

Written evidence submitted by NAHT

1. NAHT welcomes the opportunity to respond to the House of Commons Education Select Committee's inquiry on the impacts of screen time on education and wellbeing.
2. NAHT is the UK's largest professional trade union for school leaders. We represent more than 35,000 head teachers, executive heads, CEOs, deputy and assistant heads, vice principals and school business leaders. Our members work across: the early years, primary, special and secondary schools; independent schools; sixth form and FE colleges; outdoor education centres; pupil referral units, social services establishments and other educational settings.
3. In addition to the representation, advice and training that we provide for existing school leaders, we also support, develop and represent the school leaders of the future, through NAHT Edge, the middle leadership section of our association. We use our voice at the highest levels of government to influence policy for the benefit of leaders and learners everywhere.

What is the current understanding of how screen time can support and impact children's development and educational outcomes, including the effect on concentration and behaviour?

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?

4. NAHT will respond to these questions together, in the interest of explaining the nuances of impacts resulting from screen and social media usage.
5. The difficulty in isolating particular influences and impacts of screens and social media lies, in part, in the fact that this is still a relatively new area of research that is only beginning to be understood, given the exponential increase in digital technologies across society in recent years.
6. The resulting consequence of this is that any conclusions made are tentative and subject to further analysis as new evidence and technology emerges. As a result, NAHT advises that there is frequent evaluation and review of the effects of screen and social media usage on children and young people, and that government policy and resources respond to any changes in evidence accordingly.
7. As it stands, much of the research undertaken paints a mixed picture of the effects of screen and social media usage on children and young people. However, there is a general consensus that there can be positive, as well as negative, impacts on mental health and wellbeing, with the content and overall usage patterns playing the key role in the possible resulting effects.
8. The reality is that children and young people need to be able to interact in and understand the boundaries of an increasingly digital world. A growing body of evidence has documented the increase in usage of devices and social media as children grow into adults, with Ofcom's 2021 Online Nation report finding that:

- Children aged 7-16 spend, on average, nearly four hours a day online. Much of children's internet usage is spent watching video content and gaming.
 - Time spent online increased with age. For 7–8-year-olds, this was 2 hours 54 minutes, but for 15-16-year-olds this was 4 hours 54 minutes.
 - Older boys (on average) spent most time online. Half of 15- to 16-year-old boys said they spent more than six hours a day online, compared to a third of 15- to 16-year-old-girls.
9. The UK Safer Internet Centre found, in their 2023 report, that almost half (47%) of 8–10-year-olds said they went online at least three to four times a day, while over three quarters (76%) of 11-13-year-olds and almost nine in ten (86%) of 14-17-year-olds said this¹.
 10. While these data demonstrate high levels of usage and may prompt some concern, there are a number of positive impacts that technology usage has had on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.
 11. According to the UK Safer Internet Centre in 2021, almost three quarters (73%) of young people reported that being online supported them emotionally during the lockdown period, with nearly two thirds (65%) saying that they found online lessons to be a good way of learning, highlighting the 'digital native' nature of their lifelong experience².
 12. In 2022, they also highlighted the sociability and wellbeing associated with online games, with 71% of children and young people saying that playing games online makes them feel happy and relaxed³.
 13. School leaders have reported that young people with neurodiversities, especially with social communication challenges, can find interactions through screens liberating, helping them to socialise with peers in ways that may have otherwise not been possible.
 14. Ofcom found that technology usage can have benefits for mental health, with eight in ten children and young people aged 13-17 using online services to find support for their wellbeing, with 53% saying that being online was good for their mental health, compared to 17% who disagreed⁴.
 15. Similar findings were reported by The Children's Society in 2022, who concluded that children and young people's social lives and feelings of belonging can be improved through online contact, with screen time alone having little or no negative impact on physical health, or on familial or peer relationships. Rather than being a cause of poor mental health, the report concluded that spending long periods of time online is more likely to be symptomatic of low wellbeing or mental ill health, than its cause⁵.

