

Online risks for the mental health of young people

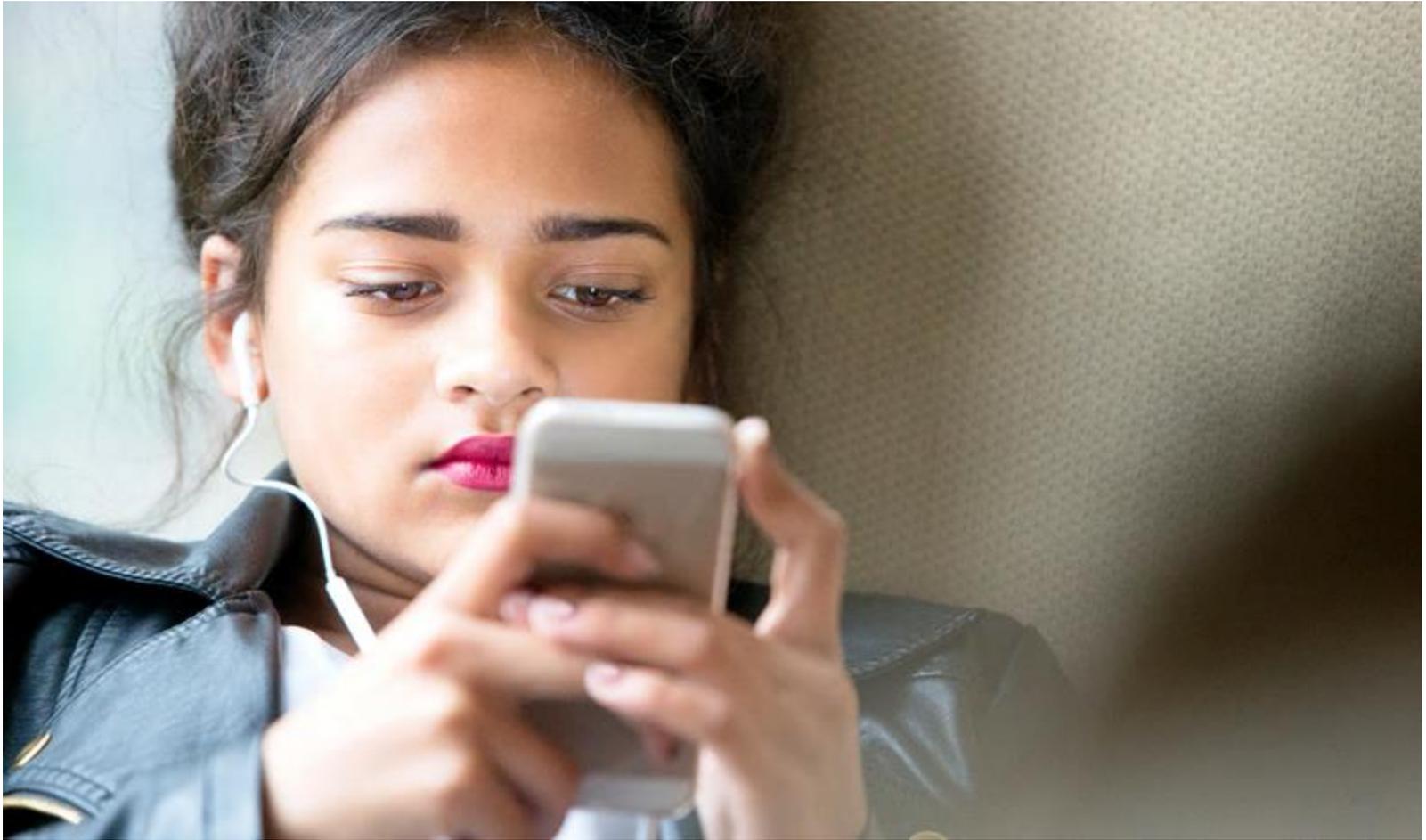
Dr Jon Goldin FRCPsych
Consultant Child and Adolescent
Psychiatrist
MCU

RCPsych International Congress
June 2021

Overview

- Context
- Prevalence of social media
- Cyberbullying
- Self Harm/Suicide
- Anorexia Nervosa
- Safeguarding/Child Protection
- Addiction
- Possible solutions/positive examples
- Conclusion

Look familiar?







Why children use social media

- Communication
- Self-esteem
- Self-expression
- Confidence
- Popularity
- Entertainment
- Sense of belonging
- To 'keep up'/receive information

How long are children spending online?

Children and young people told us that, in a typical day they spend an average of...



109 children and young people aged 11-24 years took part in this engagement exercise.

Mental Health Trends

- Smartphones came in in 2007 (first iPhone)
- Increase in prevalence of depression and anxiety in YP over past 10 years
- YP with mental health problems may be more vulnerable to the harmful effects of social media – ‘Digital Divide’.
- UK NHS Digital study showed that rates of probable mental disorders have increased since 2017. In 2020, one in six (16.0%) children aged 5 to 16 years were identified as having a probable mental disorder, increasing from one in nine (10.8%) in 2017.

Online Trends

- 3.6 Billion Social Media users in the world, nearly half the world's population. Most people don't go more than an hour without checking their phones. YP more affected - nearly half of YP in the west spend 10 hours/day online
- Children will be angry looking back at the 'wild and dangerous' online world they were exposed to *Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner, Feb 2021*

However....

