Growing Up Online

Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland - an Evidence Report

Spotlight Report on the Screen Time Debate

January 2024

Dr Deborah Webster and Dr Emilia Symington

STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE | 100
Shaping education since 1922

Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement

SBNI
Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland

Overview of Project

The *Growing Up Online* research study, funded by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) and conducted by a team from the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement at Stranmillis University College, provides an evidence report relating to children's online activities, harms, and safety. The project set out to undertake an evidence-based report relating to children's online activities, harms, and safety. The project aimed to:

- Address the emergence, nature, and impact of online risks of harm and trends among all groups of children and young people in Northern Ireland, including risk and protective factors, access to support and intervention when issues arise and the implications for safety policy and practice; and
- Review online safety provision including educational initiatives to safeguard and protect children online.

A number of spotlight reports based on the data from the broader study have been produced, concerning topics ranging from cyberbullying to gender-based violence online. This spotlight report focuses specifically on children's screen time duration, and the risks and benefits associated with excessive internet usage.

Introduction to the Screen Time Debate

Despite the internet's numerous benefits, such as access to information and the ability to communicate with long-distance friends and family, there is growing concern among parents, carers, academics and other professionals regarding the increased use of screen time, particularly since the pandemic when children have been on screens more (Cheong and Wong, 2020; Twenge & Campbell, 2018). The American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) (1990, 1999, 2001) have recommended that there should be no screen time for children under two years old, and a limit of two hours of screen time for older children. In 2016, the AAP revised this recommendation to offer families greater flexibility; rather than giving specific limits, the AAP recommend considering the quality of their screen usage rather than exclusively restricting the quantity (Council on Communications and Media, 2016). This recommendation was made in order to reflect the understanding that children can have different kinds of interactions with technology, and that other factors are important for influencing wellbeing, such as sleep, physical activity, and diet (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2019). This was recently reflected in a BBC advertisement campaign entitled '*Screens; its what's on them that counts'* (BBC, 2023). With that in mind, this spotlight report will explore the recent research findings from the Growing Up Online findings in light of the screen time debate. The question being, is it *really* what's on the screen that counts?

Literature Review

The risks to children's safety and wellbeing posed by the internet have been well documented. Livingstone's '*four C's*' (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021) is a useful framework when considering how children are put at risk when online: content (what they are viewing), contact (who is contacting them), conduct (them as a user) and contract (where money is transferred) as well as the impact that using social media has on their wellbeing (Webster, Dunne, & Hunter, 2020). Yet in terms of the screen time debate, the risks to a child might relate more specifically to how, when and why they are using their screens.

The displacement theory was first explained by Neuman (1988) in terms of watching television, and reflects the idea that harm incurred by internet usage might not be the result of what is on the screens, but rather what the child or young person is *not* doing as a result of their online activities. Neuman concluded that the harms incurred were proportionate to exposure, and their findings were affirmed by Chief Medical Officers in 2019, who warned that excessive screen time can displace health-promoting activities: for instance, physical activity, healthy diet, regular exercise, and quality time spent with family members.

Przybylski and Weinstein (2017) built on the displacement theory and proposed the digital Goldilocks hypothesis. Their study involving 15 year olds in England (n = 120,115) found that moderate levels of screen time are not intrinsically harmful and can be advantageous. However, overuse may displace other activities, such as sleep and socialisation. One place where the displacement of other activities can occur with the use of mobile phones and other digital devices, is in bed. In their study with Scottish adolescents, Woods and Scott (2016), found that adolescents who used social media more at night-time, as well as those who were more emotionally invested in social media, experienced poorer sleep quality, lower self-esteem and higher levels of anxiety and depression. At the same time, too little technology experience can also deprive adolescents of social connections with their peers. Thus, the challenge for parents and guardians is to find a balance between screen time and doing other activities, using the analogy of Goldilocks who found Baby Bears' porridge to be "just right". This poses a challenge for parents and guardians; as Przybylski and Weinstein note, 'not all digital activities are created equal,' with some digital activities having a positive impact whereas others posing negative impacts (2017, p.211).

