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### The impact of social media on adolescents' mental health

Valkenburg, P.M.; van der Wal, A.; Beyens, I.

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## ESSAY 4

# THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ADOLESCENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

University of Amsterdam:  
Professor Patti M. Valkenburg, Professor of Media, Young People and Society  
Dr. Amber van der Wal, university lecturer  
Dr. Ine Beyens, university lecturer

### The impact of social media on adolescents' mental health

Authors:

Professor Patti M. Valkenburg, Professor of Media, Young People and Society, University of Amsterdam

Dr. Amber van der Wal, university lecturer, University of Amsterdam

Dr. Ine Beyens, university lecturer, University of Amsterdam

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# 1. The issue at hand

Adolescents in the Netherlands spend an average of six hours a day on their mobile phones, two and a half hours of which is spent on social media<sup>3</sup>. On average, adolescents switch between five different social media platforms<sup>4</sup> in search of entertainment (TikTok), to chat with their friends (Snapchat), to communicate with their parents (WhatsApp) or to share what is happening in their lives (Instagram, BeReal). This heavy use of social media raises certain questions. One of the most important of these is this: how is the use of these media affecting the mental health of adolescents? Are social media delivering mainly joy or mainly sorrow through the screens of our adolescents? Which adolescents are most vulnerable? And what can parents, schools, teachers and the government do to counter any potentially negative impact of social media? The answers to these questions form the core of this essay.

We will start this essay by taking a look at the insights we have gained through scientific research. It has been shown, for example, that the mental health of adolescents has deteriorated since the 1960s. We will explore the potential causes for this, and we will consider the role social media play in this. In doing so, we will focus on international research, as well as on our own findings through [Project AWeSome](#). Standing for Adolescents, Wellbeing and Social media,

Project AWeSome is one of the first long-running studies in this field in the Netherlands. The quotes from adolescents included in this essay originate from interviews conducted over the course of 2022 and 2023 with adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18<sup>1,2</sup>. To conclude, we will consider the societal consequences of social media, focusing in particular on the role of parents, teachers, public authorities and policymakers.

This essay is about mental health, which is a two-dimensional concept. On the one hand, this concept means the absence of mental health problems, such as anxiety, symptoms of depression and psychosomatic issues. On the other hand, it means the presence of wellbeing: feeling satisfied with your life and being happy. The first dimension — the absence of any mental health problems — is self-explanatory, as these problems are diametrically opposed to mental health. The second dimension is more complex, because it is completely normal to feel unhappy or less satisfied with your life from time to time<sup>5</sup>, even though you can still be in good mental health despite these dips. In essence, the second dimension is about an individual's capacity to regain balance, learning to regulate feelings of unhappiness and dissatisfaction over time so that they eventually disappear<sup>5,6</sup>.

**Interviewer:** “What impact is social media having on you?”

**Girl (15):** “I feel happier because I only follow things that I like, and that give me joy.”

**Boy (15):** “Social media makes me feel a little sad about all the awful stuff that is happening in the world. Without social media, you'd be less aware of that.”<sup>1,2</sup>



## 2. The mental health of adolescents is deteriorating

Studies suggesting that the mental health of adolescents is deteriorating are published on a regular basis<sup>7,8</sup>. Newspaper headlines tell us there is a ‘mental health crisis’ or ‘mental health pandemic’ among our young people<sup>9</sup>. Publications like these would have us believe that the increase in mental health issues is a recent phenomenon. However, this view is not quite in line with reality, because the deterioration of mental health actually started several decades ago. A comparison of data on American adolescents aged between 14 and 16 gathered over the period from 1948 to 1989, for example, reveals a striking rise in mental health issues<sup>10</sup>. Across different periods stretching from 1983 to 2003, researchers have found a rise in such issues among adolescents in a range of countries, including the United States, Sweden and China<sup>8</sup>.

