The Screen Time Debate:
What do Children and Young People Think?

A Children’s Media Foundation Report
in Association with Dubit Ltd.

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As a recent analysis of screen time use by Professor Sonia Livingstone points out, there is a lot of conflicting and confusing information offered to parents on the subject. In addition, it seems to us here at the Children’s Media Foundation (CMF) that the voices of children and young people themselves often get overlooked in this debate. To that end, CMF commissioned Dubit to undertake a survey which would enable their opinions to be heard.

In total, 1000 children and young people aged 10-16 years old and their parents took part in an online survey. 51% were boys and 49% were girls, and the sample ranged across all socio-economic groups. As numerous studies, such as the recent media use and attitudes report from Ofcom, indicate, children have access to a wide range of technologies, and in this survey, 80% reported owning their own smartphone and 62% own a tablet.

Children and young people use their mobile devices to access a wide range of sites for gaming and chatting with friends, with YouTube, WhatsApp and Instagram being the most popular apps (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1: The social media and gaming use of 10-16 year-olds](image)

Of interest is the pattern with regard to chatting with friends on popular multiplayer online games, with Roblox appealing equally to both genders, and boys being more likely to chat with peers on Fortnite and Minecraft.
Children and their parents were asked what they felt to be a reasonable amount of time for them to use screen media. Unsurprisingly, children propose a longer time period (an average of 2 hours 7 minutes) than their parents (1 hour and 36 minutes). Similarly, children think that an average of 2 hours and 49 minutes was fine with regard to game playing, whereas parents feel a reasonable amount of time is 1 hours and 54 minutes on average. With regard to both the use of screens, and gaming in particular, the majority of parents (69.5%) state that they are comfortable with the amount of time their child spends doing these activities. The gap between children’s and parents’ views on what is a reasonable amount of time to spend on social media is smaller as children get older, but the gap in relation to gaming grows larger as children get older (see Figures 2 and 3).

**Figure 2: Perceptions of screen time (social media) by age and gender**

PARENTS vs. CHILD PERCEPTION OF SCREEN TIME BY SOCIAL MEDIA (AGE/GENDER)
Figure 3: Perceptions of screen time (gaming) by age and gender

Children were asked about their perceptions with regard to the extent to which adults should monitor children’s screen use. Just over half (53.5%) feel that adults should be worried about how much time children spend on social media/gaming, whilst 58% think this use should be limited by parents (see Figure 4).
Nevertheless, when it comes to their own use of media, children are not quite so convinced that this would be a good idea, with only 45% saying they would find it beneficial to have parental limits on how much time they should spend on screens. The majority of children report that their parents do set such limits (62.5%), but this does indicate that a large percentage of children (37.5%) appear to be allowed to use screens as much as they wish. It may be the case, however, that the parents of those children are actually monitoring children’s use of screens, but in a way that is no so obvious to the children themselves. Younger children are more likely than their older counterparts to agree that parents should limit children’s use of social media (62%), and to report that their parents do monitor this use (72%).

