in a safe and appropriate way. We must also accept the move to using digital platforms in health and education for example and our approach must encompass this. Managing the impact of social media use on young people requires inter-sectoral working with key roles for the digital technology firms to re-design platforms to make them less persuasive and for the government to support digital literacy education in schools.

For more information about AYPH or to get in contact please visit [www.ayph.org.uk](http://www.ayph.org.uk), or email [info@youngpeopleshealth.org.uk](mailto:info@youngpeopleshealth.org.uk).

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