United Kingdom Chief Medical Officers' commentary on *'Screen-based activities and children and young people's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: a systematic map of reviews'*

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Published 07 February 2019

1. What is the purpose of this document?

1.1 As the United Kingdom Chief Medical Officers (UK CMOs), we advise our respective governments on actions to improve and protect people's health. This document is our commentary on University College London's recent, independent research concerning 'screen-based activities' (e.g. watching videos online, social media use, gaming and similar activities) and the mental health of children and young people (CYP). We also outline steps organisations should take.

1.2 Scientific research is currently insufficiently conclusive to support UK CMO evidence-based guidelines on optimal amounts of screen use or online activities (such as social media use).

1.3 Acknowledging societal concerns, we have produced advice for parents and carers informed by research evidence on child and adolescent development, and the views of academics, parents and carers, teachers and CYP themselves. This advice is available at the end of this document.

2. Background

2.1   In the United Kingdom, in 2019, most CYP have grown up with internet-enabled technology in their home or school. Many will have had early access to smartphones and similar devices that can be used outside the home or school.

2.2   The internet and social media can be a force for good in our society. Social contact is facilitated, children can access advice, education, support and information. Increasingly, hardware with software applications (apps) are used to help CYP manage health conditions and access online learning.

2.3   At the same time, parents and carers, CYP, educational professionals, health professionals, academics and politicians have expressed concern that the amount of time CYP spend engaged in screen-based activities may be detrimental to their physical and mental health.

2.4   There are also concerns about the content that CYP are viewing and its impact on the mental health of CYP. Some internet content is clearly inappropriate or harmful for children and yet they may still be able to access it should they seek it, or may inadvertently access it.

3. New research on screen-based activities

3.1 Researching the effect of screen-based activities on mental health is complicated. Many factors affect mental health and it can be difficult to disentangle these factors from any effect caused by screen or social media use. Naturally all research has cost and time limitations and therefore cannot cover all related topics. Moreover, not all the necessary data are available.

3.2 As UK CMOs we present a report of independent research examining whether published reviews of evidence examine connections between a number of screen-based activities and positive or negative effects on CYP's mental health. This report was commissioned through the National Institute for Health Research Policy Research Programme, and conducted by experienced researchers at University College London. It is available at http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=3748

3.3 The research provides valuable information about the type of scientific studies which have been undertaken to date. It suggests how research could be carried out in the future to better explore the relationship between screen-based activities and CYP's mental health.

3.4 This research does not present evidence of a causal relationship between screen-based activities and mental health problems. Some research has found associations between screen-based activities and negative effects such as increased risk of anxiety or depression.

3.5 This means that we do not have clear evidence. It means that an association has been observed but cause and effect are not yet fully understood – it could be, for example, that CYP who already have mental health problems are more likely to spend more time on social media.

3.6 So, an association has been seen between those who engage in screen-based activities more frequently and/or over longer periods, and mental health problems. However, it is not clear that the screen-based activities are the cause of those problems.

4. Taking a precautionary approach

4.1   Even though no causal effect is evident from existing research between screen-based activities, or the amount of time spent using screens, and any particular negative effect, it does not mean that there is no effect. It is still wise to take a precautionary approach. This needs to be balanced, however, against the potential benefits that CYP can derive from their screen-based activities.

4.2   Under General Data Protection Regulation, in the UK only children aged 13 or over are able provide their own legal consent. Most social media companies have set an age restriction of 13 years of age to access and use their services. The UK CMOs support this.

5. UK Chief Medical Officers' advice for parents and carers on Children and Young People's screen-based activities

5.1   There is a large volume of international research published on various activities CYP undertake and the impact these activities have on their health and development. This includes research about diet, physical activity and sleep. We know that some activities are strongly associated with healthy development, such as good quality, regular sleep and quality time spent with families. These and many other factors supersede screen time in their importance for ensuring the best start in life. It is pertinent, however, to consider the impact of screen time as factors influence and interplay with each other; screen time can displace health promoting activities, and families should try to find a healthy balance.

5.2   Our advice emphasises consideration of screen time and screen-based activities in the context of CYP's healthy development. This advice is broadly in line with recent advice for parents and clinicians from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. It has also been informed by the American Academy of Pediatrics who produced recommendations for children's media use, based on available research and their expert opinion. Our advice is available at the end of this document.

6. Next steps

6.1   We are confident that the research we present adds to the scientific understanding of the relationship between screen-based activities and CYP's mental health, and will prompt further exploration of this topic.

6.2   We note that several issues are at times conflated in discussion. We recognise the following as distinct issues, though they are, at times, interconnected;

- Screen-time

- Internet (including social media) content

- Persuasive design

6.3   We hope that our advice (provided at the end of this document) will give parents and carers (and CYP) some easy to follow tips that are likely to lead to a healthier life.

6.4   The UK CMOs recommend that:

1. The UK Council for Internet Safety should:

- work with the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health over the next 12 months to expand and update their framework Education for a connected world

- invite a health minister to join their board; and

- invite clinicians to join their board.

