

THE
EVIDENCE FOR
RAISING *THE* AGE
LIMIT *FOR* SOCIAL
MEDIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We have reached an inflection point and action must be taken to avoid what is nothing short of a societal catastrophe caused by children's access to social media.

The evidence is now overwhelming: by every metric, health, educational attainment, cognitive ability, crime, economic productivity, children are being harmed.

The statistics speak clearly. Since 2016, there has been a 477 per cent rise in children's contact with mental health services. Eating disorders among 17 to 19-year-olds have increased sixteenfold in six years. Over the last decade, there has been a sevenfold rise in young girls admitted to hospital with eating disorders. Rates of suicide, depression, anxiety, self-harm and attention deficit among teenagers have shot up.

Social media is at the centre of county lines and radicalisation. In 2025, the heads of MI5, Counter Terror Policing and the National Crime Agency issued a summer holiday warning urging parents to keep children safe online. This comes as recent years have seen record numbers of young people arrested for terrorism offences.

Teachers say social media is the number one cause of disruptive behaviour. The NEU, the biggest education union, backs raising the age limit for access to social media to 16.

There is global momentum for this. Australia is leading the world and has raised the age limit to 16. Malaysia is doing the same. Denmark, France, Norway, New Zealand and Greece are considering restrictions of their own. In November 2025, the European Parliament voted overwhelmingly in support of raising the age limit to 16. Britain is being left behind.

Polling demonstrates overwhelming support: 75 per cent of adults, including 75 per cent of Labour voters, support raising the minimum age to 16. Most strikingly, young people themselves recognise the harm: 78 per cent of Gen Z say they would try to delay their child using social media as long as possible.

The government should act now. Following Australia's lead and implementing a ban on under-16s would cost nothing, command overwhelming public support, and begin to reverse a crisis damaging generations.

1. WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA, AND HOW IT HAS CHANGED?

We define social media as platforms where users can share information and connect with virtual communities through text, photos, videos and other content. Social media has become deeply ingrained in the daily lives of young people. For many early adolescents - those between 9 and 15 years old - scrolling, messaging, and posting are now core parts of how they connect and express themselves. But a growing body of research warns that the risks are both real and widespread. This isn't just about the opportunity cost of screens or the physical implications of spending too much time on them (of which there are many), but also about the specific harms that have been evidenced as relating to social media. Social media has changed beyond all recognition.

It is very important to be very clear what we are referring to. There has been a huge shift in both technology and platforms. Even parents who try their best to keep children away from harmful content and 'traditional' social media platforms may have no comprehension of what is going on.

Social media has evolved. **Aza Raskin, the man that invented the infinite scroll, now regrets it. He has said:**

“ I think when I look back, the thing I regret most is not packaging the inventions with the philosophy or paradigm in which they're supposed to be used.

There was a kind of naive optimism about thinking that my inventions would live in a vacuum, and not be controlled by market forces.

”

Aza Raskin, Inventor Of The Social Media 'Infinite Scroll'

Social media platforms were originally designed to receive updates from friends and family. More often than not people you engaged with were already known to you. Often lauded for their social value in situations such as globally mobile people keeping in touch with loved ones across the world, they have become dominated by addictive algorithms which show you content designed to provoke engagement. These additive design features are particularly harmful to children's developing brains. Adolescents who habitually check social media show measurable changes in brain function over time, with increased sensitivity in brain regions related to social rewards and punishments (*Maza et al., 2023*).

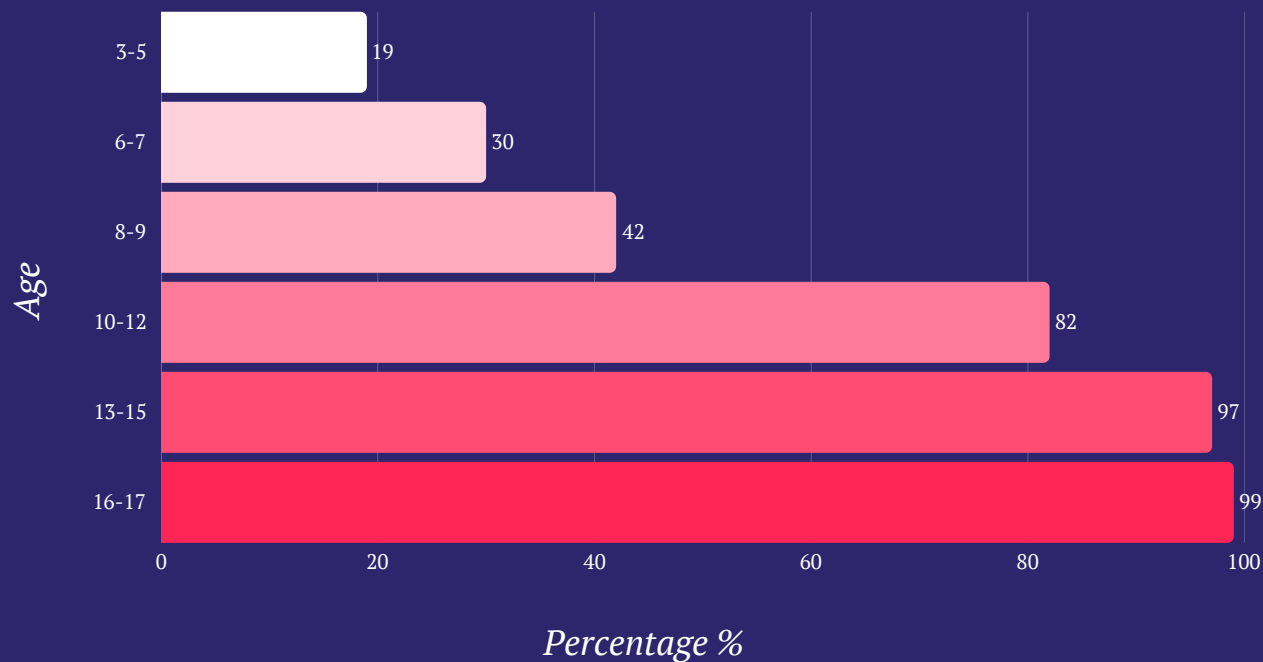
YouTube and Instagram's algorithmic feeds deliver increasingly extreme content the longer a child scrolls (*YouTube's Anorexia Algorithm, 2024*), which exploits these developmental vulnerabilities by triggering exaggerated emotional responses that adolescent brains are ill-equipped to regulate (*Blakemore, 2025*).

2. SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE STATISTICS

Many children under 5 access social media on devices belonging to adults:

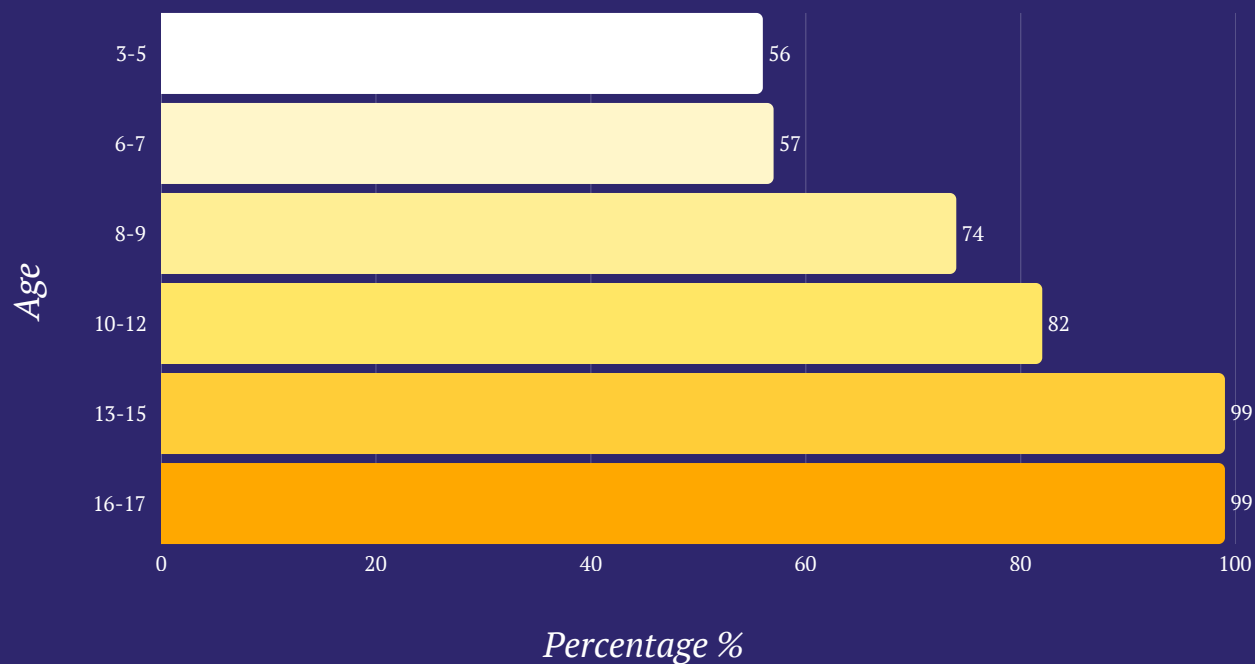
OWN A MOBILE PHONE

Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, 2025)



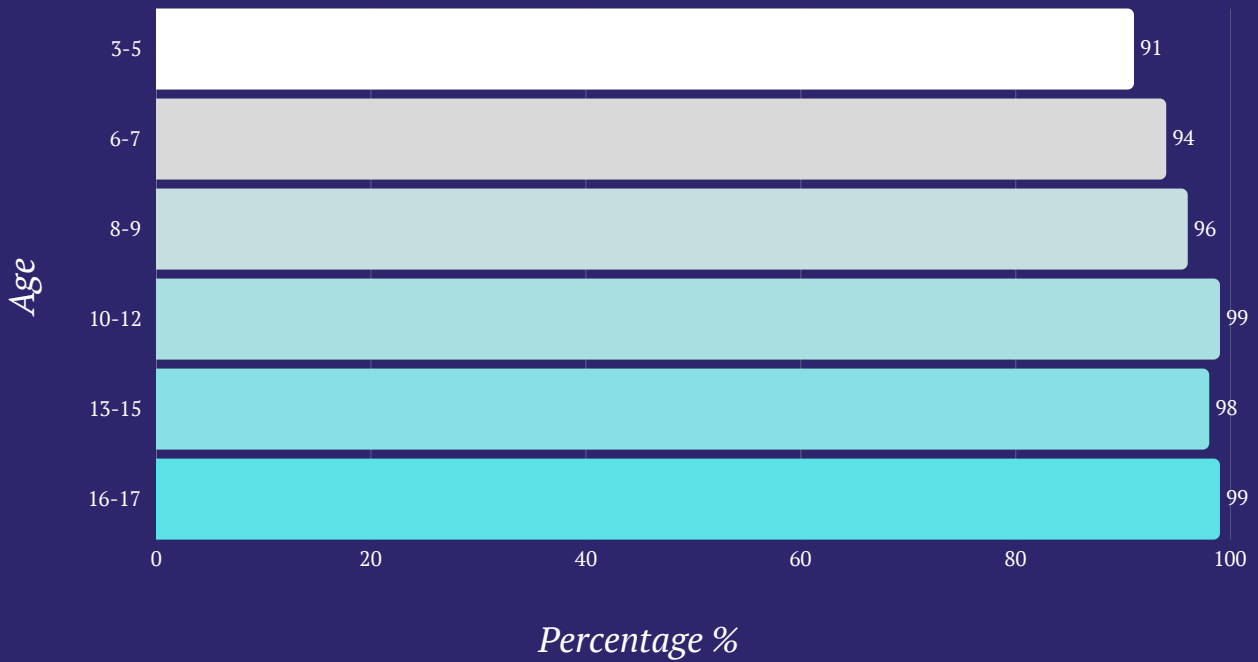
USE MESSAGING SITES

(Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, 2025)