Consideration should also be given to how children and young people are using digital devices, whether active or passive. Passive use of screen time could be, for example, when the user is simply scrolling on their device not for any specific purpose, watching one short video after another. This contrasts with active use, which is when the user is purposefully connecting with others via the platforms or playing games online. Verduyn et al. (2017) considered the impact of both active and passive use of social media on the subjective well-being on a wider population group. They conclude that social media can improve subjective well-being if it is used actively to connect with others, but can be a "significant stress" to subjective well-being if used passively. This is due to the outcomes of comparison and envy which occur as a result of passive internet usage.

Methods

In the Growing Up Online project two online surveys were administered to children and young people from across Northern Ireland, aged between 8-18 years (n = 6481). A wide variety of different target populations were recruited to take part in the qualitative part of the study which involved interviews and focus groups (n = 95) including children and young people in primary, post-primary, special schools and youth club settings, as well as parents and guardians, teachers/school leaders, and professionals working in the field of online safety. The qualitative engagement included Traveller/Roma children, LGBTQI+ young people, children with (severe) learning difficulties, young people in a youth club setting in a disadvantaged urban context, and pupils from an Irish-medium school.

Findings

Theme 1: Length of Time Spent Online

The participants in the survey were asked how long they spend online on a typical school day as well as on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays. For children aged 8 -13 years old the most commonly reported amount of time spent online on an ordinary school day was about 1-2 hours (17.77%). On a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays, it was around 7 hours or more (16.68%), demonstrating that they spent considerably more time online at the weekend and during the school holidays. In the cohort aged 14 – 18 years old, the most commonly reported amount of time spent on an ordinary school day was about 2-3 hours (18.53%), followed by 3-4 hours (18.49%). This suggests children spend more time online as they get older. At the weekend or during the holidays, the older cohort most commonly spent about 7 hours or more (21.81%) online.

Participants involved in the focus groups were asked to estimate their average screen time. The responses from focus group participants ranged extensively, both between the participants in the group and between the groups themselves. The primary school pupils estimated that their usage ranged from half an hour per day to 6 hours per day, with most responses averaging an hour in Key Stage 1 and three hours in Key Stage 2. They revealed that they rarely used the internet during school hours, and rarely needed to use the internet for homework. Instead, they were most likely to use the internet for gaming and watching videos. The primary school children thought it was unlikely that they would have a day where they didn't spend at least half an hour online. The survey findings regarding higher internet usage at the weekend were reaffirmed through the focus groups, particularly among the primary school aged participants. For instance, the children from a Roma Traveller community indicated that while they would spend "*like an hour*" online after school, they were more likely to spend longer at the weekend: "*more like three hours*."

The students attending a special school also indicated, using visual prompts, that they spent more time online at the weekends. The use of symbols (+/-) enabled participants to indicate whether they felt more time was spent online at the weekend as opposed to during the week after school. In agreement with fellow pupils, one participant said, *'Just I get more time at the weekend.'* (boy, SSY). By way of contrast, many of the other post-primary

school participants referred to the fact that their internet use at weekends could be lower than during the week as a result of their participation in school or community sports and part-time sports. This distraction from phone use was also welcomed by some parents and guardians in their focus group. In general, the distinction between weekend and weekday usage was mentioned less frequently in the post-primary groups, which is consistent with their perceptions of their internet usage being "*all day, every day*" rather than significantly higher at a certain point of the week. For instance, some of the students estimated that approximately 90% of their day was spent online, including time during school hours.

The LGBTQI+ focus group participants said that their school permitted them to use phones during independent study classes, as well as during lunch, break times, and in between classes. For this reason, the LGBTQI+ focus group participants said that their peers would generally be on their phones for the majority of the day:

> *"Every child just walks around school like this [mimes texting and walking] and like standing outside classes when they are just queuing, they are like [mimes swiping a phone screen] and it's always social media like nobody's ever on the news or anything." (Girl)*

Participants in the LGBTQI+ focus group were invited to share their screen time using the settings on their phones. This is a setting which monitors how long phones are used during the day. The participants' phone screen time ranged from 13 to 19 hours each day (excluding games console use), with one participant having spent over 12 hours on Twitter the previous day and another spending 10 hours on TikTok. There was a strong message from the LGBTQI+ group that this pattern of behaviour was becoming increasingly normal among their peer group, and that young people were getting accustomed to spending the majority of their day online. This was reflected in the other post-primary focus groups, which also reported that the majority of their day was spent online. For instance, the youth group's average daily duration ranged from 5 to 15 hours per day, with one participant highlighting that they used their phone "*all day, every day*." The youth group also claimed that they spent most of their time on social media apps, with Snapchat being cited as the most popular app amongst their group.