In the Netherlands too, mental health issues are on the rise among adolescents, in any case between 1983 and 2003<sup>11,12</sup> and between 1990 and 2019<sup>13</sup>. However, the increase is less marked than in other countries, such as the United States<sup>14,15</sup>. While mental health issues in adolescents remained relatively stable between 2012 and 2016, there was a further rise between 2016 and 2020<sup>16</sup>. This may be due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>17</sup>. Although, two years later in 2022, this rise showed no signs of slowing down<sup>18</sup>. That year, 30% of adolescents in the Netherlands aged between 11 and 16 reported that they were struggling with mental health problems<sup>19</sup>. In addition, research by the Trimbos Institute revealed that 23% of young adults aged between 18 and

24 have suffered a depressive episode in their lives<sup>11</sup>. These figures show that a considerable percentage of Dutch young people experience mental health struggles and deserve our attention. It is high time we set out to find what is causing this.

### 2.1 The causes of this deterioration

The scientific literature offers at least 15 possible causes to explain the deterioration in mental health (see Table 1). One frequently suggested cause is the rapidly declining importance of religion since the 1970s, leaving adolescents — and adults alike — without a sense of purpose and connection in their lives. Another cause that goes hand in hand with the decline of religion is the increasing importance of individualism: the belief that everyone is able — obliged, even — to shape their own life and that people exist independently from one another<sup>20</sup>. Individualism brings with it a loss of certainties and clear frameworks. That can negatively affect the mental health of some vulnerable people, because not everyone finds it easy to live without a clear framework<sup>20</sup>. Another possible cause is the greater emphasis on performance, status and wealth<sup>21</sup>. Mental health issues are more prominent in societies that attach greater importance to extrinsic values, such as financial success, status and physical attractiveness. An emphasis on values of this kind can set standards that are unrealistic or unachievable for some adolescents. The resulting gap between their expectations and reality can negatively impact their mental health<sup>22,23</sup>.

**Table1. Causes identified for the deterioration of mental health in adolescents**

1. Broader definition of mental health issues (ca. 1960)
2. Broadening of criteria for diagnosis (ca. 1960)
3. Greater collective awareness of mental health issues (ca. 1960)
4. Decline of negative stereotypes about mental health issues (ca. 1960)
5. Increase of mental health issues among parents (ca. 1960)
6. Decline of religion (ca. 1970)
7. Rise of individualism (ca. 1970)
8. Greater emphasis on extrinsic objectives: financial success, status and beauty (ca. 1980)
9. Shift towards knowledge economy in prosperous countries (ca. 1980)
10. Decline of social play in early youth (ca. 1980)
11. Increase of school stress among adolescents (ca. 1980)
12. Changing media environment (violence, consumerism, pessimism) (ca. 1990)
13. Increasing concern among adolescents about their future (ca. 2010)
14. Smartphones and social media (ca. 2010)
15. COVID-19 lockdowns (2020)

Another cause for the rise in mental health problems is the broader definition of what constitutes a mental health problem since the 1960s<sup>24</sup>. Before that time, extramural mental health care was barely existent, and mental illness was only recognized in its most extreme form, such as psychosis. This broader definition came paired with a broadening of the criteria for diagnosis and increasing societal awareness of mental health issues<sup>25</sup>. This decade also marked the start of a decline in negative stigmas surrounding mental health issues<sup>26</sup>, leaving adolescents free to admit at an earlier stage that they were struggling with their mental health. Another cause cited by researchers is the decline of social play through which young people have traditionally formed friendships, learned to give and take and learned to be assertive<sup>27</sup>.

In addition, researchers have identified increased concern among young people about their future<sup>11</sup>, as well as an increase in mental health issues among their parents<sup>7</sup>, who also more readily admit to struggling with their mental health than previous generations<sup>11</sup>. Finally, another cause was found in the 1990s — long before the arrival of social media — in the form of the changing media environment adolescents find themselves in, with a stream of visual violence, consumerism and pessimism coming their way<sup>20</sup>. What's more, this changing media environment also offered them inescapable opportunities to compare themselves to unrealistically perfect celebrities and models<sup>20,28</sup>.

Even though myriad causes have been suggested for the decline in mental health, not all of these causes have

been investigated equally systematically. This is less the case for the 'educational stress hypothesis'<sup>29</sup>. This hypothesis argues that the shift towards knowledge economies in prosperous countries over the past few decades has made the life opportunities of adolescents more dependent on their educational performance. As a consequence, they may experience more stress at school, which may lead to a rise in mental health problems<sup>30</sup>. Swedish researcher Björn Högberg, who has compared the mental health of adolescents in 33 countries<sup>30</sup>, is one of the proponents of this hypothesis. As expected, he found that adolescents in more prosperous countries experienced more stress as a result of their schoolwork. In addition, the effect of school stress on mental health in these countries was greater than in less prosperous countries.

