Written evidence submitted by Dr Sarah Rose

Executive Summary

There is a large body of scientific evidence that is often interpreted to support the argument that screen time is negatively associated with children's mental health. However, the size of the effects found are very small and the quality of evidence open to doubt. Therefore, we cannot assume that more screen time increases children's risk of experiencing a reduction in their wellbeing and poor mental health.

When considering the association between social media use and wellbeing, more evidence is required about the range of activities that children engage in when using social media to determine how these activities may be linked to their wellbeing and mental health. Research must move beyond focusing on time spent on social media as this measure does not provide meaningful insight given the large variety of activities available to children.

Numerous interventions and resources exist which aim to educate children about the risks of being online, and many of these are used in schools. However, very few of them have been empirically tested and therefore their effectiveness has not been confirmed. Furthermore, many of these programs focus on recognising and understanding risk, but few aim to develop children's ability to recover when they have potentially risky or unpleasant online experiences. Therefore, more resources to promote recovery should be included in schools-based programs to develop children's digital resilience.

There is insufficient evidence to support a total ban of mobile phones at school, and this approach is not supported by parents and pupils. School policies that ban mobile phones in schools may be missing an opportunity to educate children about responsible mobile phone use.

My Background

I am a developmental psychologist with a broad interest in education and children's wellbeing and lead a BSc (Hons) Psychology and Child Development course. I have expertise in children's screentime and technology use within the home and school environments. This has been demonstrated through papers published in peer-reviewed journals and articles written for The Conversation. Furthermore, I am currently leading three research projects on this topic. I am a chartered psychologist and a member of the Developmental Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society.

Full Response

What is the current understanding of how screen time can support or impact children's wellbeing and mental health, including the use of social media?

Multiple studies have considered the link between screen time and adolescent mental health. While findings of significant associations between greater screen time and poorer mental health are often reported, the effect sizes found are actually very small. So, although these studies have used very large data sets, and have found significant results, the small

effect sizes suggest that the effects are actually very small. This is explored in greater detail, and supporting evidence provided, in the much-cited paper by Orben & Przybylski (2019).

Furthermore, studies investigating the association between screen time and wellbeing most commonly compare measures of screen time and wellbeing that have been collected at the same time point. Therefore, we cannot be sure that the association is not a bidirectional one – and that poor mental health may be causing adolescents to spend greater amounts of time in front of screens.

You have specifically asked for evidence relating to the use of social media and the impact this may have on wellbeing and mental health. While this has been widely researched and the subject of over 80 meta-analyses and systematic reviews (Orben, 2020), these studies have failed to provide consistent results. The issues with the research into screen time more broadly also explain the inconsistencies here as data sets have been large, but effect sizes are small and there is a lack of high-quality longitudinal studies.

When we consider preteens much less is known about their experiences, or the potential impact of these experiences, on their development. This is concerning as although most social media platforms have an age restriction requiring users to be at least 13 years old 63% of 8 to 11-year-olds in the UK have their own social media account (Ofcom, 2023). We have just completed a systematic review which identified 49 published scientific papers providing evidence of 1) perceptions and experiences of the children themselves and 2) perceptions of those with the most direct contact with the children (i.e. the parents and teachers). Key findings relevant to this enquiry are:

- More than half the studies in this review reported the prevalence/frequency of social media use. This evidence suggests that between 67%-91% of children sampled (who were under 13 but over 7) use social media, spending on average 1 hour a day on social media platforms. Older preteens were increasingly likely to have their own accounts (including accounts in false names) and to spend increasing amounts of time using social media.
- Children tended to have more positive views and were more likely to report the benefits of social media use than their parents' and teachers' who were more likely to focus on risks, changes in behaviour and excessive use.
- Connecting with family and friends was perceived to be the main benefit. Other benefits included following famous people and current trends, sharing ideas and exploring self-identity and acquiring new skills.
- Thirteen of the papers reported data on the potential link between social media use and wellbeing/mental health. Six of these concluded that social media use was associated with more negative wellbeing while the other seven reported findings that were inconclusive.
- Very few studies considered the type of activities children engaged in when using social media. Therefore, we lack empirical knowledge about the types of activities children engage in and how this may affect their wellbeing in different ways. This could explain the inconsistent findings. For example, time spent on social media was not associated with Fear of Missing Out but the amount of sharing engaged in while on social media was.

Based on our summary of the available evidence more attention needs to be given to understanding the types of activities that children engage in on social media and how these activities may relate to their wellbeing and mental health.

How effective is digital safety education in schools, for example the PHSE curriculum, in educating children about screen time and online harms?

We are currently carrying out a systematic review of school-based interventions to promote digital resilience in children aged 18 or younger. What is notable is that many school-based interventions exist which aim to educate children about the risks of being online but that very few of them have been empirically tested. Therefore, little is known about the effectiveness of much of the digital safety education taking place in schools.