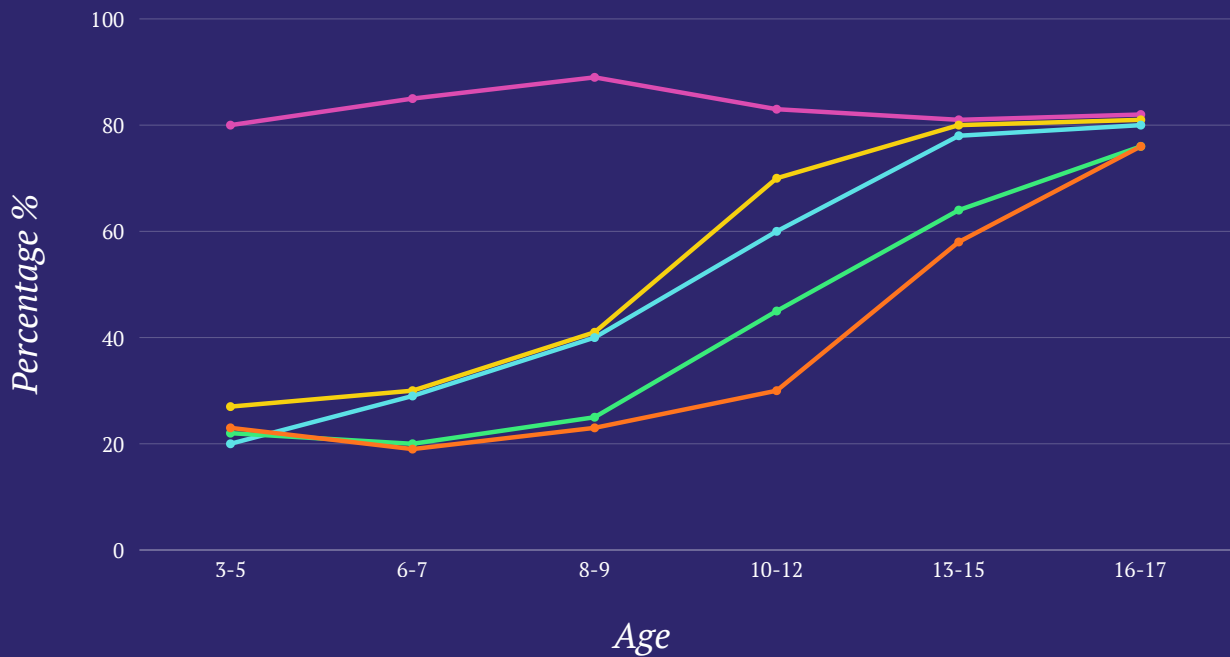
USE VIDEO SHARING PLATFORMS

Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, 2025)



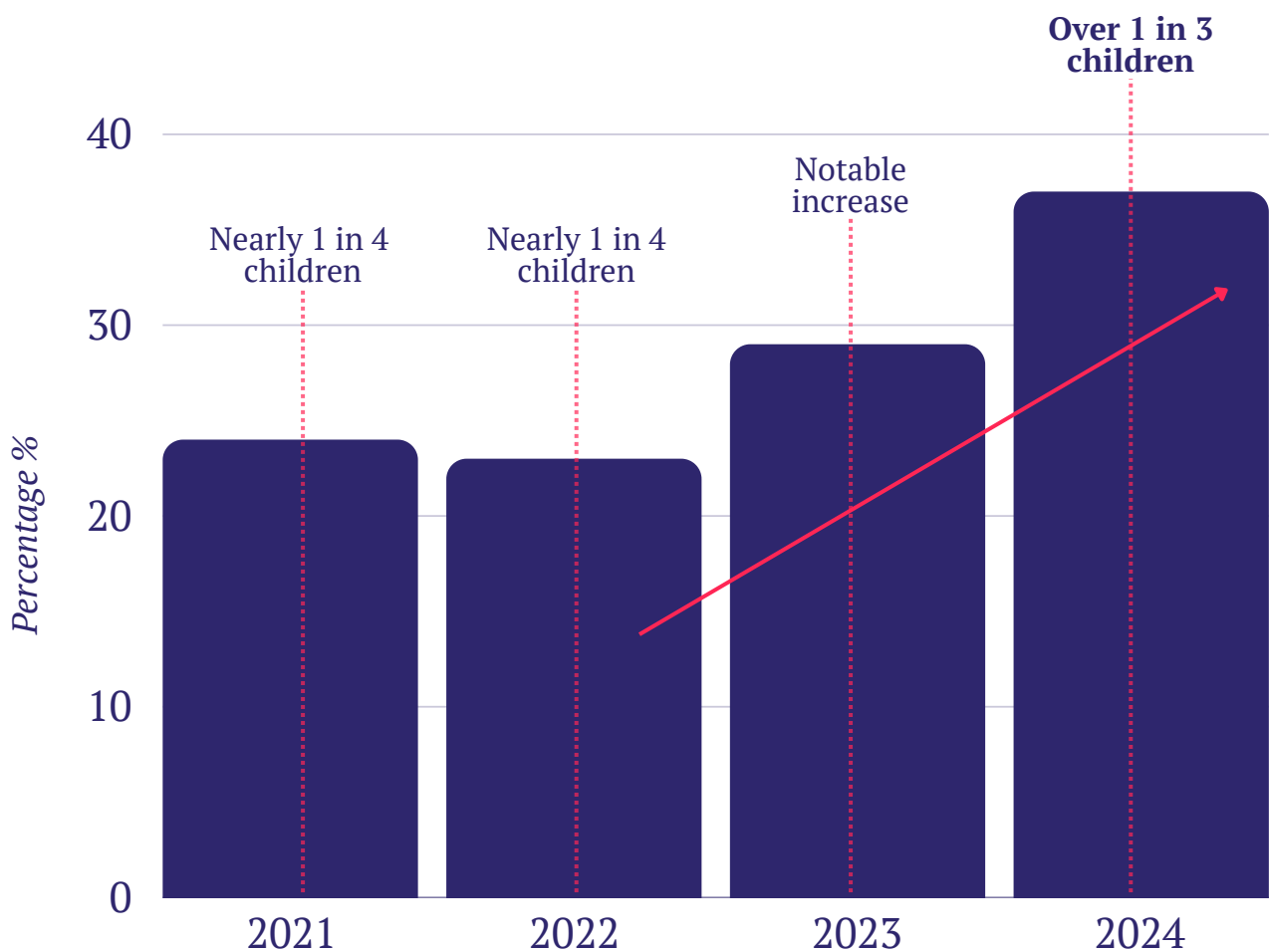
TOP 5 ONLINE COMMUNICATION APPS/SITES USED - BY AGE GROUP

- WhatsApp
- Snapchat
- YouTube
- TikTok
- Instagram



(Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, 2024)

PROPORTION OF **3-5 YEAR OLDS** WHO USE SOCIAL MEDIA



It is estimated that many young people use social media on devices **owned by adults**

(Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, 2024)

3. RISING SCREEN TIME, RISING RISK

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a trend that was already underway: young people are spending more time on screens than ever before. This isn't just about passive TV-watching. Instead, today's teens and preteens are drawn to interactive forms, such as social media, video games, video chat, and texting. Studies show that these increases are not benign (*Mabaso et al., 2024; Pagliaccio et al., 2024, Bear et al., 2025*).