¹ [Safer Internet Day 2023: full research report](#)

² [Safer Internet Day 2021: press release](#)

³ [Safer Internet Day 2022: all fun and games report](#)

⁴ [Ofcom: children and parents, media use and attitudes report 2022](#)

⁵ [The Children's Society: Net gains? Young people's digital lives and wellbeing report 2022](#)

16. This was echoed in the recently published '*A mentally healthier nation*'⁶ report, supported by 35 leading mental health and wellbeing organisations in the UK, underlining the complexity of both positive and negative effects of social media. On this basis, the report recommends that any policy responses are proportionate, and avoid creating unnecessary moral panic.
17. However, the negative impacts of screen use must not be overlooked or ignored, with the Department for Education's State of the Nation report demonstrating that a sizeable minority of children and young people having had negative experiences with social media, with girls and young women being less likely to report feeling safe using social media⁷.
18. Revealing Reality outlined some of the risk factors associated with children and young people using online platforms, including the cumulative effect of being exposed to hazards, such as body-focused content, and engagement with behaviours that self-reinforce to cause significant harm, such as pro-anorexia content⁸.
19. Outside of social media, there is growing research on the effect of excessive screen time and child development, with a literature review published this year outlining that it may be linked to delays in cognitive, linguistic, and social-economic growth, but acknowledging that there are also positive effects. Notably, the study highlighted that 'media multitasking was found to have a negative impact on executive functioning in teenagers, notably on working memory, inhibition, and the capacity to switch between tasks'⁹.
20. At this point in time, leading organisations across the UK, including Childnet, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH), and the UK Safer Internet Centre are in agreement that there is not an 'appropriate' or 'advised' amount of screen time usage, with the focus being better directed towards what is on the screen and being aware of any negative effects that may be caused as a result.
21. This reiterates the importance of parents and carers being aware of their child's online activities, to ensure that negative effects are being mitigated. The RCPCH has suggested that parents and carers should consider whether screen time interferes with 'positive' activities, such as socialising, sleeping, or exercise.
22. Although there are risks to concentration, mental ill-health and poor wellbeing in children and young people using screens, there is also a wealth of evidence that highlights the positive impacts, underlining the importance of maintaining a balanced approach to usage. Ultimately, it is clear that screen time and social media use is not something that can be avoided.
23. As a result, NAHT believes that it is critical that children and young people are taught to develop positive relationships with technology, such as how to use it for learning and relaxing, to help them identify when they are not having 'quality' or safe screen time, and to appropriately deal with this. As part of this, NAHT is keen to see further steps be

⁶ [Centre for Mental Health: A mentally healthier nation report 2023](#)

⁷ [Department for Education: State of the nation 2022: children and young people's wellbeing](#)

⁸ [Revealing Reality/Ofcom: research into risk factors that may lead children to harm online 2022](#)

⁹ [Muppalla SK, Vuppalapati S, Reddy Pulliahgaru A, Sreenivasulu H. Effects of Excessive Screen Time on Child Development: An Updated Review and Strategies for Management. Cureus. 2023](#)

taken to ensure that parents and carers are able to effectively identify areas of risk and understand how best to help develop their children's digital experience.

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

24. Schools have a long-established role in educating children and young people about both screen time, specifically how to be digitally literate and resilient as digital technology becomes increasingly integrated into everyday life, and online safety, notably the benefits, risks, and consequences of their online behaviour, which includes social media.
25. This responsibility will, in part, be fulfilled by the RSHE – relationships, sex, and health education – curriculum, which sets specific outcomes for primary and secondary pupils, and covers a number of areas related to screen time and online harms.
26. These include, but are not limited to, online relationships, internet safety and harms, online media, and understanding the law in relation to image and information sharing, which includes areas such as 'sexting' and youth-produced sexual imagery.
27. In addition, the computing curriculum also includes specific outcomes that teaches pupils how to use technology safely, respectfully, responsibly, and securely across each of the key stages of education.
28. The RSHE and computing curriculums will help ensure children and young people are prepared for life, and to develop the transferable skills and attitudes they need to enable them to make confident and informed choices and cope with the increasingly digital world they live in.
29. Outside of these subjects, schools will cover aspects related to screen time and online safety where relevant and appropriate, as well as across the wider school through assemblies, policies, and modelling behaviour.
30. However, the success or effectiveness of these approaches around digital safety education undertaken by schools is contingent on a number of factors.
31. Firstly, there needs to be sufficient space in the curriculum to allow for teaching and learning time on these areas. Currently, the curriculum is over-crowded, with a range of important subjects competing for space. NAHT is clear that additional topics cannot keep being added to the curriculum, without any refining or removal of pre-existing areas.
32. Secondly, NAHT believes that that providing high-quality training for school staff members is imperative to ensure that teachers are both knowledgeable and confident in the subject matter to address the complexities and sensitivities relating to online safety and social media usage.
33. Finally, the importance of high-quality and up-to-date resources cannot be understated. There needs to be an evaluation of the resources available to support the statutory curriculum content to assess for gaps in provision, which the DfE needs to address by commissioning new resources as a matter of urgency.

How can schools and parents be better supported to manage children's screen usage, for example, through age-related guidance? Could the Department for Education be doing more in this area?

