

The influence of social media on the development of children and young people



This study examines the influence of social media on the development of children and young people through a review of the available research and a legal and policy analysis of the EU framework to address the negative effects on children's well-being.

Main observations

Social media use is ubiquitous among children and young people for whom social media platforms provide a highly appealing way to connect and communicate with peers, share content, and make new friends.

The study

examines research on the impact of pervasive social media use on children's and young people's development.

Children and young people's use of social media coincides with an **important period of development** in their lives when they are undergoing key physical, psychological, cognitive, emotional and social changes. Developmental tasks associated with adolescence include developing independence and a separate identity, becoming comfortable with one's body image, developing relationships with peers

of all genders and acquiring a set of values to guide behaviour.

For young Europeans, using social media is an integral part of this process and while they gain many benefits from being connected in this way, they also encounter content and behaviour online that may be harmful for their development. Drawing on the **CO:RE classification of online risks**, the study reviews evidence of children's experiences of the following:

- **Content risks**

Children and young people encounter **cyberhate, sexualised content, gory or violent images, content that promotes eating disorders, and disinformation on social media**. Harmful effects for children's development include potential increased aggression, problematic sexual behaviours, unhealthy eating habits,

body image dissatisfaction and distorted values and attitudes.

- **Contact risks**

While predatory contact by adults may be rare, **risks of sexual exploitation, harassment and threats of extortion** have been documented. Research points to gaps in children's awareness of the risks and their coping strategies with unfamiliar situations.



- **Conduct risks**

Cyberbullying is persistent and commonplace occurrence for many young people with serious adverse effects for younger users. Children also experience **unwanted requests for sexual information** while the **non-consensual sharing of intimate images** is a source of severe harm and trauma. **Participation in harmful online communities** (such as promoting self-harm) is also a potential source of harm though other contributory factors to poor mental health also need to be considered.

- **Contract risks**

The social media environment is also thoroughly commercialised in which children face wide-ranging risks through opaque and unfair practices, clickbait strategies and hidden marketing. Algorithmic recommendation systems also increase risks to children.



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• **Mental health and well-being**

Children’s mental health and well-being is a vital area to consider concerning social media. This is a complex area which involves many different and interrelated risk manifestations. The evidence for either a positive or negative impact on children’s health and well-being is mixed and inconclusive. Probing the outcomes of problematic social media use – reported by only a minority of children – is an important priority for research.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Supporting children to be safe, protected and empowered when they go online is a cornerstone of EU digital policies, expressed most explicitly in the **Better Internet for Kids (BIK+) strategy** adopted by the European Commission in May 2022. Enhanced protections for young people are also envisaged in the Digital Services Act, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, the General Data Protection Regulation and the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive. Internationally, an emphasis on children’s rights in the digital environment and strengthened protections for children’s safety, privacy, and welfare when using digital services is noteworthy.

Children’s online safety is also a multistakeholder responsibility reflected in the many different

programmes carried out nationally and at the EU level to raise awareness, lessen the chance of children encountering risks and to support children if they become victims of online harm. Awareness raising and digital literacy to empower children to have the necessary skills to manage their use of digital services safely and responsibly is also vital. Safer Internet Centres play a crucial role in this regard.


The study offers the following recommendations:

Safety by design and **age appropriate design** are key concepts that should be endorsed and promoted within policy and legislation. More work is needed, however, to ensure effective standards and monitoring progress in the implementation of age appropriate design.

Similarly, continued development of privacy protections for children’s data in the social media environment is essential with **more guidance and standards needed to ensure best practices in supporting children’s privacy**.

Age assurance and **digital identity systems** to underpin more robust age verification can also make social media use safer for children. Finally, it is also important to future-proof with **continued research dedicated to children’s experiences of the digital environment** and to keep pace with a rapidly evolving digital sphere.

CO:RE Classification of Online Risks

	Content	Contact	Conduct	Contract
Aggressive	Child engages with or is exposed to potentially harmful content Violent, gory, graphic, racist, hateful or extremist information and communication	Child experiences or is targeted by potentially harmful <i>adult</i> contact Harassment, stalking, hateful behaviour, unwanted or excessive surveillance	Child witnesses, participates in or is a victim of potentially harmful <i>peer</i> conduct Bullying, hateful or hostile communication or peer activity e.g. trolling, exclusion, shaming	Child is party to or exploited by potentially harmful contract Identity theft, fraud, phishing, scams, hacking, blackmail, security risks
Sexual	Pornography (harmful or illegal), sexualization of culture, oppressive body image norms	Sexual harassment, sexual grooming, sextortion, the generation and sharing of child sexual abuse material	Sexual harassment, non-consensual sexual messaging, adverse sexual pressures	Trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, streaming (paid-for) child sexual abuse
Values	Mis/disinformation, age-inappropriate marketing or user-generated content	Ideological persuasion or manipulation, radicalisation and extremist recruitment	Potentially harmful user communities e.g. self-harm, anti-vaccine, adverse peer pressures	Gambling, filter bubbles, micro-targeting, dark patterns shaping persuasion or purchase
Cross-cutting	Privacy violations (interpersonal, institutional, commercial) Physical and mental health risks (e.g., sedentary lifestyle, excessive screen use, isolation, anxiety) Inequalities and discrimination (in/exclusion, exploiting vulnerability, algorithmic bias/predictive analytics)			

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