Children were asked about their perceptions with regard to their own use of screens. 45% percent of children suggested that they could not switch off from social media and gaming, with 45.5% stating that they feel they spend more time on these activities than they should do. It is of note that children who feel they should spend longer on social media and gaming are more likely to say they cannot switch off from them, and vice-versa (see Figure 5).
Often, media reports focus on the risks associated with screen use, yet this survey indicates that children use their devices for a wide range of creative activities, for an average period of 90 minutes per day. On a typical day, 83% of children take photographs, with older female children more likely to report doing so (91%). Children were asked to identify what they would describe as creative use of devices, and reported a wide range of activities, as can be seen in Figure 6.
The children were also asked what they considered to be use of screens ‘just for fun’, and the activities reported are familiar, such as watching videos, playing games, listening to music and chatting to others. Children’s perceptions are that they spend slightly longer per day on fun activities (2 hours 6 minutes) (see Figure 7).
Children report that they spent 90mins per day doing what they would describe as educational activities. Over two-thirds of children (72%) use devices to learn about something they are interested in. Taken together, therefore, children report that they spent over five hours a day on these activities (creative, fun and educational) combined, which points to the difficulties of asking children (and their parents) to estimate time in this way. Nevertheless, it does suggest a broad pattern in that children appear to spend longer using devices for what they perceive as ‘fun’ activities rather than what they perceive to be ‘creative’ and ‘educational’. It is worth noting that the way the survey questions were set up separated out the activities in this way in order to help children to categorise them in an easy manner, but this does not suggest that these categories are mutually exclusive.
The majority of children (86%) report that, in general, that they feel OK most of the time, with 10% reporting that they are neutral about this question, and 4% stating that they do not feel OK most of the time. 71% report that social media does not affect their moods, with 20% stating that they feel neutral about this. A small minority (9%) of children feel that social media does affect their mood. Because of this, one might have expected that the majority of children would think that adults worry too much about the impact of social media use on mental health and well-being, yet only 60% of children report that they agree with that statement, indicating that children understand the complexities of the issues and that there are aspects of social media use that they feel do deserve parental focus (see Figure 9).
A sizeable minority of children (36%) suggest that they feel their health would improve if they used social media less. This may relate to the fact that whilst only 9% state that social media affected their mood, 20% are neutral about this. However, it is of note that 47% of 16-year-old boys suggest that they feel their health would improve if they used social media less. The survey did not probe whether that perception was with regard to mental and/ or physical health, but 42% of children would like more advice in this area. Of interest is that 60% of 12-year-old boys and 57% of 16-year-old boys want more advice about social media use and their health and well-being. This suggests that some sensitivity to the needs of boys in particular in this area is needed, as they may be reluctant to express this desire for guidance to parents and teachers in front of siblings and peers.

Finally, children were asked if they had any advice on how children could use social media in ways that would improve their well-being. Children made a range of sensible and appropriate suggestions (see Figures 10-13), but not all children have this knowledge, and so it is important for peers to be able to share their advice with others. Also of interest was that there were comments about the way in which social media is often scapegoated and this draws attention away from other areas of life that are likely to cause children stress, such as schooling:

*Parents constantly worrying about social media and setting limits could lead the child to want/ feel a need to go on social media more as they feel like they are missing out. Parents/ adults need to focus more on the extreme stress that things such as unreachable expectations, stress from school, too much homework and pressure can put on their child, rather than blaming the wellbeing of their child on things like social media because it’s easier to put
the blame on something that is seen as ‘unproductive’.

**Figures 10 - 13: Suggestions for social media use**

**SUGGESTIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA USE (1)**

**BE SAFE & SENSIBLE**
- Be sure that you know who you are talking to and that they are safe. You should limit your contacts to your friends that you know.
- Don’t add strangers. Block people who are mean or bullying you, and tell someone if you are being bullied.
- Only talk with people you know personally. My mum checks my phone so I cannot have any new people on without asking my mom. This will stop people who want to cause you harm from being a ‘friend’.
- Don’t post nasty things & don’t believe anything nasty people say about you, ignore haters.
- Not to believe everything they read, there is a lot of false news on the internet in general.
- Don’t put too many photos on when kids are deliberately looking older.
- Don’t think that celebrities bodies are what we should look like as they use lots of filters.
- Don’t post embarrassing pictures that will enable others to bully you online.
- Don’t compare yourself to others. Don’t try to be perfect.

**SUGGESTIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA USE (2)**

**USE SOCIAL MEDIA POSITIVELY**
- Only use it for fun and knowledge and phone people. Join groups with people who help or have similar problems.
- All children must know the advantages and disadvantages of social media before they use it. They should use it for educational purposes not for passing the time.
- Doing things that feel good and talking about ideas and interest. Not spending time on seeing or talking about things that don’t feel good.
- Use it more to make your creative skills better.
- Do what makes you happy and turn it off when it becomes negative. You can use it to build up their self esteem and interact with other kids in a safe online environment.
- Keeping in touch with family and friends, talking to them about their worries and not keeping it bottled up inside of them.