- Must not confuse correlation with causation
- Currently no evidence from neuroscience studies that typical internet use harms the adolescent brain
- In terms of social interaction and empathy, adolescents' use of social media can enhance existing friendships and the quality of relationships (for some more than others)
- Young people do need to learn to access the online space thoughtfully and responsibly

Girls suffer under pressure of online 'perfection', poll finds

- Quest to create the image of a “perfect” life on social media is affecting the wellbeing of one in three girls
- Poll of more than 1,000 YP by UK charity Girlguiding found 35% girls aged 11-21 said their biggest worry online was comparing themselves and their lives with others
- Parents failed to recognise this as a problem
- Girls included grooming, how photographs they took could be altered or used out of context online, and threats from strangers. A third also worried about how they looked in photos
- Sense of self bound to numbers of ‘likes’ received.

Cyber-bullying

- Cyber-bullying eg private images being widely circulated, public shame/humiliation. Has led to suicides.
- *‘People say a lot more behind a computer screen than they would in real life’*
- Major study of 10,000 teenagers by University College London (UCL) and Imperial College London showed that social media damages children’s mental health by ruining sleep, reducing their exercise levels and exposing them to cyberbullies in their homes.

Sleep Deprivation

- There is a strong association between social media use before bed and poor sleep quality
- The LED lights on electronic screens can stop the natural processes in the brain that trigger the feeling of sleepiness
- One in five school students have admitted to waking up in the middle of the night to check their phones
- Many of the apparent connections between screen time and adverse effects may be mediated by lost opportunities for positive activities (socialising, exercise, sleep) that are displaced by screen time. (RCPCH Guidance re Screen Time 2019)

Deliberate self-harm

- Voyeurism/exhibitionism
- Glamorises/romanticises self-harm?
- Adolescents seek feeling of belonging and being 'understood' that such websites can provide
- Competition between peers/'badge of honour'
- Advice re 'how to do it'
- Suicide pacts/people meeting on line
- Education/increased awareness

Anorexia Nervosa

- ‘Thinspiration’
- Competition/peer encouragement/‘tips’
- Reduced sense of isolation but often unhelpful peer group
- Filters and photo editing particularly detrimental, YP compare themselves to altered images. Need public education re this.
- Some helpful websites eg Beat

Safeguarding/Pornography

- Inappropriate exposure to indecent images
- Grooming - easy to pretend you are someone you aren't, prey on the vulnerable
- 61% of children have met offline with someone they had contacted online without their parents knowledge
- 'OnlyFans' – BBC Investigation May 2021. Underage girls faking their ages to post explicit content or being trafficked/abused

'Sexting'

- 'Sexting' has become part of the 'normal' flirting ritual for many young people. But sexting carries significant risks. Images which are supposed to remain private are often shared with a much wider audience, and can be used to bully and control.
- Sexting is also influenced by pornography, which is now accessed on-line by a high proportion of boys, and which can introduce inappropriate expectations into young people's relationships.
- Recent discussion of 'Rape Culture' in many schools – 'Everyone's Invited' (2021), online platform with thousands of harrowing anonymous testimonies. Widespread sexual violence, particularly at parties.
- We need to help young people address the risks through open discussion and education.

Addiction

- Social Media companies deliberately manipulate the algorithms to increase our time spent online *Harris, 2016*
- ‘Swipe Down’ has similar effect to slot machines. See ‘Dopamine Labs’ – aim is to make apps as addictive as possible
- #TruthaboutTech – range of techniques to make social media addictive
- Variable reinforcement, automatic notifications, targeted content etc
- The Social Dilemma - Netflix

Possible solutions?

- Family-friendly filters on devices but young people often know more than adults about disabling these
- The national curriculum aims to teach children aged five to 16 about internet safety in a sensible, age-appropriate way. Education important.
- Parents need to try to view world through their child's eyes.
- Website providers need to police their sites more closely?
Better legal framework?
- Death of Molly Russell, 2017 – Instagram announced it will ban all graphic self harm images 2019
- Searches related to depression and self-harm, may be intercepted with users directed to counselling and resources that can offer support

Online Safety Bill, May 2021

- Makes companies more responsible for their users' safety online, especially children and other vulnerable groups
- Social media companies must remove and limit spread of illegal and harmful content eg CSA/suicide content
- Ofcom given powers to fine companies failing in a new **duty of care** up to 10% of annual global turnover
- New criminal offence for senior managers introduced as a deferred power if needed.

COVID-19

- Has Social Media been a 'lifesaver' for some people during lockdown?
- May be the only way of staying in touch with friends
- Anecdotal decrease in cyber-bullying?
- May be more focus on positive aspects of Social Media going forward?

Information and Online Resources

- Kooth.com Online counselling and support
- net-aware.org.uk Guide for parents - NSPCC resources, videos, templates and training re staying safe online
- Childnet International www.childnet.com
- Digizen www.digizen.org advice on cyberbullying
- To make a report: CEOP (if concerns re online grooming or sexual behaviour online) or Internet Watch Foundation www.iwf.org.uk
- www.good-thinking.uk NHS approved – Digital Mental Wellbeing for London
- www.minded.org.uk NHS HEE Free educational resource re CYP's Mental Health

Conclusion

- ‘The Genie is out of the bottle’
- Adults need to understand seriousness of some of the internet content out there and what young people may be exposed to
- Can’t turn back time, need to inform ourselves, educate, monitor, discuss openly
- Appropriate boundaries important wrt social media eg no phones in bedroom at night
- Mental health can be harmed but also can be helpful aspects. Focus on the message rather than the medium.
- Can be good to ‘disconnect to connect’



“Alright, you can go on your iPad for ten hours as a reward for being off it for five minutes”

Thank you for listening

- jon.goldin@gosh.nhs.uk
- Twitter: @DrJonGoldin