34. As previously established, schools have a responsibility to educate children and young people about their online behaviour and how to be digitally literate and resilient.
35. Schools are already delivering this through their curriculum offers, pastoral support, and behaviour modelling. Their aim is to develop the skills, resilience, and strategies that pupils will need for life beyond school to interact in a digital environment. This will include equipping them with awareness and strategies to responsibly monitor their own screen use and the ability to identify and respond to any potentially harmful content and the impact it may have.
36. Although schools will have well-established processes to support the education of safe screen usage, they are keen to ensure that their teaching and resources are of the highest quality and up-to-date.
37. The DfE can support schools by developing new resources and providing training to support with the online elements of the RSHE curriculum, sharing guidance and best practice across the sector, and signposting to other relevant resources and organisations who can provide schools with expert and specialist advice.
38. Alongside this, schools regularly engage with parents and carers, to ensure that they are aware of what their children are taught, and that pupils receive consistent messaging. Schools will do this through sharing information on their website and in newsletters to parents, as well as through sessions held with parents around online safety.
39. However, schools have reported that parent and carer attendance at these sessions can be limited, and that those who the school has identified as potentially benefitting from further support are often those not in attendance.
40. Schools are only part of the solution when it comes to protecting children online. NAHT believes that social media websites must take responsibility in providing a safe online environment, including in regulating the access children and young people have to inappropriate online content.
41. This includes strengthening age verification procedures to ensure that children are prevented from signing up for websites they are too young to use. The limitations of the current approach are self-evident: despite most social media sites stipulating that users must be over 13 years old; this is easily circumvented by entering a false birth date, requiring underage accounts to be reported before removal or closure.
42. NAHT believes that any website or platform that has children and young people amongst its user base must provide safety features tailored to them, for example reporting functions being clear and easy to use. Ideally, these would be similar in design and operate consistently across platforms to ensure that children and young people are easily able to identify and use such functions.

43. Moreover, rules and codes of conduct should be clearly displayed, outlining how sites should be used and the implications for misuse, to ensure that children and young people fully understand the expectations and accepted behaviour of users on the site.
44. NAHT cannot understate the importance of social media and other platforms expanding and improving the monitoring and moderating of external content hosted on their sites, to ensure that any harmful content is swiftly removed.
45. Further to this, NAHT is clear that the government needs to do more to raise wider public awareness and to support parents and carers to understand the risks and benefits of their children's screen use outside of school, which is beyond schools' control.
46. NAHT members are all too aware of the pressing need for government to take action at the earliest possible opportunity, having called on the government to establish a national strategy, education programme, and effective legislation in order to safeguard young people online. NAHT is prepared to work with government officials and stakeholders to develop a range of strategies to achieve this.

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

47. In an increasingly digital world, there are many benefits of using technology as part of children and young people's education offering, not least because it helps pupils to model the knowledge, skills, and strategies they can apply to using technology in their life outside of school.
48. Through targeted curriculum plans and extracurricular opportunities, schools are able to equip pupils with awareness and strategies to responsibly monitor their own screen use and the ability to identify and respond to any potentially harmful content and the impact it may have.
49. Within the school environment, NAHT assumes that managing children's 'recreational screen usage' refers to any non-teacher led screen use, which will primarily relate to mobile phone use at break times.
50. NAHT acknowledges that mobile phone usage in school is contentious amongst pupils, parents and carers, and school staff.
51. While many primary schools ban pupil mobile phone usage entirely, finding it is easier to enforce in an environment when parents and carers are still primarily responsible for the journey to and from school, there is greater variation in the secondary phase.
52. Some secondary schools have banned mobiles completely, whereas others have banned them at certain times of day, or in certain areas of the school, with some concerned that banning mobiles can push their usage underground creating more problems. However, school leaders are united in wanting to encourage responsible use of mobiles, recognising the important role they play in young people's lives.
53. This plurality of views indicates that dictating a ban is not the right solution, as there are many varied issues that need to be considered at the individual school level. These

include, but are not limited to, pupils travel safety to and from school, pupils that may need access to a phone, for example young carers, and the storage of mobiles if pupils cannot carry them.

54. Sharing guidance and best practice relating to mobile phone usage across the school network could be a useful way of highlighting the range of practice and approaches to consider, on the condition that such guidance includes the challenges of such policies and how solutions to these, successful or otherwise, have been implemented.
55. NAHT believes that, ultimately, school leaders are best placed to develop and implement policies and processes on mobile phone and recreational screen usage that are suitable for their school community and are regularly reviewed.

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