Source: Dumb, 2013. Do you have any advice for how children could use social media in ways that will improve their emotional well-being?
SUGGESTIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA USE (3)

PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT

- Make sure your parents know what you are doing. Tell them everything and be honest. Ask for their help.
- I think parents SHOULD limit the time their kids spend doing social media and when kids are on it they should not take anything someone else says or does too seriously... take it for what it is, a means of communication.
- When I was younger my mum was very strict which I think was good.
- Only talk with people you know personally. My mum checks my phone so I cannot have any new people on without asking my mom. This will stop people who want to cause you harm from being a 'friend'.
- Parents need to understand that the Internet is a way to access/speak to people about what they are feeling/finding people who are like them and helping themselves. Parents need to understand that not all things on the Internet are negative and that their child could wisely using it, basically they need to trust that their child knows what's best for them/ is making the right decisions.
- Parents constantly worrying about social media and setting limits could lead the child to want/ feel a need to go on social media more as they feel like they are missing out. Parents/ adults need to focus more on the extreme Stress that things such as unreachable expectations, stress from school, too much homework and pressure can put on their child, rather than blaming the wellbeing of their child on things like social media because it's easier to put the blame on something that is seen as 'unproductive'.

Source: OLB, OEL. Do you have any advice for how children could use social media in ways that will improve their emotional well-being?
Issue: UK 10-16s 1.005

SUGGESTIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA USE (4)

KNOW HOW TO GET HELP

- Very often young people can't convey their feelings to a parent or teacher, and it can help to talk to friends and peers online, and sometimes even access professional anonymous help if required.
- Tell adults if you are being bullied online. You can also speak to someone at school like a wellbeing person.
- Follow things such as self-help pages/avoid pages that you know will have a negative/toxic impact. If you have anyone that you don't like/ isn't kind to you, block them on social media. Talk to the right people. Use your social media for good (helping/reaching out to others, spreading positivity, being kind etc.). Make sure that if you see anything offensive/something that could upset/hurt someone else, report it.

SET TIME LIMIT

- It's good to have hobbies and play sports so there is less time to spend on social media.
- Set a rule how much they need to use it every time without affecting their daily lives such as homework, study, or spending time with families. Be sociable in real life.
- Set a timer and come off at the time. Use in moderation and be disciplined throughout.
- Get times that you are allowed on it and off it by your mum and dad that way you know how long you have and can come off it.
- Don't be on it so long, learn to know when to walk away from it.

Source: OLB, OEL. Do you have any advice for how children could use social media in ways that will improve their emotional well-being?
Issue: UK 10-16s 1.005
Conclusion

Overall, the survey conducted by Dubit indicates that a sizeable minority of children and young people do have some concerns about social media, but only a very small minority (4%) report that they do not feel OK most of the time, with 10% expressing neutrality about that. This does not present a picture of a generation of children with significant problems with regard to well-being, but it does indicate that the situation is complex, as some children do indicate concerns with regard to their time spent on social media. In particular, boys would appreciate more advice on how to manage the use of social media more effectively. Given that many children are able to outline a range of strategies for managing this use, more thought could be given to how to leverage greater peer-to-peer support. Children may be more likely to accept advice and guidance from each other than from parents and teachers. Setting up mentorship groups in which younger children can talk about their concerns with older children might be one strategy to use.

However, it is worth noting that 16-year-old boys are more likely than other groups to say that their health would improve if they used social media less, and so that age group should not be neglected. It may be the case that for this age group, there are more limited options available for social recreation, given the loss of youth services that has occurred during the last seven years in England in particular, which may drive some to use their devices more, even if they do not necessarily wish this to be the case. This is not to suggest a simple causation effect, however, but to raise this as one of the factors that might be impacting on screen use. Addressing the concerns of children and parents in this area, therefore, should not just rely on enhancing the guidance and advice given to them, valuable though that would be, but should also focus on asking some searching questions about what society offers for all groups of teenagers. Unless that happens, those children who live in families that can afford a range of leisure pursuits outside of the home will continue to have a wider spectrum of activities available to them. Instead of being barraged by constant media reports about children’s excessive use of screens, which frequently appear to lay the blame squarely on the shoulders of children and parents themselves, a more nuanced analysis of the situation needs to be undertaken, which outlines clearly the responsibility of governments to ensure that the needs of children and young people are taken into account when setting social policy.

The responsibility of managing children’s and young people’s use of digital devices effectively is one that is shared. Parents and carers, children and young people, schools, media industry and governments all have their parts to play in this, and, in this article, the CMF has offered a platform for children and young people themselves to enter the discussions about screen time. We hope that their thoughts and concerns can inform the next stage of public debate on this issue.