



“Digital Childhood: How Screen Time Shapes Kids’ Minds and Emotions”

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Abstract:

In today’s digital age, children are growing up immersed in screens — from tablets and smartphones to gaming consoles and social media. While digital media offers valuable learning tools and new ways to connect, it also presents challenges to children’s psychological development. This article explores the complex relationship between digital media exposure and children’s mental health, behavior, and cognitive growth. It highlights both the benefits and potential risks, offering insights and practical advice for parents and educators aiming to foster healthy digital habits in the young generation.

Keywords:

Digital media, children’s psychological development, screen time, mental health, social media, child behavior, cognitive growth, online safety, cyberbullying, internet hazards, parental guidance, healthy digital habits, technology and childhood, emotional well-being, digital literacy, digital parenting, youth mental health, social skills, media exposure, psychological risks

Introduction:

The rise of digital technology has transformed childhood in unprecedented ways. Unlike previous generations, today’s children are exposed to digital media almost from infancy, engaging with content through apps, videos, games, and social platforms. This digital immersion brings exciting opportunities for learning and creativity but also sparks concern about its impact on children’s psychological well-being. How does screen time affect their attention, emotions, and social skills? Can digital media promote positive development, or does it pose hidden dangers? Understanding this evolving landscape is essential for guiding children toward a balanced and healthy relationship with technology.

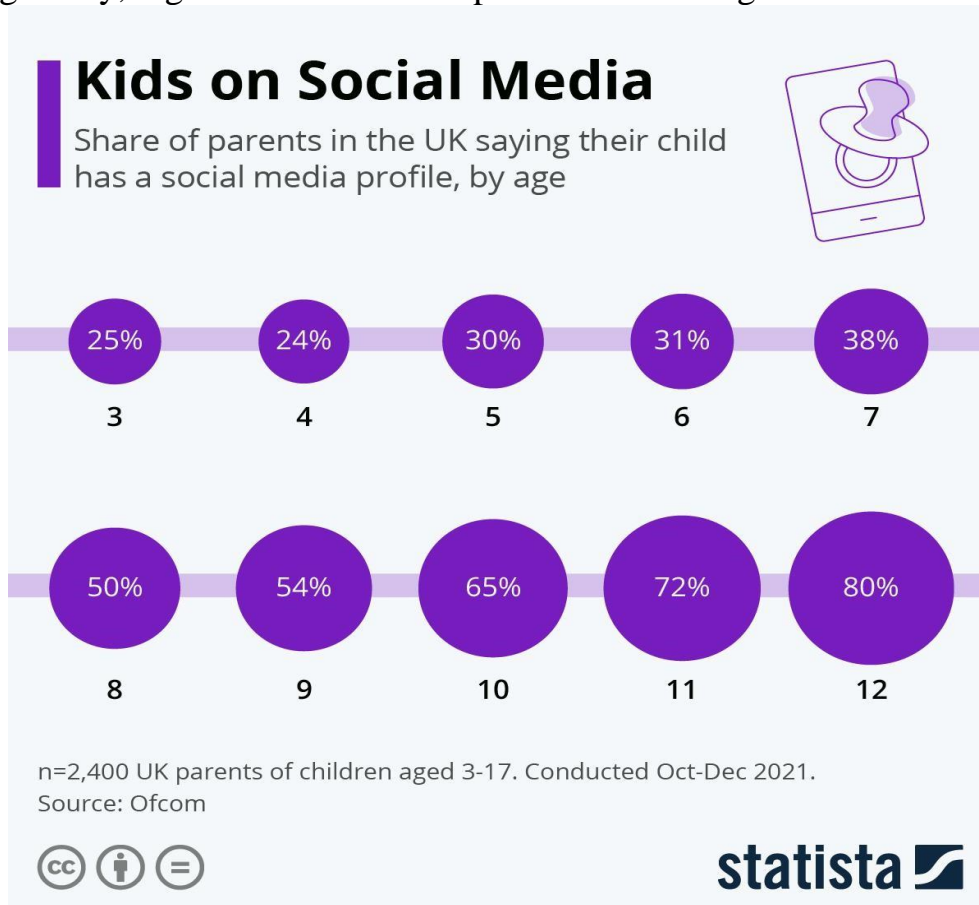
Social Media as a Major Developmental Context for Youth

In an era where digital devices are practically extensions of our children’s hands, understanding the impact of screen time on their developing minds has never been more urgent. From educational apps that promise to boost learning to social media platforms that connect them with friends, digital media is woven deeply into daily life. Yet, as much as technology offers opportunities, it also raises important questions: How does

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this constant digital exposure shape children's emotions, behavior, and social skills? Are we preparing kids to thrive in a digital world — or unknowingly exposing them to psychological risks? This article dives into the complex effects of digital media on children's psychology, exploring both the bright and shadowy sides of growing up online.