Through our review we have identified ten papers which empirically assess the effectiveness of an intervention designed to increase children digital media literacy, all of these include an element of educating children to recognize potential risks when online. However, only one of the interventions includes an element designed to promote recovery after experiencing something unpleasant online. Therefore, we do not have evidence- based interventions currently being delivered in schools which educate children on how to recover when things go wrong online. More emphasis needs to be placed on not only educating children to recognize and understand potential online risks, but they need to be provided with opportunities and challenges which they can learn from and develop their ability to recover when they do have potentially risky or unpleasant online experiences.

How can schools and parents be better supported to manage children's screen usage, for example, through age-related guidance?

There is evidence that many parents ignore age-related restrictions – for example by helping their child to open a social media account in their own name despite their child being younger than 13 and therefore not meeting the recommended age requirement for most social media platforms (Jennings & Caplovitz, 2022). Therefore, age-related guidance may not always be effective. Through interviews with parents and their pre-adolescent children we have found that parents tend to use a framework of mediation strategies to guide their child's online activities. Whether they choose restrictive or more enabling approaches can be fluid and often depends on the context. Parents report that their mediation strategies are influenced by their perceptions of the potential risks, their own online experiences and their perceptions of their child's behaviour and maturity.

What policies and practices are schools developing to manage children's recreational screen usage, particularly mobile phones?

I am disappointed to see that this week the DfE has introduced guidelines for mobile phones to be banned in schools. While I recognise that there are concerns that mobile phones in classrooms will distract children from learning, this finding has not always held true. Looking more closely at the evidence around mobile phones and distraction in classrooms reveals that studies have focused on different age groups and little consideration has been given to children's maturity and academic motivation. However, when age is taken into consideration older pupils tend to use their phone when the intensity of teaching is low, and therefore interference with learning is minimal. Younger children may be more negatively impacted as they lack the maturity and experience to decide when to engage in phone use. Therefore, while bans may be appropriate in classrooms with younger children, they may not be appropriate in all classrooms.

Furthermore, it has been reported that mobile phones can increase pupils' engagement in learning (Statti & Torress, 2020). A Bring your Own Device initiative in New Zealand secondary schools, in which pupils were encouraged to bring their smartphones and tablets to use in class, found that their digital skills were improved and that there were increased opportunities for collaboration between pupils and between pupils and teachers (Parsons & Adhikari, 2016). While some schools may be able to provide individual digital devices for classroom use this may not be possible in all schools and therefore bringing your own device could be an appropriate way for schools to integrate technology within lessons (Elliott-Dorans, 2018).

From our own research (Rose et al., 2022) with children (10- and 11-year-olds) and their parents we found that both parents and children felt that having phones was important for keeping in contact, both for practical arrangements, safety getting to and from school, and emotional support during the day. They were also aware of the downsides of having phones at school, including bullying and risks of being able to access the internet but **neither parents nor children were supportive of policies involving total bans.**

During this research children demonstrated good awareness of appropriate and inappropriate use of mobile phones at school. One parent-child pair suggested a role of "telephone prefect" who would have a class mobile phone that children and parents could use to contact each other during the school day when necessary. While this mature approach may not be found among all children, school policies that ban mobile phones may be missing an opportunity to involve children and educate them about responsible mobile phone use.

Involving children and parents in policy development has the potential to increase the effectiveness and enforceability of policies. Consulting with parents and pupils when developing school mobile phone policies is already recommended in Ireland.

References

Elliott-Dorans, L. R. (2018). To ban or not to ban? The effect of permissive versus restrictive laptop policies on student outcomes and teaching evaluations. *Computers & Education, 126*, 183–200. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2018.07.008

Jennings, N. A., & Caplovitz, A. G. (2022). Parenting and tweens' media use during the COVID-19 pandemic. Psychology of Popular Media, 11(3), 311–315. https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000376

Ofcom (2023) Children and parents: Media use and attitudes report 2023. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023

Orben, A. (2020). Teenagers, screens and social media: a narrative review of reviews and key studies. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 55*, 407–414 https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-019-01825-4

Orben. A. & Przybylski, A. K., (2019). The association between adolescent well-being and digital technology use. *Nature Human Behaviour, 3*, 173-182. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0506-1

Rose, S. E., Gears, A., Taylor, J. (2022). What are parents' and children's co-constructed views on mobile phone use and policies in school? *Children & Society, 36,* 1418-1433 https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12583

Statti, A. & Torres, K. M. (2020). Digital literacy: The need for technology integration and its impact on learning and engagement in community school environments. *Peabody Journal of Education, 95*, 90-100. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2019.1702426

October 2023