In the Netherlands, the number of adolescents experiencing stress at school has always been well below the international average, although there has been a significant drop in that position over the past decade<sup>19</sup>. By 2017, the school stress experienced by our adolescents was comparable to the international average, according to the Utrecht HBSC study, and by 2021, there had been a further rise in this level of stress<sup>19</sup>. Parents and children in the Netherlands are attaching ever greater importance to the best possible grades and the highest possible level of education<sup>19</sup>. Within Project AWeSome too, we have found that adolescents cite 'school/homework' as the main cause of any stress they experience (see Figure 1), especially when compared to five other causes, including their home situation and social media<sup>2</sup>.

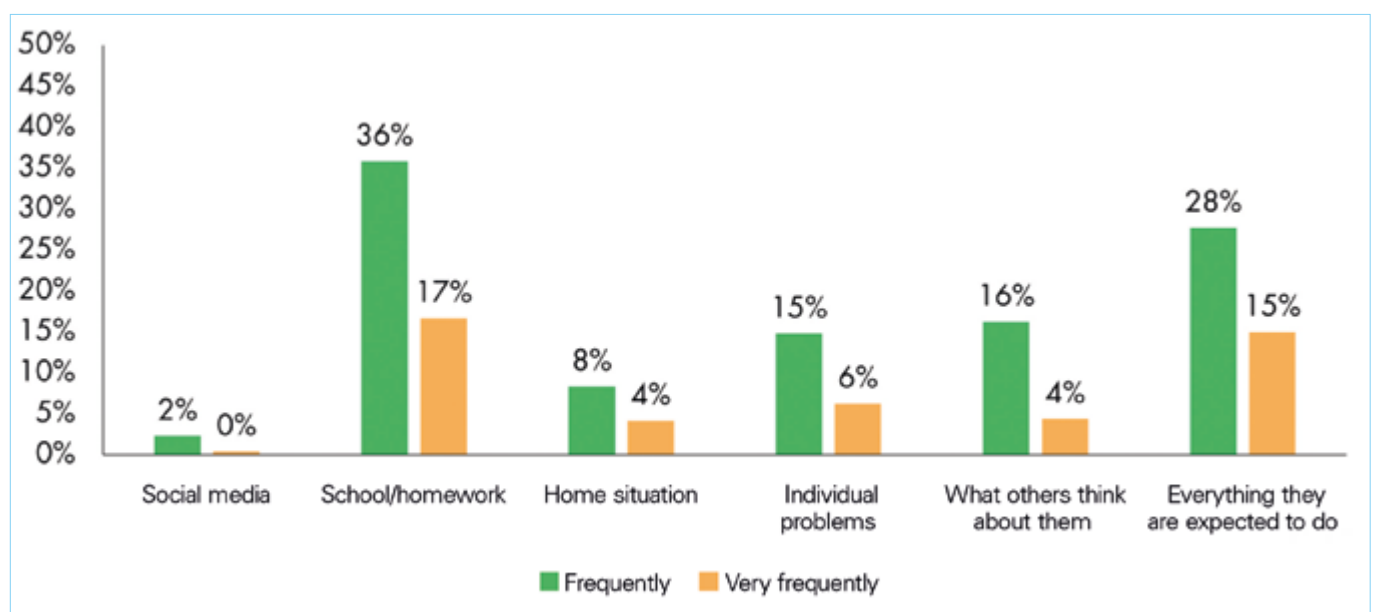


Figure 1. Causes of stress among adolescents aged 14-18 in the Netherlands (Project AWeSome, 2023).