HIGHER SOCIAL MEDIA USE IS LINKED TO A RANGE OF MENTAL HEALTH SYMPTOMS:

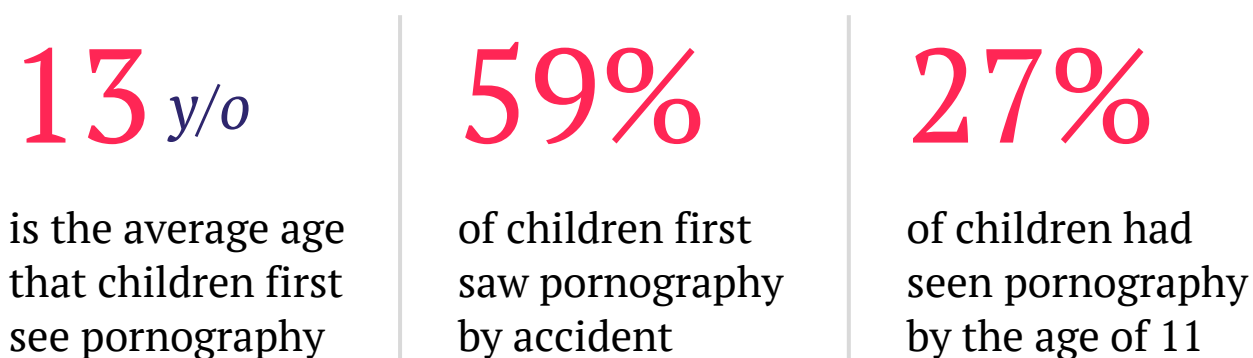
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Eating disorders
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Disruptive behaviour disorders

The Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Study found that these associations hold in both short-term and longer follow-up studies. Importantly, the adverse effects are more pronounced with social media use than with other types of screen activity (*Nagata, Lee et al., 2025*).

4. CHILDREN DON'T LOOK FOR HARMFUL CONTENT, IT LOOKS FOR THEM

Another key fact that is vital for policymakers to understand is that on the whole children do not look for harmful content, it finds them. It incrementally builds up in their feeds. The content children see on social media is very different from that of their parents. This isn't just about the harms of passive screen watching and an increase in sedentary lifestyle.

Pornography is seen by children on social media sites as well as pornography sites. Also social media platforms have increasingly become one of the most popular types of platforms and applications used by convicted extremists (*Kenyon et al., 2022*).



PLATFORMS WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE ARE BEING EXPOSED BY PORNOGRAPHY:

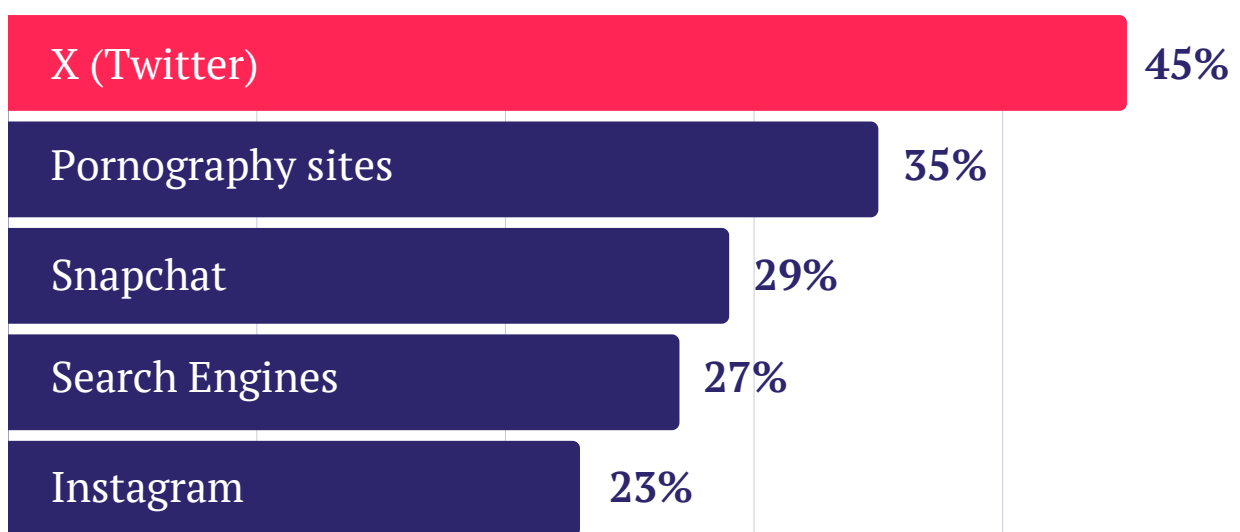


Figure 4: ("Sex is kind of broken now": Children and Pornography, 2025)

Percentage % of young people

5. WHAT DOES PROBLEMATIC SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE MEAN?

Problematic social media usage is a technical term which describes addictive-like behaviours. Typically the below:

A significant portion struggles to control their use. Globally, more than 1 in 10 adolescents (11%) show signs of what experts call "problematic social media use." This term describes addiction-like symptoms, such as:



1 in 10 adolescents (11%) show signs of problematic social media use

Inability to control usage	Feeling withdrawal when not online
Neglect of other activities	Experiencing daily negative consequences due to social media

Girls are especially vulnerable, with 13% reporting problematic use compared to 9% of boys. In England, 20% of 11-year-old girls and 23% of 13-year-old girls have problematic social media usage (Boniel-Nissim et al., 2024). The effects are far-reaching: those with problematic social media patterns report lower life satisfaction and higher rates of psychosomatic complaints, most notably, persistent bad moods and irritability. What's striking is that these negative impacts appear regardless of gender or how much social support the young person feels. This reinforces the profound impact of social media on adolescents' wellbeing (Vonk et al., 2025).

A direct comparison is not possible as these are slightly different behaviours/usage patterns, but the below table puts the 11% of adolescents displaying signs of problematic social media usage into perspective compared to other UK addictive illness rates.

11% problematic social media use vs UK addiction rates:

- 3-5x higher than alcohol dependency (1.4%-3%)
- 3.5x higher than drug dependency (3.1%)
- 6x higher than frequent drug use (1.8%)
- 4x higher than frequent drug use among young people (2.5%)

6. SOCIAL MEDIA HARMS THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN

Sleep is essential for healthy adolescent development, but social media often gets in the way. Studies have shown that higher social media use is directly linked to shorter sleep duration and difficulties with sleep onset (*Khan et al., 2024*).

Moreover, this lack of sleep has a compounding effect: interactions between sleep deprivation and activity in specific brain regions (like the cingulate and frontal gyri) can predict both increased social media use and changes in brain function (*Kiss et al., 2024*). These brain areas are crucial for executive control (the ability to make decisions and regulate behaviour) and reward processing. What does this mean for teens? Poor sleep, triggered or worsened by time spent on social media, can alter brain function in ways that may make young people even more vulnerable to depressive symptoms (*Hökby et al., 2025*).

Higher social media use leads to less sleep, which makes adolescents more vulnerable to depression. Bedroom screen use was the strongest predictor of children's exposure to mature media (*Nagata, Li et al., 2025*).

Impact on sleep

Surveys of children routinely report social media usage into the early hours. Teachers often report children exhausted in class, having stayed up on social media. The UK Millennium Cohort Study found that very high social media users were roughly 70% more likely than average users to fall asleep after 11pm on school nights and after midnight on free days. The same survey found that 20% of teenagers were classed as having very high usage. It is important to note that this survey was conducted in 2019. The problem has grown exponentially since then.

