

Social media and teen mental health: confusing correlation with causation

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Parents and teachers alike have been bombarded by claims about the negative impacts of social media on adolescents' mental health. However, recent findings suggest that we have been too quick to jump to conclusions.

Communication has moved online; keeping up with events and maintaining relationships with friends and family is becoming more and more dependent on social media platforms. For many, social media is not only a "social facilitator", but also a source of news. Indeed, a recent survey indicated that a third of US adults often get their news from Facebook. Social media clearly plays a critical role in society today.

Children and adolescents are not only exploring new social terrain in "real life"; they are now also faced with the complex task of communicating and building relationships via multiple social media platforms. This has led to worries and concerns about cyberbullying and an increase in feelings of loneliness and rejection, in a world where "like" is king. There is certainly some cause for unease about the influence of social media use on teenagers' mental health, given evidence showing vulnerabilities in adolescents' brain and social development.

Unfortunately, research on the impact of social media use on teenagers' mental health has produced unclear evidence, leading to confusion about the best ways to support young people. Many of the studies have benefited from large sample sizes as they are conducted using measures from much broader, previously collected surveys. Large, representative sample sizes are important in making conclusions about the general population of adolescents, however a small correlation in a large dataset is a relatively insubstantial finding.

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A national survey in the US involving over half a million teenagers found that for girls, an increase in symptoms of depression was related to an increase in use of social media. However, this relationship accounted for 0.36% of the variance in depressive symptoms, meaning 99.64% of the samples' depressive symptoms were not related to social media use. Small correlations found in large-scale studies show that it is too simplistic to conclude that social media use has a negative impact on young people.

Another issue is that some surveys might only include one question about social media use, which renders it impossible to make meaningful conclusions about what is driving a potential relationship between social media use and mental health. Based on the evidence from the large-scale survey data, we cannot conclude *how* social media use is related to mental health issues in adolescence or

the direction of this relationship, i.e. does using social media cause an increase in mental health issues or does an increase in mental health issues cause young people to turn to social media? This question is yet to be answered.

While the effects on children's and adolescents' mental health are not yet fully understood, there is no denying that social media plays a critical role in forming and maintaining relationships in today's society. Therefore, rather than urging parents and teachers to restrict or even ban social media use, we should focus on providing young people with the support they need.

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For example, the BBC recently launched an app that uses artificial intelligence to monitor the language a child is using, so that it can offer advice or encourage children to talk to trusted adults if it detects signs of negative mood. Such services could help to identify children who may be suffering from mental health problems, as well as those at risk of becoming victims of cyberbullying.

Considering the weak, correlational evidence, it is more effective to support individuals who are at risk for mental health problems than to impose a general ban on the use of social media for all children and adolescents. This approach will help us to guide young people as they navigate through their increasingly technology-dependent lives.

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