While concerns around screen time often take center stage, it's important to recognize the many ways digital media can support healthy development. Educational apps and interactive games offer children opportunities to practice problem-solving, develop creativity, and build new skills in an engaging way. For example, language-learning apps can help kids expand their vocabulary, while coding games introduce them to logical thinking from an early age. Moreover, digital platforms can strengthen social bonds, especially when children use video calls or messaging apps to stay connected with family and friends, helping to reduce feelings of isolation. When used thoughtfully, digital media can be a powerful tool for growth and connection.



Recent research highlights just how early children are engaging with social media, often well below the recommended age limits. According to a 2021 survey by the UK communications regulator Ofcom, a surprising **one quarter of 3-year-olds in the UK already have a social media profile**. While most platforms set their



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minimum age at 13, up to **80% of 12-year-olds** reportedly have some kind of social media account. In fact, across all age groups from 3 to 17, the proportion of children with profiles never drops below 25%.

When it comes to specific platforms, younger children show a strong preference for apps like **TikTok and YouTube**. The survey found that **34% of children aged 8-11 have TikTok profiles**, and **27% use YouTube**. Even among toddlers aged 3-4, **16% use TikTok**, with that number rising to **29% among 5-7-year-olds**. Overall, YouTube remains the most popular platform, with **89% of UK children aged 3-17 using it** in 2021.

Interestingly, only about a third of parents correctly identified the minimum age requirements for social media use. Furthermore, many younger children who have profiles under the age limit reported setting them up themselves, often without parental knowledge or supervision. This early and unsupervised exposure raises concerns, especially given mounting evidence that social media can have a net negative effect on young people's mental health, contributing to issues like anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression.

Internet hazards for children

Despite its many benefits, the internet also exposes children to a variety of risks that can seriously affect their mental health and development. One major concern is **cyberbullying**, which affects nearly 37% of children aged 12 to 17, according to a 2023 report by the Pew Research Center. Cyberbullying can cause feelings of fear, shame, and isolation, often leading to anxiety and depression. Children may also encounter **inappropriate content**, such as violent or sexually explicit material, which can be confusing or traumatic for young minds. Studies show that early exposure to such content can increase aggressive behavior and emotional distress. The anonymity of the internet also enables **online predators** to target vulnerable children, with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children reporting thousands of cases annually. Moreover, excessive screen time has been linked to **attention difficulties** and disrupted sleep patterns; research published in *JAMA Pediatrics* found that children spending more than two hours daily on screens are more likely to experience sleep problems and lower academic performance. On social media platforms, children face pressure to meet unrealistic beauty and popularity standards, contributing to **low self-esteem** and **social anxiety**. A 2022 study from the University of Pennsylvania found that limiting social media use to 30 minutes a day led to significant reductions in loneliness and depression among adolescents. These risks underscore the importance of informed and active guidance by parents and caregivers to protect children's well-being in the digital age.

Promoting Healthy Digital Habits and Protecting Children from Internet Hazards



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In the digital age, fostering healthy digital habits in children is essential for their psychological well-being and overall development. Parents and caregivers can help children navigate technology positively by setting clear boundaries around screen time. Experts, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, recommend limiting recreational screen time to no more than 1-2 hours per day for older children, while encouraging more interactive and educational content rather than passive consumption. Establishing consistent routines, such as device-free family meals and screen curfews before bedtime, supports better sleep and strengthens family connections.

Equally important is teaching children about **online safety**. Open conversations about the dangers of sharing personal information, recognizing inappropriate content, and understanding the risks of interacting with strangers can empower children to make safer choices online. Using parental controls and privacy settings on devices and social media platforms adds an extra layer of protection, restricting access to harmful material and limiting contact with unknown users.

To reduce risks like cyberbullying and exposure to harmful content, parents should actively monitor their child's digital activity and encourage them to speak up if they encounter anything upsetting. Encouraging a healthy balance between online and offline activities, including physical play, hobbies, and face-to-face social interactions, promotes emotional resilience and social skills.

By combining clear rules, education, and supportive communication, families can help children enjoy the benefits of digital media while minimizing potential harms, creating a safer and healthier online experience.

Conclusion

Digital media is undeniably a powerful part of children's lives today, offering both exciting opportunities and serious challenges. While educational content and social connectivity can support children's growth and development, excessive or unsupervised use can expose them to psychological risks such as anxiety, attention difficulties, and negative social comparisons. Understanding these complex effects is crucial for parents, educators, and caregivers who play a vital role in guiding children toward healthy and balanced digital habits. By setting clear boundaries, fostering open communication, and teaching online safety, adults can help children navigate the digital world confidently and securely. Ultimately, the goal is to empower children to harness the benefits of technology while protecting their mental and emotional well-being—preparing them for a healthy digital future.

“As technology continues to shape childhood, it's up to us to ensure that digital experiences become a source of growth—not stress—for our kids. Let's commit to guiding them wisely through the online world, one mindful click at a time.”



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