According to documents filed by the state of Utah in their lawsuit against TikTok (*Utah Division of Consumer Protection v. TikTok Inc, 2023*), analysis of TikTok global usage patterns reveals concerning levels of late-night and early-morning activity among teenagers globally. Data shows that 19% of the platform's 13- to 15-year-old users and 25% of 16- to 17-year-old users are active on TikTok between midnight and 5:00 a.m.

This overnight usage occurs during hours when adolescents should be sleeping, with the platforms sending push notifications directly to users' phones during both school and sleeping hours. These patterns of nocturnal social media use directly contribute to sleep deprivation, as engagement with stimulating content and blue light exposure during these critical sleep hours suppresses melatonin production and disrupts the natural circadian rhythm that teenagers need for healthy development.

7. SOCIAL MEDIA, DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE

Perhaps the most alarming finding is the strong association between addictive social media use and suicidal behaviour. Tracking over 4,000 adolescents, researchers found that 31.3% were showing rising addiction to social media over four years. These teens faced a doubled risk of suicidal behaviour and emotional struggles (*Xiao et al., 2025*). The UK ranks joint second to last for teenage life satisfaction among 43 wealthy countries. (*UNICEF, 2025*). There was a 22.7% increase in suicide rates for ages 10-24 between 2012-2016 and 2018-2022 (*OHID, 2024*).

Higher addictive social media use isn't just a symptom of distress - it's a predictor of more severe mental health challenges, including depression, manic symptoms and anxiety (*Nagata, Omar, et al., 2025; Nagata, Zamora, et al., 2025; Bye et al., 2024; Pagliaccio et al., 2024*). This was confirmed by the ongoing BrainWaves work in the UK, which found a linear relationship between higher rates of anxiety and depression and time spent networking on social media sites (*Hayward & Sellman, 2024*).

A systematic review has found a close link between high levels of social media use and psychiatric disorders that involve delusions such as narcissism and body dysmorphic disorder (*Yang et al., 2025*).

These risks underscore the need for urgent action, particularly as digital habits develop early and become entrenched.

8. SOCIAL MEDIA AND EATING DISORDERS.

Social media contributes to the development and exacerbation of eating disorder symptoms through perpetuating unrealistic body standards, as well as acting as a platform for aggressive marketing by the diet industry (*Jimenez-Marin et al., 2020; Matos et al., 2023*). And through targeted algorithms that show harmful content, including "toxic eating disorder" content, as already mentioned above (*Griffiths et al., 2024*).

A SCOPING REVIEW LOOKING AT 50 STUDIES IN 17 COUNTRIES

showed that social media use consistently predicts:

- Body image concerns
- Disordered eating
- Poor mental health

Each extra hour on social media raises the odds of engaging in risky compensatory behaviours (like binge eating) and experiencing distress about eating.

(Dane & Bhatia, 2023)

Odds ratios for these behaviours range from 1.05 to 1.55, indicating that the risk increases steadily with increased time spent online. Meanwhile, problematic social media use and excessive phone habits are linked to all types of eating disorder symptoms, with odds ratios from 1.26 to 1.82 (*Chu et al., 2024*).

The NHS have recorded a 5.2-fold increase in eating disorders in children aged up to 16. 2.6% of children in this bracket now record some form of eating disorder compared to 0.5% in 2017 and a 16 fold increase in eating disorders for 17 to 19-year-olds (*Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023, NHS England*). An investigation in the United States involved creation of a dozen automated accounts registered as 13-year-olds and revealed that TikTok algorithms fed adolescents tens of thousands of weight-loss videos within just a few weeks of joining the platform. These videos included tips on how to consume less than 300 calories a day and promoted a 'corpse bride diet' (*Costello, 2023*).

More substantial biases in users' algorithms toward these videos were associated with more severe eating disorder symptoms.

Whilst users with eating disorders were slightly more likely to "like" these problematic video categories (e.g., dieting videos: +23% versus controls), their algorithms were far more likely to deliver these videos in the first place (dieting videos: +335% versus controls) (Griffiths et al., 2024).

A STUDY LOOKING AT WHETHER TIKTOK CONTRIBUTES TO EATING DISORDERS

compared TikTok algorithms belonging to individuals with eating disorders versus healthy controls. They found that algorithms belonging to users with eating disorders delivered more of the following content:

Appearance-oriented

+146%

Dieting

+335%

Exercise

+142%

Toxic eating
disorder videos

+4,343%

An average of 388,000 views per harmful eating disorder video were recorded (*YouTube's Anorexia Algorithm, 2024*).

It is important to remember that Anorexia Nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric illness, and there has been a dramatic increase in the prevalence of eating disorders in young people in the past decade.

This on a backdrop of a completely overloaded health service that simply cannot cope with the increased demand (*Darzi, 2024*). There has also been a marked increase in paediatric psychiatric emergency hospital admissions. This rise has been particularly pronounced in girls aged 11-15, with a 113% increase, and for eating disorders, a 515% increase between 2012 and 2022. (*Ward et al., 2025*).

9. SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE RISE IN ADHD

A meta-analysis of 28 studies show that there are significant links between increased digital media use and ADHD symptoms.

Furthermore, many researchers have found a specific link between social media and attention. A major US longitudinal study tracking over 8,000 children for four years found that daily social media use was associated with measurable increases in inattention symptoms over time; notably, video games and television showed no such association. 'Constant exposure to fast-paced, highly stimulating content, such as social media and video games, may contribute to attentional difficulties by conditioning the brain to expect frequent, rapid rewards, making it harder to sustain focus on less stimulating tasks' (Nivins et al., 2025).

There is a further problem within the issue of ADHD and social media. The platforms drives content towards viewers which suggests to them that they have ADHD leading to a huge rise in diagnosis, a subsequent drain on NHS resources.



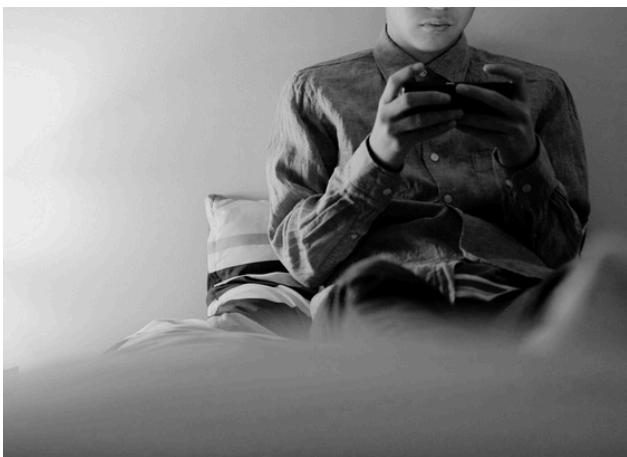
An analysis of the 100 most-viewed TikTok videos related to ADHD showed that fewer than half the claims made about symptoms align with clinical guidelines for diagnosing the condition.