2. The Department for Education (England) must continue their good work and move as swiftly as possible to introduce the compulsory subjects of relationships education (primary), relationships and sex education (secondary) and health education (all phases) including content on internet safety and online harms. The Devolved Administrations; Wales' Education and Public Services, Northern Ireland's Department of Education (DENI) and Education Scotland - should introduce similar compulsory rules.

3. Our children have a right to be safe and the technology industry have a duty of care. It is imperative that the technology industry proactively acts in the interests of users, as well as shareholders. We support the Government's intention to legislate to set clear expectations of the technology industry. (By 'technology industry' we mean technology industry stakeholders who create or develop products mainly for use by the public e.g.

hardware (smart phones, tablets etc.) and software and online services (social media, apps)).

4. In advance of this planned legislation, the technology industry should now establish a voluntary code of conduct addressing how they safeguard CYP on their sites. They should involve civil society and independent experts. Potential areas for inclusion are:

- clear terms of use that children can understand

- enforcing their own terms and conditions and to work with government to put in place effective age verification

- recognising the 'precautionary approach' in developing structures and remove addictive capabilities

- ensuring appropriate age specific adverts only, focussing on help and where to access support

- ensuring that no normalisation of harmful behaviour (such as bullying and self-harming) occurs.

- ongoing work about safety issues including, bullying and grooming.

5. Vendors of 'smart' hardware have a responsibility to assist those who purchase smart hardware for children's use to ensure that the hardware has appropriate child safety features activated. Vendors should recommend child security features to the purchaser, and advise and assist them in implementing these.

6. The technology industry must share data they hold in an anonymised form with recognised and registered public sector researchers for ethically agreed research, in order to improve our scientific evidence base and understanding.

7. The Chief Scientific Advisor for the Department of Health and Social Care (England) should convene a research seminar to identify the avenues for undertaking and funding future research in this area. This needs to involve the four nations, other research funders and the technology industry. The technology industry should contribute to funding the required independent research over the next decade.

7. Advice for parents and carers

7.1   We encourage parents and carers to agree boundaries, outside of school and educational use, with CYP around online behaviours and time spent using screens. Studies have reported that CYP are worried about their parent's screen use and want them to engage with them, and so adults can lead by example through not using screens excessively in front of children and behaving online as they would in person.

7.2   We commend the discussion questions for families produced by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health to help them make decisions about their screen use:

- Is your family's screen time under control?

- Does screen use interfere with what your family want to do?

- Does screen use interfere with sleep?

- Are you able to control snacking during screen time?

7.3   Many organisations are working to support parents and carers in keeping CYP safe online. If they, or any professionals working with children, would like to further explore advice on a healthy approach to screen based activities, the following sites contain information and tools:
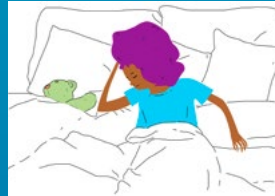
- The UK Council for Internet Safety has developed a framework to equip children and young people for digital life and guidance for parents on minimising their child's risk of online harms.

- The UK Safer Internet Centre has developed a platform where people can report harmful content online if they are not satisfied with the result of their report to social media providers. For illegal content, reports should be made to the police and online to the Internet Watch Foundation.

- The UK Safer Internet Centre have partnered with Childnet International to create specific guidance on Keeping under 5s safe online.

- The Professionals Online Safety Helpline

- 360 degree safe

UK Chief Medical Officers' advice for parents and carers on Children and Young People's screen and social media use

Technology can be a wonderful thing but too much time sitting down or using mobile devices can get in the way of important, healthy activities. Here are some tips for balancing screen use with healthy living.

Sleep matters

Getting enough, good quality sleep is very important. Leave phones outside the bedroom when it is bedtime.

Education matters

Make sure you and your children are aware of, and abide by, their school's policy on screen time.

Safety when out and about

Advise children to put their screens away while crossing the road or doing an activity that needs their full attention.

Family time together

Screen-free meal times are a good idea – you can enjoy face-to-face conversation, with adults giving their full attention to children.

Sharing sensibly

Talk about sharing photos and information online and how photos and words are sometimes manipulated. Parents and carers should never assume that children are happy for their photos to be shared. For everyone – when in doubt, don't upload!

Keep moving!

Everyone should take a break after a couple of hours sitting or lying down using a screen. It's good to get up and move about a bit. #sitlessmovemore
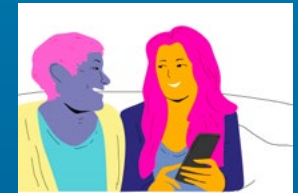
Talking helps

Talk with children about using screens and what they are watching. A change in behaviour can be a sign they are distressed – make sure they know they can always speak to you or another responsible adult if they feel uncomfortable with screen or social media use.

Use helpful phone features

Some devices and platforms have special features – try using these features to keep track of how much time you (and with their permission, your children) spend looking at screens or on social media.

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