# Britain’s child mental health crisis deepens amid surge in problematic screen time



Britain is facing what consultant paediatrician Dr. Sanjiv Nichani describes as a “screendemic,” which he claims is significantly harming the mental health of children. According to Dr. Nichani, who was instrumental in establishing Leicester Children’s Hospital, the pervasive use of smartphones and social media presents a “real and present threat” to young people's well-being. This alarming assertion stems from his firsthand observations in clinical settings, where he has witnessed a disturbing trend: children displaying symptoms akin to behavioural addiction, coupled with profound developmental challenges.

The dramatic increase in children’s screen time between 2020 and 2022 has heightened this crisis. Dr. Nichani reported that toddlers he's treated often appear glazed and disconnected, drawn to devices rather than engaging in verbal communication. The increasing prevalence of social media among young people has been linked to rising issues of anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem, suggesting that these platforms can exacerbate pre-existing mental health problems.

Comparatively, studies from respected institutions reinforce Dr. Nichani’s concerns. Research conducted by Imperial College London during the COVID-19 pandemic indicated a notable increase in depressive symptoms among adolescents, exacerbated by their reliance on digital technology for social interaction during lockdowns. Furthermore, the World Health Organization highlighted a concerning trend—the percentage of adolescents experiencing problematic social media use rose from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022, underscoring the urgency for action.

As discussions on this topic gain momentum, the Centre for Social Justice has proffered recommendations for stronger governmental intervention. Among their proposals is an increase in the age of digital consent from 13 to 16, a move aimed at curbing the exploitation of young users' data. They also advocate for a ban on algorithms targeting those under 16 and for schools to implement smartphone-free zones to foster healthier learning environments.

Contrastingly, not all experts agree with blanket bans. Social psychologist Sonia Livingstone proposes a more nuanced approach, arguing for the significance of quality over quantity in children's screen time. Her perspective posits that while parental guidance is essential, it should involve empowering families through flexible rules rather than enacting stringent prohibitions. This presents a complex dilemma: how to foster an environment conducive to healthy childhood development while acknowledging the inevitable presence of technology in modern life.

The government’s apparent hesitance to implement decisive measures has raised concerns among practitioners and policymakers alike. Analysts suggest that without urgent and effective interventions, the current trajectory may lead to a more profound mental health crisis among the younger population. As Dr. Nichani aptly summarised, “American society doesn’t want to admit there’s a problem… but we need to take stock before it’s too late.”

The case of Molly Russell, a British teenager whose tragic suicide was linked to harmful online content, has further fueled the call for action. This incident highlights the pressing need for schools and parents alike to create a safe digital landscape for children, away from the harmful effects of unregulated screen time.

In light of these issues, it is evident that while technology is a vital aspect of modern life, its unchecked influence poses a significant risk to the mental health of future generations. A concerted effort to balance the benefits of digital interaction with the need for emotional and social fluency is more crucial than ever as society navigates this complex landscape.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2059810/doctor-warns-uks-screendemic-poisoning), [[2]](https://www.itv.com/news/central/2024-06-11/screendemic-warnings-that-babies-are-becoming-addicted-to-phone-screen-time)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2059810/doctor-warns-uks-screendemic-poisoning), [[3]](https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/251333/unveiling-impact-digital-technologies-adolescent-mental/), [[4]](https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/25-09-2024-teens--screens-and-mental-health)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2059810/doctor-warns-uks-screendemic-poisoning), [[5]](https://www.ft.com/content/0e2f6f8e-bb03-4fa7-8864-f48f576167d2)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2059810/doctor-warns-uks-screendemic-poisoning), [[6]](https://www.ft.com/content/9b928dc8-c873-4132-8cf8-916cc061a283)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2059810/doctor-warns-uks-screendemic-poisoning), [[7]](https://www.ft.com/content/c122775a-f664-4c06-90c2-eba077367757)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2059810/doctor-warns-uks-screendemic-poisoning> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.itv.com/news/central/2024-06-11/screendemic-warnings-that-babies-are-becoming-addicted-to-phone-screen-time> - Dr. Sanjiv Nichani, a leading consultant paediatrician from Leicester, has raised concerns about the impact of excessive smartphone and social media use on children's mental health, referring to it as a 'screendemic'. He highlights the significant increase in children's screen time between 2020 and 2022 and the alarming number of children exhibiting behaviors consistent with behavioral addiction. Dr. Nichani emphasizes the need for intervention to prevent potential mental health issues arising from this trend. ([itv.com](https://www.itv.com/news/central/2024-06-11/screendemic-warnings-that-babies-are-becoming-addicted-to-phone-screen-time?utm_source=openai))
3. <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/251333/unveiling-impact-digital-technologies-adolescent-mental/> - A study by Imperial College London investigated the relationship between digital technology use and adolescent mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research found clear increases in depression and anxiety symptoms among adolescents over the course of the pandemic, compared to pre-pandemic assessments. The study underscores the challenges faced by adolescents and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging their voices in discussions on mental health. ([imperial.ac.uk](https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/251333/unveiling-impact-digital-technologies-adolescent-mental/?utm_source=openai))
4. <https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/25-09-2024-teens--screens-and-mental-health> - The World Health Organization (WHO) reported a significant rise in problematic social media use among adolescents, increasing from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022. The study also highlighted that 12% of adolescents are at risk of problematic gaming. These findings raise concerns about the impact of digital technology on the mental health and well-being of young people, emphasizing the need for immediate and sustained action to address these issues. ([who.int](https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/25-09-2024-teens--screens-and-mental-health?utm_source=openai))
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/0e2f6f8e-bb03-4fa7-8864-f48f576167d2> - An article in the Financial Times discusses the deterioration of adolescent mental health since 2010, noting an increase in depression and feelings of worthlessness among teenagers. Experts like Jean Twenge suggest that the pervasive use of smartphones and social media may negatively impact mental health. The article also observes a decline in face-to-face interactions in favor of digital contact and suggests that reducing social media use could improve mental health. ([ft.com](https://www.ft.com/content/0e2f6f8e-bb03-4fa7-8864-f48f576167d2?utm_source=openai))
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/9b928dc8-c873-4132-8cf8-916cc061a283> - Thomas Mills High School in Suffolk, UK, implemented a strict ban on smartphones to address concerns over their impact on children's mental health. The ban was motivated by increasing evidence linking smartphone use to issues like depression, anxiety, and eating disorders among young people. The case of Molly Russell, a British teenager who committed suicide after viewing harmful online content, partly influenced the decision. ([ft.com](https://www.ft.com/content/9b928dc8-c873-4132-8cf8-916cc061a283?utm_source=openai))
7. <https://www.ft.com/content/c122775a-f664-4c06-90c2-eba077367757> - Social psychologist Sonia Livingstone advocates for a balanced approach to children's smartphone use, emphasizing the quality of screen time over quantity. She suggests that tech companies should be more responsible, proposing changes like turning off autoplay features. Livingstone supports empowering parents and children through guidance and flexible rules rather than strict bans, recognizing the complex impact of smartphones on mental health. ([ft.com](https://www.ft.com/content/c122775a-f664-4c06-90c2-eba077367757?utm_source=openai))