(Karasavva et al., 2025)

10. SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE RISE OF DAMAGING COSMETIC TREATMENT

The pressure of social media, the constant recording of life and the comparative culture have led to increased body image concerns and cosmetic surgery. Heavy use of these platforms, especially amongst young women, increases the likelihood of girls aspiring to cosmetic surgery as a solution to perceived body image issues (Ateq et al., 2024).

Almost three-quarters of teenage girls believe that social media creates more pressure for people to look a certain way, and this sentiment is now also echoed among boys.



52%

of boys state that influencers on social media create pressure to undergo cosmetic procedures to alter their appearance

34% 31%

of men globally of boys globally

have stopped themselves from eating, are binge eating, or skipping meals to achieve their ideal appearance

27%

have adopted unsafe exercise behaviours, such as exercising more than their body can handle

The skincare routines and trends popularised on social media drive younger children and teens to use complex and expensive skincare products, which are not suitable for their skin and can cause long-term damage (Rackham, 2024). Acne rates among young people in the UK were among the highest globally. There was a steady increase in cases, averaging 0.27% per year over a three-decade period. By 2021, 14.6% of adolescents and young people were diagnosed with acne, a 7.4% increase from 1990 (Zhu et al., 2025). It has been suggested that this is partly due to inappropriate skincare routines (Eccles, 2024).

11. SOCIAL MEDIA SPREADS VIOLENT CONTENT AND LEADS TO CRIME

A major study by the *Youth Endowment Fund (2025)*, surveying nearly 11,000 children aged 13-17 in England and Wales, found that violent and hateful content is now pervasive on young people's screens.

70% OF TEENAGERS HAVE SEEN REAL-WORLD ACTS OF VIOLENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE PAST YEAR

The most common content was:



Beyond violence, 82% of teenagers have seen social media posts discussing harming specific groups such as migrants, ethnic minorities or LGBTQ+ people. Over a third (36%) say they have participated in these online debates. Almost four in ten (39%) have seen material encouraging violence against women and girls, up from 33% in 2024.

Crucially, the research shows a strong link between online and offline violence. 13% of teenagers reported perpetrating violence in the past year. This rises to 22% among those who had seen content promoting violence against women and girls or participated in discussions about harming specific groups.

There is consistent evidence that exposure to violent content increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behaviour in young people, particularly boys. (*Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, The Lancet*).

Of those seeing weapons online, 44% saw kitchen knives and 34% saw zombie knives or machetes.

Only 6% who saw violence online actually searched for it - most had it pushed to them by platform algorithms.

Vulnerable children are also at risk of child criminal exploitation via social media platforms. Johnny Bolderson, Senior Service Manager in County Lines Support and Rescue for Catch22, described social media and online gaming as the "foundation of county lines recruitment" that have made it far easier for criminal gangs to contact vulnerable young people (*Education Select Committee, 2024*).

This is why more and more Chief Constables are calling on the Government to act now. This includes the National Association Police Chiefs Leads for rape and serious sexual offences as well as the lead for violence against women and girls.

The lead of the National Police Chief's Council lead on rape and serious sexual offences, Sarah Crew (also Chief Constable of Avon and Somerset) said:

“ It’s like the American West in the 1850s... there was little regulation and law enforcement and codification ... ”

Sarah Crew, Chief Constable & NPCC Lead

Research examining violence exposure found that 50% of children who have seen violence online say they came across it on someone else's profile or feed. 35% report that violent content has been shared with them directly. Worryingly, 25% of young people viewing violent content online said the platforms had pushed or made the content available to them (e.g. via their 'Newsfeed' or 'For You Page') (*Youth Endowment Fund, 2024*).

SENIOR POLICE LEADERS WHO HAVE CALLED FOR A BAN INCLUDE:



Sarah Crew
Chief Constable of Avon and Somerset and the NPCC lead on rape and serious sexual offences



Maggie Blyth
Acting Chief Constable of Gloucestershire and the NPCC lead on violence against women and girls



Neil Basu
Former Assistant Commissioner for Specialist Operations, Metropolitan Police



Tim De Meyer
Chief Constable for Surrey



Matt Jukes
Head of UK Counter Terrorism Policing



Simon Bailey
Former Chief Constable of Norfolk and NPCC lead on child protection

A study conducted by Demos involving multiple focus groups of 16 year olds across the country found that in one group, every single girl had received unsolicited sexual images. As one student put it, not a single one of the men she knows has ever been sexually assaulted but every single girl she knows, including herself, has been.

Estimates have also shown that at least 27,000 children, with as many as 4,000 in London alone, are believed to be trapped in county lines across the UK. Smart devices are critical to this epidemic of child criminal exploitation, which is being fuelled by gangs who use social media to target, groom, coerce, and track the movements of vulnerable children online as young as 11. Between 2017 and 2022, online grooming crimes surged by 82%, with 73% involving platforms like Snapchat, Facebook and Instagram (*Unseen, 2024*).

12. SOCIAL MEDIA IS A CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER TO NATIONAL SECURITY

The situation led to the Director of MI5, the Head of Counter Terror Policing and the head of the National Crime Agency issuing a summer holiday warning last year because of the risk of young people discovering harmful content online during the holidays.

They warned that children are being routinely exposed to the most serious harmful online content including sexual violence, self-harm and suicide content, extreme gore, animal cruelty, indecent images of children and terrorist content, with some children becoming completely desensitised to extreme and obscene content. Outside the UK, the head of Europol now believes that the single biggest threat to the European Union is the ‘weaponization of children’ for organised crime groups.

IN 2023, MORE YOUNG PEOPLE THAN EVER BEFORE WERE ARRESTED FOR TERRORISM OFFENCES

Exposure to extreme violence

Online grooming pathways

Weaponization of children by organised crime groups

“ ‘They weaponize the children to torture or to kill. It’s not about petty theft anymore. It’s about big crimes.’ ”

A study by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue looked at 49 children who had been convicted of terror offences since 2016 showed the ‘mainstreaming of ideas such as extreme misogyny online, or school shooter fandoms.’

13. SOCIAL MEDIA DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTS VULNERABLE CHILDREN

The increased exposure of vulnerable children to violent content is of great concern. These children are also more exposed to all risks of harm from social media.

Children receiving Free School Meals (FSM) are more likely to participate in high-risk activities online.

Metric	FSM Children	Non-FSM Children
<i>Live-streaming</i>	17%	12%
<i>Frequent posting/commenting on social media</i>	21%	11%
<i>Exposed to online harms</i>	74%	60%
<i>Being online makes them sad</i>	14%	4%
<i>Worried about their appearance</i>	17%	8%

(Digital Wellbeing on a Budget, 2023).