## 2.2 The gender gap in mental health

One thing that stands out in the literature is that girls report more mental health issues than boys in nearly all studies<sup>8, 11, 31</sup>. In fact, this 'gender gap' has been evident in most countries ever since the 1980s<sup>8, 31</sup>. Paradoxically, girls in prosperous countries and in countries with greater gender equality experience poorer mental health than girls in less prosperous countries and countries with lower gender equality. This was revealed in a study by Campbell et al. comparing the gender gap between 77 countries<sup>31</sup>. In their study, the researchers suggest that this gap exists because societal expectations about gender equality in prosperous countries are not in line with the everyday experience of girls. Consequently, girls in these countries find it more difficult to achieve their goals than girls in poorer countries, negatively impacting on their mental health<sup>31</sup>. An alternative possibility is that girls in countries with greater gender equality are torn between conflicting expectations: they feel pressure to perform and be independent, while also needing to comply with traditionally female standards and values, such as beauty and a caring nature.

The gap between boys and girls also appears to have widened during and after the COVID-19 period<sup>17, 19</sup>. In 2021, girls in the Netherlands reported significantly more mental health issues than in 2017, compared to a lower increase in boys<sup>19</sup>. Life satisfaction also declined in girls over the same period, significantly more than it did in boys<sup>19</sup>. The fact that the mental health of girls is poorer than that of boys might be down to girls experiencing more school stress than boys<sup>29</sup>. Our own research shows that girls feel around twice as much stress about school/homework than boys<sup>2</sup>, even though in general, girls obtain higher grades at secondary school than boys<sup>32</sup>. On top of that, girls also tend to feel more stressed about the expectations of their parents and teachers surrounding their future<sup>19</sup> and about unpleasant interpersonal experiences, such as arguments with their parents, friends and love interests<sup>33</sup>. All of these forms of stress may serve as an important cause for their poorer mental health.

**Boy (14):** "Social media has helped me discover who I am, and what I like and don't like. Using it allows me to learn more about myself."

**Girl (14):** "You shouldn't compare yourself to others on social media, but that's easier said than done. It has been a difficult time for me. I've been seeing a psychologist for a while..."<sup>1,2</sup>

## 3. The role played by social media

Ever since adolescents started embracing social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok en masse<sup>34</sup>, researchers have been turning to the use of platforms to explain the deterioration of mental health<sup>35</sup>.<sup>37</sup> This shouldn't come as a surprise. The potential risks to which adolescents are exposed has only grown in line with the rapid rise in the use of these social media. These risks not only reside in more screentime, but also in the fact that this screentime increasingly occurs out of sight of parents, and is more and more often driven by algorithmically controlled recommendation systems. Such systems can cater to the preferences of adolescents with frightening precision, but can equally play on their vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the deterioration in the mental health of adolescents appears to have picked up speed over the past decade, coinciding exactly with an inversely proportional rise in social media use among adolescents.

American researchers Jean Twenge and Jonathan Haidt regard the increased use of social media as the main explanation for the decline in mental health among adolescents<sup>35,37</sup>. In their studies, they have found a weak statistical connection between high social media use and low mental health among adolescents. Their research is receiving a lot of attention both inside and outside the academic world, partly because they write persuasive and accessible books and blogs for a wide audience. But what this wide audience is less aware of is that most of their findings are based on data gathered at one specific moment in time. This lack of a time element in their studies makes it impossible to determine whether the use of social media is a cause or consequence of poorer mental health. After all, adolescents with mental health issues may be turning to social media more often to find information or access support from their peers. Platforms such as TikTok, for example, offer countless therapeutic videos that find an eager audience among young people. For adolescents like these, it is perfectly possible that their mental health is affecting their use of social media, instead of the other way round.

### 3.1 The research is not unequivocal

Over the past decade, hundreds of empirical studies have been published about the relationship between social media use and the mental health of adolescents. In fact, so much research is now available that no fewer than 25 meta-analyses have been published on this topic over the last three years<sup>38</sup>. These reviews and meta-analyses

have revealed that the impact of social media use on mental health is minor<sup>38</sup>. The vast majority of these meta-analyses cautiously interpret this impact exactly as it is: 'minor'. However, certain other meta-analyses based on the same empirical studies interpret this minor impact as 'substantial'<sup>35</sup>, 'severe'<sup>39</sup> or even 'harmful'<sup>40</sup>. Such differences in the interpretation of the same statistical impact are nothing new. Ever since the 1980s, for example, there has been a fierce academic debate about the impact of violence in games on aggression<sup>41,42</sup>. Often, the scholars involved do not so much disagree on the exact extent of these effects, but rather on the exact way in which these effects should be interpreted.