Within the mainstream post-primary focus groups, participants estimated that they spent a minimum of seven hours per day online during the week. This was lower at weekends, as well as being reduced on days where they had prior commitments. For example, some participants noted that sporting and work commitments meant that they often spent less time online:

> *"You know, I'd be working the guts of 8 hours at the weekends, 10 hours or so on the weekend, so you're not on your phone all that time" (boy, MPP1).*

This indicates that although the pupils spend a large amount of time online, it is not necessarily their first choice of activity. Instead, if alternative commitments arise, they are less likely to spend time on their phones.

In the focus groups, the LGBTQI+ group were unsurprised and unconcerned by their high screen times. They suggested that this was to be expected given their ages, and hypothesised that their peers' screen times would be similar:

> *Non-binary: Over the last two days my screen time is 43 hours.*

> *Interviewer: And is that, is that normal? Like compared to your peers, would that be normal?*

> *Boy: That's normal.*

In contrast, just under half (49.98%) of 14-18 year olds and over a third (38.42%) of 8-13 year olds who completed the survey felt that they spent too much time online. Most thought their parents and guardians were concerned about their screen time, with 56.77% of 8-13 year olds and 62.64% of 14-18 year olds reporting that their parents and guardians probably thought they spent too much time online. In the parent and guardian focus group, the participants all indicated a high level of concern about their children's screen time. However, they indicated that they felt unable to do anything regarding their concerns, for fear of isolating their child from their peer group.

Theme 2: Risks and Benefits of Excessive Time Spent Online

Although the majority of the focus group participants identified their own screen time usage as being high, they were also critical of peers who appeared to be online for longer amounts of time. For instance, the primary school children identified a member of their class who "*never comes outside no more*," and criticised her for being "*always online*." The primary school pupils felt that device usage should be limited, but they disagreed on how this should happen in practice; some children suggested only being allowed to use devices at a certain time of day such as not before bedtime, whereas others argued they should be allowed to use devices at any time but only for a limited timeframe.

The students in the post-primary focus groups also gave anecdotal examples of students they knew who spent a long time online, particularly late at night. Many of the young people in these groups claimed they knew of students in their year group who stayed up as late as "*half two*" and "*possibly the whole night*" (MPP1, boy). The young people noted that this nocturnal internet usage had a negative impact on their peers, with one girl noting that their friends who had been online late at night struggled to concentrate in class the next day and tended to be "*kind of moody*" (girl, MPP3). There was a longer discussion of this behaviour in one of the focus groups in particular, highlighting the negative impact on the young people's ability to learn in school:

> *Interviewer: "…and those people who are on it to one or two o'clock in the morning, when they come into school the next day, what sort of shape are they in?*

> *Girl: In a complete state. Yeah.*

> *Boy: Wrecked*

Teachers also reported that they witnessed the impact of this nocturnal online activity and reported that they saw children "coming in tired, they literally look as white as a ghost in the morning." They referred to the lack of parental supervision as a contributory factor. These findings were supported by the quantitative data collected through the online survey, which asked children and young people what impact their online activity had on their sleep. Among the younger cohort (8-13), 19% reported that they were often tired the next day as a result of being online late at night. Among the older cohort (14-18) this had risen to 27%.

However, not all post-primary students thought that their nocturnal online activities were harmful. The LGBTQI+ group were unconcerned about their internet usage, and did not think it was problematic to be regularly "*up 'til like five in the morning*" on their devices;

> *Interviewer: So you're getting like two hours sleep a night?*

> *Boy: Yeah.*

> *Girl: Yeah, that's all I need for the whole day.*

> *Boy: I got like one hour of sleep last night and look at me, I'm perfectly fine.*

Other risks associated with being online for a prolonged period of time included the inability to engage in physical social interaction "*due to a heavy reliance on iPads/phones*," (Professional 7) and experiencing feelings of low self-worth after spending time on social media. For instance, in both cohorts (8-13 and 14-18), there was a correlation between those who spent most time online and a feeling that their social media use made them feel worse about themselves. Among the older cohort (14-18) of those who reported that social media use made them feel worse about themselves, 43% spent 6 hours or more online at weekends/holiday times. By contrast, of those who reported that social media made no difference to how they feel about themselves, only 29% spent 6 hours or more online.

