

**Written evidence submitted by Professor Christopher Ferguson
(NDC0006)**

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Dear UK Parliament:

I appreciate the opportunity to submit evidence regarding the impact of digital devices on youth mental health. I am a licensed psychologist and psychology professor at Stetson University. I have also conducted numerous research studies published in peer reviewed journals regarding the impact of social media, smartphones, video games and other technology on youth wellbeing.

My main concern is that the UK is responding to a moral panic where public narratives regarding the impact of youth and technology are not matched by good data. These have happened before with books, radio, comic books, rock and roll, “video nasties”, video games, etc., yet we keep repeating the pattern.

At this point, one thing we know clearly is that time spent on social media or other devices is not a predictor of youth mental health (e.g., Ferguson, Kaye et al., 2025; Yang & Feng, 2024). There may be some nuances around how individuals use technology, for good or for bad, although this is true for many things including, say books. But this line of thought does not suggest that banning social media for youth is likely to be productive. Indeed, although evidence from Australia’s social media ban for under 16s is thus far preliminary and anecdotal, this evidence suggests a failed policy. Most youth remain on social media having circumvented the ban, and those who have successfully been blocked from social media appear to be experiencing an increase in mental health problems, not a decrease (The West Australian, 2026). Though far from definitive, this does suggest other countries should take a wait-and-see approach until data from Australia is clearer.

Likewise, studies of social media reduction thus far reveal little evidence for benefits. There are now three meta-analyses of experimental studies, all of which have concluded that reducing social media use produces either no or “weak” effects (Ferguson, 2025; Lemahieu et al., 2025; Burnell et al., 2025). None of these supported social media reduction as policy. This is particularly remarkable given that these types of social media reduction experiments have a potentially biasing flaw: it is obvious to participants what the hypotheses are and, particularly in the current moral panic environment, this may cause them to artificially change their behavior. Specifically, such studies probably *exaggerate* the benefits of social media reduction. As such, false positives from such experiments are a very serious risk. Unfortunately, the UK appears to be relying on one such study the “In Real Life” study, which has increased this inherent bias by publicly stating their hypotheses and desired outcomes. This biasing effect is so strong that the UK should not use this study to guide their policy (see Ferguson, 2026). Likewise, other technology restricting strategies such as banning cellphones from schools fail to provide meaningful benefits for student grades, behavior, or mental health (Goodyear et al., 2025).

Likewise, the notion that dopamine is an “addiction neurotransmitter” that is particularly potent with technology is based more on myth than truth. Dopamine is involved in anticipatory pleasure, but this is a natural response. Spending 6 hours on social media may be less socially desirable than spending 6 hours with friends, but the dopamine response is exactly the same. As neuroscientist Dean Burnett put it (e.g., Blanchard & Burnett, 2026), talk of dopamine is “science garnish”, making pseudoscience beliefs sound scientific by crudely using neuroscience language. There is no solid evidence base to support these concerns.

The same basic findings are true for other technologies as they are for social media. I am currently working on a dataset from *The Global Mind Project* which finds no evidence that age of smartphone or tablet acquisition impacts later mental health. However, this data does reveal something that does influence mental health: adverse childhood events.

As research Mike Males (2026) has tried to point out, moral panics over technology distract from real causes of youth distress: adverse childhood events such as abuse and neglect in families or absent parents. Unfortunately, policy makers often ignore this evidence in favor of technology moral panics.

In the United States, youth suicides correlate not with technology adoption but rather with adult mental distress (Ferguson, in press). This appears likely because of the opioid epidemic in the US, with parental suicides, mental illness and imprisonment causing trickle down impacts to their children, causing mental health problems for them. Furthermore 70-80% of youth tell us that schools are a toxic mixture of stressful and boring. Yet schools would have us believe that removing cellphones is the answer. Unfortunately, even as cellphone bans in the US have become widespread, US standardized testing scores have continued to drop. Indeed, in my own state of Florida, two years after state-wide bans were implemented, standardized testing scores dropped to their lowest level in 20 years. Clearly, this was not the solution.

Unfortunately, I believe many policy makers have been misled by books of pop psychology such as the *Anxious Generation*. Such books should not be taken seriously and have been criticized by scholars many times (e.g., Odgers, 2024; Gray, 2024). They should certainly not be the basis for policy. Whether trial lawyers, makers of “child safety” products, or people promoting bestselling books, entire industries are generated during moral panics to profit from people’s fears. Unfortunately, these can distract society from the real problems children face: distressed families and failing schools. We should be at least as suspicious of this “fear” industry as we are of big tech companies themselves.

If the UK is serious about youth mental health, focusing on technology is largely a waste of time. Youth would benefit most from media literacy to learn how to use new technology well. Technology companies do have real issues, such as privacy concerns, harassment on online platforms, and adult material slipping into child platforms. But if the concern is *mental health*, a hyper focus on technology will most likely be a distracting exercise in futility just as past media bans have been. At this juncture, there is little reason to believe that a social media ban for minors would be helpful for youth mental health. Such bans also create free speech nightmares not only for youth who may benefit from many opportunities on social media, but also by creating an authoritarian government speech control that will affect adults as well as youth.

As such, my advice is for the UK government to learn from past moral panics, ignore the bad advice they have gotten from some sources, and focus instead on helping families in need and examining school reforms that may make learning exciting.

I am happy to answer any questions the UK Parliament may have.

Cordially,

Christopher J. Ferguson, Ph.D.

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