The thing that is often overlooked in these kinds of debates is that statistics representing the extent of an impact are generally determined at an aggregate level. In other words, they represent the average impact of social media use on youth mental health. Aggregated statistics of this kind may give the impression that the impact of social media is minor on all adolescents. However, every individual in their right mind knows that this cannot possibly be the case. No two adolescents are the same. Even within their own families, parents see one child respond in a totally different manner to what is happening around them compared to the other. Aggregated data are based on large groups of adolescents, each of which differs greatly in their sensitivity to social influences in general<sup>43</sup>, and to social media in particular<sup>44</sup>. These differences are not adequately reflected in the aggregate data reported by empirical studies and meta-analyses.

### 3.2 No two adolescents are the same

Once we assume that the wellbeing of some adolescents is positively and that of others negatively impacted by social and other media, both the optimistic and pessimistic conclusions about the impact of social media use may well be true. The optimistic conclusions may simply pertain to other adolescents than the pessimistic conclusions. In our own Project AWeSome, we have demonstrated this individual impact of social media use on several occasions<sup>45,47</sup>. We did so by following a large group of young people every day over the course of several months, via their phones. Using this method, we found that most adolescents experienced little or no impact of social media use on their wellbeing. But for around 10%, social media use has a positive impact, while for a different group of 10%, it had a negative impact<sup>48</sup>.



There is no need to be concerned about the adolescents for whom social media use has no impact or a positive impact on their wellbeing. However, there is a need to be concerned about the group of adolescents who experience a negative impact. When we realize that there are around 54 million adolescents (aged 12-18) in Europe and once we extrapolate our 10% to that group, we are left with the fact that the wellbeing of 5.4 million adolescents could be harmed by social media use. That is a figure we need to take seriously. It is also a figure that might explain why the mental health of adolescents has deteriorated at a faster rate over the past decade than before. The negative impact that social media use is having on this group comes on top of the 14 other causes that were identified long before the advent of social media.

Determining the exact individual impact that social media are having on adolescents can help us resolve the contradictions between optimistic and pessimistic interpretations of that impact. On the other hand, it can also help us understand when, why and for whom the use of social media is having a positive or negative

impact on mental health. Instead of asking ourselves whether the use of social media is or is not causing mental health issues, a better question would be why it is that some adolescents get on fine in the online world, while others experience problems. It is also important that we identify the adolescents who are experiencing problems through their use of social media. Armed with that knowledge, we will be able to target prevention and intervention strategies at this specific group.

Over the past few years, research has been carried out into the so-called 'risk' and 'resilience' factors that leave adolescents vulnerable or resilient to the detrimental impact of social media on their mental health. Several meta-analyses suggest that young people who are vulnerable offline due to other factors that harm their mental health are also at a higher risk online<sup>49,50</sup>. Adolescents who feel anxious or stressed, who are being bullied or who have a tendency to compare themselves socially are more vulnerable to the impact of social media on their mental health than other adolescents<sup>37, 51, 52</sup>. By the same token, adolescents who are resilient offline are also at a lower risk online.

**Girl (14):** “ I’m much more sociable. I’m also in touch with friends much more often these days.”

**Boy (16):** “Personally, TikTok has completely destroyed my attention span, so back in March, I thought: you know what, I quit. It really wasn’t much fun.”

**Girl (16):** “I don’t necessarily feel any impact, I don’t feel more insecure, or more secure – neither, really.”<sup>1,2</sup>

As with research into social media in general, research into the risk and resilience factors of social media often falls back on aggregate data. Generally speaking, this research offers only modest evidence of differences between broad groups, such as boys and girls. Even though girls generally spend more time on social media, report mental health issues more frequently and compare themselves to others more often, there is no conclusive evidence of their increased

vulnerability to the negative impact of social media. The differences that have been observed are often minor, meaning they don't apply to all girls. Once again, any negative impact is mainly felt by girls who are already vulnerable. That said, the minor gender difference means that some boys too are vulnerable to the impact of social media. That much is also clear from what the boys quoted in this section are saying.