Yet, needless to say, the young people also highlighted a number of benefits they experienced due to their prolonged screen-time. For many children and young people, and particularly for young people at risk of exclusion, such as those identifying as LGBTQI+, being online represents an important source of comfort, support, and genuine friendship. The internet enabled them to form lasting friendships with people who lived in different parts of the world, but it also meant that they had a constant line of direct access to their 'comfort person'.

> *Boy: Sometimes my mental health goes so bad to the point where I actually feel like cursing someone out so I'll go to [person] to see if someone will start a fight with me so that I can curse them out.*

> *Interviewer: And does that help?*

> *Boy: It helps so much!*

This group in particular felt that their social network was predominately, if not exclusively, based on the internet. Therefore, they were required to have high screen times; this was how they connected with their friends and therefore represented an important source of comfort and security.

Conclusion

As evidenced in recent reports in Ireland, the UK and throughout Europe (Cybersafe Kids, 2023; Ofcom, 2023; Smahel, et al., 2020) being online is integral to the lives of children and young people and this was no different for children and young people in Northern Ireland, as evidenced by this report. As one young person commented: "We're teenagers. We spend most of our day on the internet." This study provided evidence that children and young people are spending many hours online each day, on school days but especially at weekends and during holidays. While being online can be beneficial in many different ways, both to their education and wellbeing, there are concerns that too much screen time can have a negative impact on their lives.

Spending too much time online is a concern due to the risks that children are exposed to when online. If they are spending more time online, the concern could be that they are more exposed to risk than if they are on for a shorter length of time. However, although Neuman (1988) found harms proportionate to exposure in terms of television viewing, exposure to risks for children and young people will depend on several factors: for example, what activities they are doing, which platforms they are using, the extent of restrictions and parental controls in place, their interests, which celebrities and/or influencers they follow, and so on.

Spending too much time online is also a concern because it can displace other health-promoting activities, particularly other activities that are good for both the physical and mental wellbeing of young people such as creative play, sports, exercise and spending time 'in-person' with friends and family. Participants in the primary school focus groups expressed frustration at peers who were online a lot of the time and not wanting to come outside anymore. Some members of the post-primary focus groups indicated that at the weekend they would typically spend less time online because they had other things to do with their time: for example, sport or a part-time job. Displacement is particularly relevant when it comes to sleep: young people are missing out on sleep because they are on their devices in bed.

Parents and guardians can play a critical role in moderating screen time particularly for young children, yet this report provides us with evidence that only half of the children surveyed thought their parents and guardians were concerned with their online activities. In contrast, the parents' and guardians' focus group participants expressed that they were very concerned about their child's online activities, although they were unsure how to monitor or limit their screen time without causing social isolation from their peers. Despite this anxiety, the UK Chief Medical Officers (2019) have urged families to "try to find a healthy balance" (p.6) through agreeing boundaries for screen use and modelling moderate screen usage in front of children.

There are many things that parents and guardians can do to help moderate screen time use. For example, using a parent app to limit screen time use, encouraging their children to be involved in other activities, ensuring devices are kept out of bedrooms at night-time and creating a culture of positive screen time use within the family home. Parents and guardians do need to be supported in their role to do this however as many feel under pressure by their peers or by their own children to have no limits on screen time.

Recommendations

While it is important to resist a simplistic binary association between screen time and wellbeing, there are nonetheless grounds for concern and attention must be given to this through meaningful dialogue with children and young people themselves in schools and in the home. The "precautionary approach," proposed by the UK Chief Medical Officers (2019), is recommended, due to the concern that excessive screen time can "displace" (p.6) health-promoting activities by children such as physical activity, healthy diet, regular sleep and quality time spent with families.

On the one hand, and as detailed in the aforementioned BBC (2023) advertising campaign entitled '*Screens: it's what's on them that counts*', viewing educational or inspirational content might be more helpful than content that is solely for entertainment purposes, or content that is harmful. Adopting an active use of the internet, such as playing games or communicating with friends, rather than passive use such as simply consuming content, may also have a more positive impact on children. At the same time, if excessive screen time is displacing other activities that are beneficial for children and young people's wellbeing, such as physical exercise and sleep, then the negative impact outweighs any possible benefit afforded through active use.