Children with special educational needs and disabilities are additionally vulnerable online. Some children who had special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) have experienced online harm which appears to have been exacerbated or made more likely due to their additional vulnerabilities.

This included them being taken advantage of because of their desire to maintain friendships, or challenges with reflecting on the consequences of certain actions (Reality, 2024).

Children in care, care leavers, young carers, children experiencing poverty and children with additional needs are more susceptible to online harms. These groups are more susceptible either because of their increased use of screens in comparison to other children, or because of their decreased ability to approach and interact with social media in a self-protective manner (*Education Select Committee, 2024*).

Research covering almost 3000 adolescents in the UK concluded that:

“offline vulnerability extends to online life”

(El Asam & Katz, 2018).

The online landscape continues to evolve in ways that pose unprecedented risks to children. Text-to-image applications with inadequate safeguards now allow the generation of any content imaginable. Large language models originating from jurisdictions with minimal content moderation are facilitating and encouraging extreme conversations.

Online communities are driving abuse and exploitation behaviours at a scale previously unimaginable. Children are using mainstream social media platforms to create their own payment models for live sexual content. Platforms continue to host child sexual abuse material behind paywalls, ignoring requests for removal.

Virtual reality environments are rapidly approaching photorealism, raising serious concerns about the creation of immersive abuse content. The proportion of children now reported as perpetrators of sexual offences should alarm us all - a trend driven in significant part by early and repeated exposure to pornography.

14. THE EFFECT ON EDUCATION

Social media is the number one cause of poor pupil behaviour, according to 59% of teachers (*NASUWT, 2025*) and in teachers' view will be the biggest source of pressure for students in the future, above all other pressures, including economic ones (*Teacher Tapp*).

IN SCHOOLS:

In February 2025, a survey of 6,409 teachers and leaders in schools by ASCL found that social media platforms are being 'weaponised' causing extreme difficulty not only for children themselves but for the educational leaders in charge of them.

- **Nearly three quarters of teachers** had seen evidence of online bullying on social media platforms amongst the children they teach

- **Nearly a third of teachers saw evidence** in the classroom of children having accessed violent or pornographic content

Furthermore, children in the UK are falling behind their international peers in socio-emotional skills, which are essential for regulating emotions and decision-making. A report by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) found that England ranks among the bottom ten of 31 countries assessed in PISA 2022 for these skills, including curiosity, perseverance, emotional control, stress resistance, empathy, and cooperation. The UK is noted as having the lowest happiness ranking out of 25 (or 28) countries.

Educational statistics are only going to get worse. Children with a mental health problem were seven times more likely to have missed 15 days of school in the Autumn term 2022, compared to those without a mental health problem (*Centre for Mental Health, 2024*).

Furthermore, a Nuffield Foundation study predicts that national GCSE results in key subjects will steadily worsen until 2030, when it expects fewer than 40% of pupils to get good grades in maths and English (*Major et al., 2024*).

15. PARENTS ARE NOT TO BLAME

Many parents think that they can shield their child from the adverse effects of social media. Even those who implement strict rules around what is allowed and what is not allowed can find themselves being out competed by the platforms.

These parents simply cannot keep up with technological changes which switch a classroom group chat into one of the biggest tools in the predators arsenal. Many parents hope that a strong support network can shield their children from the harms of social media. While supportive families and friends are always beneficial, research indicates that merely increasing perceived social support is insufficient to counteract the adverse effects of problematic social media use (*Vonk et al., 2025*).

Parents believe that social media has the biggest impact on their children's mental health.

16. A BAN HAS VERY POPULAR SUPPORT, INCLUDING FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

There is now a vast array of evidence that every level of the population would support a ban. Including young people themselves.

Parents would support moves to tackle social media, nearly nine in 10 parents (86 per cent) backed raising the so-called "digital age of consent", the point at which children should be allowed onto social media, from 13 to 16 (*More in Common, 2025*).

More in Common polling also found that 75% of Labour voters want the minimum age to be raised, whilst this polling also found a deep sense of regret amongst Gen Z's about social media:

- **75% of Labour voters** support raising the age limit
- **Almost two thirds** of Gen Z say social media does more harm than good
- **Half of them say** they wish they'd spent less time on their phones growing up
- **78% say** if they were a parent they would try to delay their child using social media for as long as possible
- **60% of voters** say more likely to vote for party that introduced it

This is not an anomaly. The National Education Union's polling also found that nearly three quarters of people think the minimum age should rise from 13 to 16.

A ParentKind survey in 2024 found that 74% of over 16's believe social media is harmful and expressed concern for younger siblings.

A particularly noteworthy study was conducted by Peter Hyman and Demos: 'Inside the mind of a 16 year old'. Hyman conducted focus groups of 16 year olds across the UK involving 700 people.

He went into the study 'with an open mind but with one over-riding instinct - a distaste for the moral panic of an older generation towards young people.' This included a deep scepticism about a social media ban but found that:

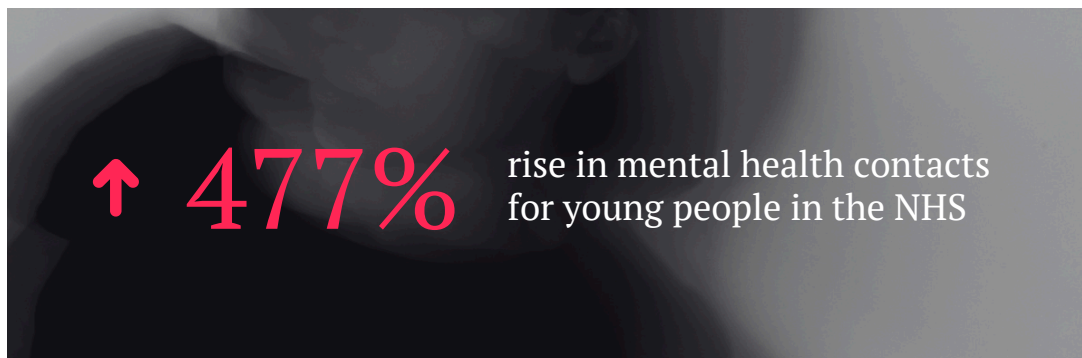
“ We have come around to the belief that social media should be banned for the under 16s.

We believe that will go a long way to releasing young people from the grip of addiction. It is what many of them want and we have a duty to support them in doing so. ”

There is a strong potential narrative here about a Government taking on big tech to save children; it is one that would be extremely politically popular.