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## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

There is no denying the fact that the mental health of adolescents has deteriorated over the past few decades. It also seems to be the case that this decline has accelerated over the last ten years. Some of the causes we have mentioned in this essay apply at a collective level, such as the increased emphasis in prosperous societies on extrinsic values like financial success, status and beauty. Other causes are presenting at the individual level. Adolescents tend to start struggling with their mental health when they are experiencing stress at school, for example, or when they have parents with mental health problems. These collective and individual factors may reinforce each other. When adolescents are already more vulnerable due to certain factors, negative experiences on social media can be extra detrimental to their mental health.

The vast majority of adolescents acknowledge that there are positives and negatives to using social media<sup>1,2</sup>. They experience joy and sorrow through their screens. Having a convenient way to stay in touch with their friends makes them happy, but they admit that using social media can also leave them feeling insecure and upset<sup>1</sup>. Precisely because social media use is a double-edged sword, regulating it is proving to be extremely tricky. Nobody wants to deny adolescents the positives of social media. That leaves us with an important question: how do we help young people maximize the positives of social media while minimizing the negatives? The considerations we believe parents, schools and teachers, public authorities and policymakers should bear in mind are listed below.

### 4.1 Parents

Adolescents need their parents to help them build resilience to the irresistible temptations and potential risks of social media. We have long assumed that media literacy can help our young people protect themselves against any possible risks. But knowledge alone isn't enough. The AI-based recommendation engines of the latest generation of platforms are so savvy that they can easily undermine the agency that vulnerable young people have. One of the consequences of this is that adolescents are tempted to use their phones at inappropriate times and places, such as over dinner, before going to bed, during the night and during in-person conversations. What's more, they often continue to do so in spite of any ban imposed by their parents. During our

interviews, some adolescents showed us screen times of 8, 9, and in a single case, 14 hours. This is excessive, and they are well aware of this fact themselves.

One important task reserved for parents is to teach their children self-control, which helps them learn to deal with the temptations and risks in their surroundings. Children and adolescents need to learn that there are standards and rules they should stick to. This applies all the more to phone use, while also presenting an extra challenge to parents. For other things, such as doing homework, not lying and setting the table, it is relatively easy to set and enforce rules. To both parents and kids, these rules fall within the 'moral' (lying is bad) or 'conventional' (homework is part of life) domain of bringing up children. Phone use is different. To parents, this often falls under the 'prudential' domain: it may present certain risks to adolescents, not dissimilar to smoking and alcohol<sup>53</sup>. To adolescents, however, their phone falls under their 'personal' domain; the same domain as their friends and clothing. The problem is that this domain is where young people resist authority and interference by their parents. When it comes to clothes and friends, you better stay out of it as a parent — and the same applies to phones.

Even so, setting clear and consistently enforced rules is crucial for matters in the personal domain of adolescents: no phones at meal times, no phones during in-person conversations, and no phones in the bedroom. It is also important to agree clear rules for phone and social media use at the earliest possible stage — even before a child gets their first phone, for example. Consistent enforcement of these rules helps a certain behaviour become second nature to children and adolescents. The rules become a habit, making complaints and bargaining a thing of the past. On the other hand, when a rule is not enforced consistently, there may be no end to the amount of resistance or bargaining an adolescent engages in, leaving parents barely able to reverse the phone habits they will soon develop.

### 4.2 Schools and teachers

Research in various countries has shown how phone use — both at school and outside of it — affects the educational performance of adolescents. A meta-analysis based on 39 empirical studies found a minor negative link between phone use and performance at school<sup>54</sup>. As underlined earlier, it is important to take these minor



links seriously, as they may mean that for a small share of adolescents, phone use negatively impacts their educational performance. Even more importantly, we need to acknowledge that the current generation of social media brings significant potential for distraction. Our research found that the negative impact of social media as a source of distraction or procrastination<sup>55</sup> is many times greater than the negative impact on wellbeing, self-confidence<sup>56</sup> and friendships between adolescents<sup>46</sup>. For that reason alone, it is important that mobile phones are banned from classrooms.

In principle, phone education at school is no different from phone education in a family setting. At school and in the classroom too, this education can only be effective if clear rules are consistently enforced. Within a school setting, there are two dimensions to this consistency: rules must be consistent over time (you can't be allowed a phone one day and not the next) and consistent between teachers (you can't be allowed a phone with some teachers and not with others). As is the case at home, it is important that teachers set the right example. In principle, the rules that apply to pupils should also apply to them.

