

Written evidence submitted by Place2Be

Introduction

Place2Be is the UK's leading children's mental health charity providing expert in-school mental health support, with nearly 30 years' experience working with pupils, families and staff in schools. We currently provide an embedded mental health service in around 520 primary, secondary and high schools, supporting a school community of nearly 300,000 children and young people.

Place2Be provides information and support for families and carers of children in primary schools. This is available for further reading on our [Parenting Smart Website](#). We also provide expert mental health training to school leaders and staff to build their knowledge and understanding of wellbeing.

Q. 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?

Social media

Social media is increasingly part of young people's lives. One of our counsellors told us that *"most parents I speak with always comment about social media and how difficult it is for their children to navigate life with it."* Ofcom found that in 2022 97% of children and young people aged 3-17 went online, either at home or elsewhere, with the majority (69%) using a mobile phone to do so.¹

Research on the impact of social media on wellbeing paints a mixed picture: there are several benefits, including promoting connectivity, preventing isolation, and providing information and entertainment. This was especially important during Covid-19 lockdowns, where in-person socialisation was limited.²

Online relationships can reflect those in real life: *"Just yesterday I was speaking with a young person who was relaying his use of WhatsApp groups and how difficult it was to manage them, a parallel to how they were trying to navigate friendship groups at school."* – Place2Be School Project Manager, London.

Social media can be used to enhance wellbeing and prevent loneliness when used safely. Yet social media has also been associated with several mental health difficulties for young people including lower life satisfaction, poor sleep quality, poor body image, low self-esteem, and increased anxiety and depression.³

Research suggests that the detrimental effect of social media on life satisfaction changes for girls and boys at different ages – with girls experiencing a negative link when they are 11-13 years old and boys when they are 14-15 years old.⁴ Physiological and life changes e.g., brain development and puberty can make young people especially vulnerable to harmful effects of social media in those periods.

¹ Ofcom (2023) [Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report](#)

² Pandya, A., Lodha, P., (2021) [Social Connectedness, Excessive Screen Time During COVID-19 and Mental Health: A Review of Current Evidence.](#)

³ The Children's Society (2021) [The Good Childhood Report](#)

⁴ University of Cambridge (2022) [Scientists find that the impact of social media on wellbeing varies across adolescence.](#)

A study by the University of Cambridge also found that those with lower life satisfaction had increased social media use.⁵ Consequently, social media can be an effective means of reaching vulnerable young people to share relevant information and wellbeing advice.

Keeping safe online

It is vital that children are kept safe online, and that content accessed by them is age-appropriate and monitored. Online safety forms a key element of Place2Be's safeguarding policy, recognising issues where children have been exposed to illegal or inappropriate content; have been subjected to harmful online interactions with other users; have behaved in a way that causes harm (e.g. sharing explicit images); and risks such as online gambling or scams.⁶ Limiting screen time could help limit exposure to these risks, though parents have frequently shared with us the difficulties they feel in imposing boundaries on screen or phone use.

We support the Online Safety Bill's regulation of harmful suicide and self-harm content.⁷ A recent report found that among people aged under 18 who died by suicide while in contact with mental health services, 24% had used the internet in relation to suicide (compared to 15% of those age 18-24). 13% of this group had experienced cyberbullying.⁸ Place2Be supports children who have been affected by bullying, including cyberbullying, to help address the underlying causes and impact of this behaviour.

"Because social media is unfiltered – as in people can say what they want – they might suffer the consequences, but there are no procedures to stop them posting certain things... It happens over and over, and people still get hurt by it anyway." – Young person⁹

Many children and teenagers also use the internet to play online games, either independently, with friends, or even strangers. Therefore, it is especially important that young people understand how to safely navigate this and the risks associated with its use. Additionally, while certain games are age-restricted, many 7-10 year olds describe themselves as 'addicted' to games that they are not considered old enough to play. Being exposed to violence and sexual imagery on screen, including in the form of violent or overtly sexual content in video games, can distance children from reality and even result in trauma.¹⁰

Physical exercise and play effectively promote wellbeing and positive development.¹¹ It is important therefore that children have other activities to enjoy away from the computer screen, such as sport and exercise, reading, music and crafts.

Screen time also affects sleep, with research suggesting that an increased amount of screen exposure leads to adverse sleep outcomes on children and adolescents.¹² The bi-directional relationship between sleep and mental health means that those with poor mental health are likely to sleep less, while less sleep worsens mental health. Place2Be research found that children and young people who usually get less than the recommended 9

⁵ University of Cambridge (2022) [Scientists find that the impact of social media on wellbeing varies across adolescence.](#)

⁶ Place2Be (2022) [Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy](#)

⁷ Place2Be (2022) [Letter to the PM: Suicide and self-harm prevention in the Online Safety Bill](#)

⁸ National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicide by People with Mental Illness (2023) [Annual Report](#)

⁹ Place2Be (2023) [How we connect: young people open up on the impact of connections on their mental health](#)

¹⁰ Parenting Smart (2023) [Supporting healthy gaming habits for children](#)

¹¹ Youth Sport Trust (2022) [Evidence Paper – The Link Between Physical Activity and Attainment in Children and Young People.](#)

¹² Sin-Chin Tan, Jenny Fraser (2021) [Effects of screen time on sleep in children and adolescents: a systematic review](#)

hours sleep on a school night are both more likely to feel that worries get in the way of school work and are less able to cope with worries.¹³ Late night use of devices should therefore be avoided due to the impact on sleep and wellbeing.

“We notice that a lack of sleep can affect a child’s concentration, cognitive functions and ability to access the curriculum. As teachers we see a struggle to retain or process information which results in increased levels of anxiety and worry that will inevitably impact on their emotional health and wellbeing.” - Headteacher, London

Recommendations

While stronger regulation can help provide a safety net for young people online, there are several measures that can be done by the adults in young people’s lives. This includes promoting better education and understanding of potential dangers online, and ensuring support is available to those whose wellbeing has been affected.

Government:

- We encourage the Government to promote resources and information for families, schools and young people to promote responsible internet use and advice on safe screen time.
- We recommend that the measures within the Online Safety Bill aimed at regulating harmful online content are enforced and implemented robustly and uniformly.
- We recommend that the Government increases access to school-based mental health support, to support the wellbeing of children and young people who have been negatively impacted by online harms.

Schools:

- It is vital that young people are taught to understand safe internet use and screen time from a young age. PSHE lessons and school assemblies can aid this. School staff should create spaces to talk about online issues with their pupils, keeping pace with developing technologies and trends. Staff should be confident to have constructive conversations with pupils about online safety.
- Mental health support should be available in schools to support pupils who are struggling with experiences of online harm or bullying.

Families:

- We encourage and support adults to have constructive conversations with their children to encourage safe use of social media and help them understand potential harms from a young age.¹⁴ Parental controls are also effective ways of regulating content that children are exposed to online.
- We encourage parents and carers to set positive examples of responsible screen time, including limiting the number of websites available to a child, removing notifications, and turning off devices at least one hour before bedtime to enable a better night’s sleep.

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¹³ Place2Be (2019) [Research: children with less sleep are more likely to struggle with worries](#)

¹⁴ Parenting Smart (2023) [Safe social media for primary aged children](#)