17. THE BILL ON THE TAXPAYER IS RISING EXPONENTIALLY

Public spending on mental health cases is only going to go up as a result of this. The use of social media by young people represents a drain on the public finances:

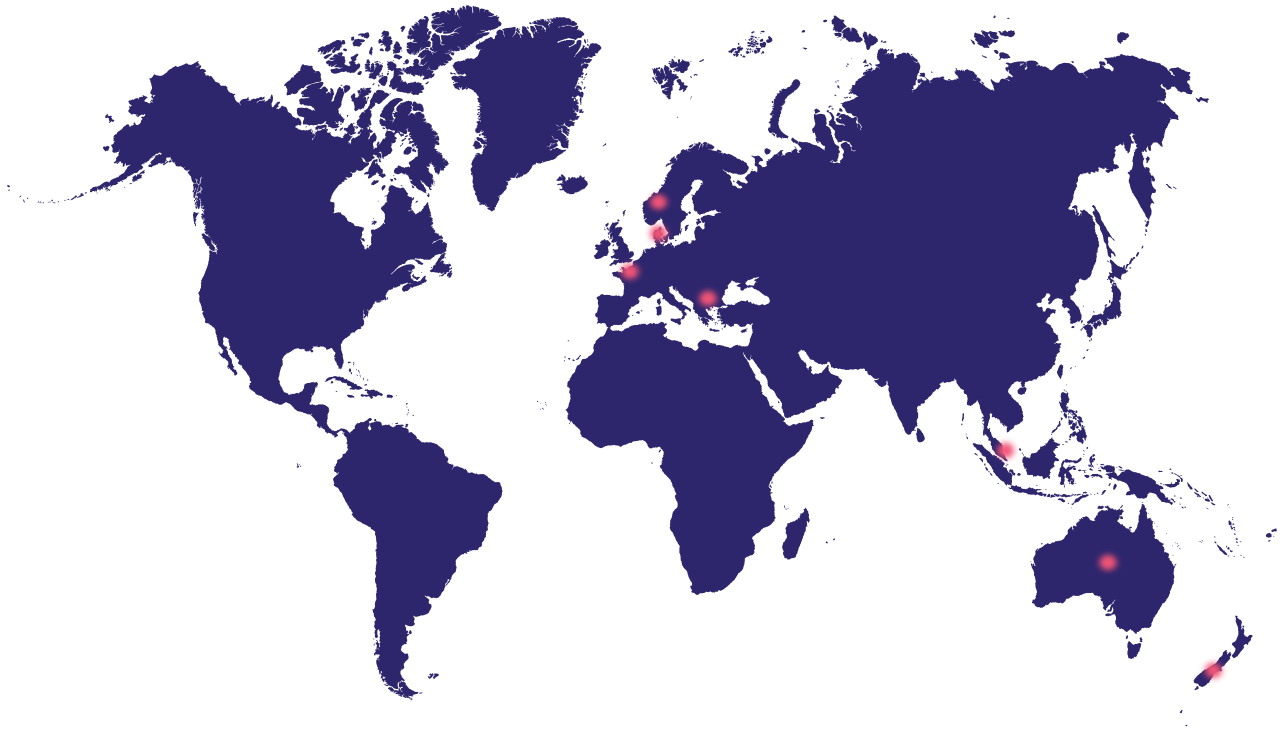


There has been a 23% rise in SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) in 6 years and 46% of the £7.6bn increase in England's school spending has been consumed by SEND costs. This bill is only going to rise. It has led the Institute for Fiscal Studies to publish a report on SEND funding entitled 'Something has to change.' It is worth considering the long-term impacts. The impacts of children growing up with record levels of mental health diagnosis, with limited attention span and all other side effects of social media.

The annual cost of mental health is already estimated to be £300bn annually (*Cardoso & McHayle, 2024*). What will it rise to? There are likely to be generations of citizens with vastly lower productivity outputs and thus lower taxes. The economic burden of social media is going to be immense, whilst tech companies profits grow and grow.

Some estimates have said that the failure to address children's mental health crisis costs over £1 trillion in lost earnings across a generation's lifetime, with affected individuals earning up to 30% less than peers by age 50 (*Future Minds Campaign, 2025*).

18. OTHER COUNTRIES ARE MOVING ON THIS, WE ARE GOING TO BE LEFT BEHIND



Australia
has gone first and is the first country to ban children from social media



Malaysia
is likely to be next



European Parliament
has voted overwhelmingly in support of a ban



Denmark, France, Greece, New Zealand and Norway
are all considering similar measures

It is time to **act**, time to **make a stand**,
time to **save our children's future**.

CONCLUSION

The Health Emergency

Child mental health contacts have risen 477% since 2016. Eating disorders among 11-16 year olds have increased fivefold, among 17-19 year olds sixteen-fold, while suicide rates among 10-24 year olds have risen 22.7%.

Globally, 11% of adolescents show symptoms of problematic social media usage, three to six times higher than alcohol or drug dependency - while in England, 20% of 11-year-old girls have problematic social media usage.

A 2024 longitudinal study found a one-directional causal relationship: higher social media use preceded increases in ADHD inattention symptoms in children, with no evidence of reverse causation (Nivins et al., 2024).

The Security Crisis

In 2025, MI5, Counter Terrorism Policing, and the National Crime Agency issued a summer holiday warning about online radicalisation, as more young people than ever are arrested for terrorism offences.

An estimated 27,000 children are trapped in county lines gangs, with online grooming crimes surging 82% between 2017 and 2022, while 70% of young people have seen violent content online in the past year. Evidence consistently shows that exposure to violent content increases the chance of children committing violent acts themselves.

The Schools Crisis

Social media is the number one cause of poor pupil behaviour, according to 59% of teachers (NASUWT, 2025) and in teachers' view will be the biggest source of pressure for students in the future, above all other pressures, including economic ones (Teacher Tapp). Teachers routinely report exhausted children, unable to concentrate having been up most of the night online.

National GCSE results in maths and English are predicted to worsen steadily until 2030, when fewer than 40% of pupils will achieve good grades (Nuffield Foundation, 2024). The NEU, the biggest teaching union, are campaigning themselves for a ban on social media for children.

The Economic Catastrophe

One in four children have mental health disorders, 33% aren't school-ready at reception, and England ranks bottom ten of 31 countries for socio-emotional skills essential for work.

The annual cost of mental health is £300 billion, with failure to address this crisis costing over an estimated £1 trillion in lost earnings across a generation as we create economically inactive young people who cannot concentrate, work effectively, or compete globally.

International Action

There is global momentum for this. Australia is leading the world and has raised the age limit to 16. Malaysia is doing the same. Denmark, France, Greece, New Zealand and Norway are considering restrictions of their own. In November 2025, the European Parliament voted overwhelmingly in support of raising the age limit to 16. Britain is being left behind.

Public Demand

Polling demonstrates overwhelming support: 75 per cent of adults, including 75 per cent of Labour voters, support raising the minimum age to 16. Most strikingly, young people themselves recognise the harm: 78 per cent of Gen Z say they would try to delay their child using social media as long as possible.

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