One thing schools can do is set clear rules in terms of conduct and routines, in consultation with pupils and their parents. At a school that has its house in order, the sanctions for failure to comply with the rules are transparent. Everyone must also be clear about any exceptions to the rules. These exceptions must be understood by all parties and clearly formulated, to avoid any renegotiation or discussion<sup>57</sup>. An effective phone policy of this type can only be successful if everyone is fully behind it, including teachers, parents and pupils. And that takes time and dialogue. Some schools may opt for different behavioural rules and routines. Proper and comprehensive guidelines, based on the book 'Running the Room' by Tom Bennet, for example, may prove useful in this<sup>57</sup>.

### **4.3 Public authorities and policymakers**

Legal bans on phones in the classroom are in place or are being considered in a range of countries, including France, China, Finland and Australia. In the Netherlands too, phones will no longer be allowed in the classroom from January 2024 onward, unless they are essential to the subject matter. The Netherlands has not opted for a statutory ban, but for a guideline instead. We believe this is the right move, because it is naive to believe that a ban enshrined in law is a silver bullet. As such, it won't come

as a surprise that in countries that have introduced a legal ban on phones, schools regularly play fast and loose with the rules. In France, for example, schools themselves are responsible for enforcing the law. This would also be the case in the Netherlands if a legal ban were to be put in place. A ban of this type can offer schools an excuse to get rid of phones altogether by hiding behind the law. But if a ban is nothing more than that, it is just a symbolic piece of legislation that is doomed to fail, as evidenced by convincing insights from the educational literature.

As an alternative to banning phones in schools, certain countries and states are considering or implementing a complete ban on certain platforms. This is the case for TikTok in India, Nepal and the US state of Montana, for example. A complete ban of this kind would be at odds with various articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>59</sup>, which has been ratified by the Netherlands and all other EU countries. The Convention stipulates that children have the right to access these platforms to access the benefits they offer and share their opinions. According to the explanatory notes to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 'meaningful access to digital technologies can support children to realize the full range of their civil, political, cultural, economic and social rights.' (General Comment no. 25, Article 4, 2021)<sup>59</sup>.

The government have a responsibility to support parents and schools in the raising of children. They can achieve this by offering clear guidelines for both parties. In addition, it is important to regulate at the point where any risks first manifest, being on the platforms themselves. In fact, a broad consensus exists among EU countries on that point. The digital environment in which our children find themselves has witnessed a dramatic transformation over the past few years. In our conversations with adolescents, for example, we noticed that some of them have been left more vulnerable in AI-driven digital environments. In 2021, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) expanded its typology of the possible risks underage children face on these platforms. The OECD not only identified risks in terms of content, contact, conduct and consumer rights, but also advanced technological risks, privacy risks and risks to the mental health of adolescents<sup>60</sup>. All of these risks deserve the attention of policymakers.

Over the past few years, several laws have been introduced to protect children and adolescents in the digital world. Unfortunately, as we speak, effective enforcement of these laws remains lacking. The profiling

of minors on platforms has been banned under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) since 2018, for example, but still takes place regardless on a daily basis. Even though as researchers, we strictly comply with the GDPR, platforms clearly feel no need to do so. Fortunately, the European Commission has introduced flagship legislation in the form of the Digital Services Act (DSA). In 2023, in line with this Act, the European Commission ordered the largest platforms to recognize the risks identified by the OECD and offer an assessment of how to avoid or mitigate these. What sets the DSA apart from previous legislation is that it outlines a clear procedure for enforcement.

To conclude, as we have argued in this essay, by no means all children and adolescents are negatively impacted by the risks identified by the OECD. Nevertheless, it is important that we apply the precautionary principle<sup>61</sup> when it comes to minors. In line with this principle, the fact that the use of social media platforms can cause harm to minors should be sufficient justification to take measures to prevent or reduce such harm. Safeguarding the mental health of children and adolescents will require the attention and involvement of parents, schools, teachers and government. That said, platforms also need to take effective measures to encourage minors to use social media in a conscious, controlled and safe manner.



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*A range of authors were invited to provide the content of these essays. For that reason, the opinions and viewpoints contained in this essay are not necessarily the opinion of UNICEF the Netherlands.*