In conclusion, this has been a large, multi-method, participatory study which has yielded important new insights into the lived online experiences of a broad spectrum of children and young people in Northern Ireland. It is hoped that its findings and recommendations will help to inform the delivery of the actions associated with the Northern Ireland Executive's *Keeping Children and Young People Safe: An Online Safety Strategy 2020-2025,* and so contribute to our children and young people growing up safe online.

References

BBC (2023). *BBC Trailers, Screens: It's what's on them that counts Trailer (short)*. [online] BBC. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0g25m86 [Accessed 7 Nov. 2023].

Cybersafe Ireland (2023). *Trends and Usage Report*. [online] *Cybersafekids.ie*. Co. Dublin: Cybersafe Ireland. Available at: https://www.cybersafekids.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CSK_Data-Trends-Report-2023-V2-Web-Version.pdf [Accessed 7 Nov. 2023].

Davies, S.C., Atherton, F., Calderwood, C. and McBride, M. (2019). *United Kingdom Chief Medical Officers' commentary on 'Screen-based activities and children and young people's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: a systematic map of reviews*. [online] *www.gov.uk*. Department of Health and Social Care. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c5b1510e5274a316cee5be8/UK_CMO_commentary_on_screentime_and_social_media_map_of_reviews.pdf [Accessed 7 Nov. 2023].

Kam Cheong Li and Wong, B. (2020). Social Media in Higher Education: A Review of Their Uses, Benefits and Limitations. *Communications in computer and information science*, 1302. doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4594-2_21.

Livingstone, S. (2021). *The rise and fall of screen time*. [online] eprints.lse.ac.uk. Available at: https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/111915/ [Accessed 7 Nov. 2023].

Livingstone, S. and Stoilova, M. (2021). *The 4Cs: Classifying Online Risk to Children*. [online] *SSOAR*. Hamburg: Leibniz-Institut für Medienforschung | Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI). Available at: https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/71817 [Accessed 19 Jul. 2023].

Neuman, S.B. (1988). The Displacement Effect: Assessing the Relation between Television Viewing and Reading Performance. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 23(4), p.414. doi: https://doi.org/10.2307/747641.

Ofcom (2023). *Media Use and Attitudes Report*. [online] www.ofcom.org. Ofcom. Available at: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/%20children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023 [Accessed 7 Nov. 2023].

Przybylski, A.K. and Weinstein, N. (2017). A Large-Scale Test of the Goldilocks Hypothesis. *Psychological Science*, 28(2), pp.204–215. doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797616678438.

Smahel, D., Machackova, H., Mascheroni, G., Dedkova, L., Staksrud, E., Ólafsson, K., Livingstone, S. and Hasebrink, E. (2020). *EU Kids Online 2020: Survey results from 19 countries.* [online] EU Kids Online. Available at: https://doi.org/10.21953/lse.47fdeqj01ofo [Accessed 7 Nov. 2023].

Twenge, J.M. and Campbell, W.K. (2018). Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study. *Preventive Medicine Reports*, [online] 12(12), pp.271–283. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2018.10.003.

Verduyn, P., Ybarra, O., Résibois, M., Jonides, J. and Kross, E. (2017). Do Social Network Sites Enhance or Undermine Subjective Well-Being? A Critical Review. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 11(1), pp.274–302. doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12033.

Viner, R., Davie, M. and Firth, A. (2019). *The health impacts of screen time: a guide for clinicians and parents*. [online] *www.rcpch.ac.uk*. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. Available at: https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-12/rcpch_screen_time_guide_-_final.pdf [Accessed 7 Nov. 2023].

Webster, D., Dunne, L. and Hunter, R. (2020). Association Between Social Networks and Subjective Well-Being in Adolescents: A Systematic Review. *Youth & Society*, 53(2), p.0044118X2091958. doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118x20919589.

Woods, H.C. and Scott, H. (2016). #Sleepyteens: Social media use in adolescence is associated with poor sleep quality, anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. *Journal of Adolescence*, [online] 51(1), pp.41–49. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.05.008.

STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE | 100

Shaping education since 1922

Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement

SBNI

Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland