# Digital natives reject early smartphone use amid rising mental health concerns



The increasing scrutiny surrounding the smartphone use by children and teenagers has led many of those who grew up with technology to reconsider its role in their lives. A growing number of digital natives, like Sophie, now 18 and studying at the University of Edinburgh, reflect critically on their earlier enthusiasm for smartphones. In her case, early exposure to distressing content, including extreme violence and graphic material shared by peers, has forged a resolve against allowing her future children such access until adulthood. “Until you’re an adult and able to recognise the many ways in which people act deviantly to advance their own interests, you should not be online,” she asserts.

Sophie is not alone. Recent data indicates that nearly half of young people might prefer a world without the internet, with a similar number advocating for digital curfews. More than three-quarters report feeling worse about themselves after engaging with social media, highlighting the emotional toll these platforms can inflict. This distrust aligns with a broader trend of scepticism towards the technology many grew up with, driven in part by an alarming rise in issues such as cyberbullying and mental health struggles. Netflix's recent series, "Adolescence," has further fuelled discussion about the negative impact of social media on youth mental health and the troubling online misogyny that has emerged on various platforms.

Izzy Bouric, a 24-year-old artist, echoes these sentiments, criticising how the lines between childhood and adulthood have blurred on sites like Instagram and TikTok. “I was on [the children's game] Club Penguin at their age—what you could actually say was limited… and now you have 12-year-olds on Instagram reading Nazi comments,” she observes. Bouric, who felt overwhelmed by social media's pervasive negativity, has opted for a simpler life with a flip phone. She believes firmly that smartphones aren’t suitable for children until their brains have fully developed. “Your parents not knowing what you’re doing is not the safest thing in the world,” she adds, underscoring the need for greater parental involvement in online activities.

Concerns about smartphone use extend beyond emotional disturbances; they also implicate cognitive development. Tobias, a 20-year-old from Austria, experienced firsthand how smartphones altered social interactions among his peers. With friends absorbed in their screens, opportunities for genuine conversation declined sharply. “I found myself in moments of despair after watching short video content for two to three hours straight and wondering, ‘Wow, that went fast and I have no time left for things I actually want to do,’” he reflects. Recognising the impact these devices have on attention spans and mental wellbeing, Tobias advocates for limiting smartphone access to children.

Lethe, a student paramedic from Birmingham, articulates similar apprehensions. She observed marked differences in her friends’ behaviours after they gained access to smartphones—bullying incidents increased, and attention spans decreased. Now, she is unequivocal about her future parenting: her child would not receive a smartphone until at least age 16. Such caution is echoed by Nora, a 23-year-old project manager from Spain, who describes her own experiences with unwanted online advances and the toxic nature of online interactions. She is particularly worried about her younger brother, who is exposed to harmful messaging on platforms like TikTok.

In the political arena, legislation such as the Kids Online Safety Act aims to mitigate some of these risks. Introduced in Congress, this act seeks to impose a "duty of care" on tech companies, calling for increased privacy protections and restrictions on addictive features. While it has garnered bipartisan support and backing from major tech companies, critics warn that it could impose undue censorship on free speech, particularly against marginalized communities. This ongoing debate reflects a larger global movement towards safeguarding children online, coinciding with similar initiatives in various countries.

Social psychologists like Sonia Livingstone argue for a more measured approach to smartphone regulation, suggesting that the quality of screen time is more critical than the quantity. Livingstone proposes that tech companies enhance parental controls as well, which could empower families to navigate the digital landscape in a healthier manner. There is a mounting demand not only for improved corporate accountability but also for educational resources that help parents and children alike understand the complexities of digital life.

With high-profile figures, including Prince Harry, speaking out against the growing epidemic of anxiety and depression linked to social media use among youth, the conversation is shifting towards increased awareness and action. He emphasised the need for ethical accountability from social media platforms, advocating for proactive measures to protect young users.

As today's digital natives grow into adulthood, their experiences can inform a more thoughtful approach to technology use among younger generations. It is becoming increasingly clear that a balance must be struck, one that considers both the potential benefits of connectivity and the serious mental health challenges posed by constant digital engagement. This nuanced dialogue will undoubtedly shape the policies and practices surrounding youth and technology for years to come.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/25/my-parents-didnt-have-a-clue-why-many-digital-natives-would-not-give-their-kids-smartphones), [[2]](https://time.com/7288539/kids-online-safety-act-status-what-to-know/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/25/my-parents-didnt-have-a-clue-why-many-digital-natives-would-not-give-their-kids-smartphones), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/c122775a-f664-4c06-90c2-eba077367757), [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/cd5ab9d7b12dbbca8c3ab3be860cbf28)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/25/my-parents-didnt-have-a-clue-why-many-digital-natives-would-not-give-their-kids-smartphones), [[5]](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/09/social-media-lgbtq-teens-harms/679798/?utm_source=apple_news), [[6]](https://time.com/6211192/kids-phone-safety/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/25/my-parents-didnt-have-a-clue-why-many-digital-natives-would-not-give-their-kids-smartphones), [[2]](https://time.com/7288539/kids-online-safety-act-status-what-to-know/), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/c122775a-f664-4c06-90c2-eba077367757)
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* Paragraph 6 – [[5]](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/09/social-media-lgbtq-teens-harms/679798/?utm_source=apple_news), [[6]](https://time.com/6211192/kids-phone-safety/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/cd5ab9d7b12dbbca8c3ab3be860cbf28), [[5]](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/09/social-media-lgbtq-teens-harms/679798/?utm_source=apple_news)
* Paragraph 8 – [[6]](https://time.com/6211192/kids-phone-safety/)
* Paragraph 9 – [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/c122775a-f664-4c06-90c2-eba077367757), [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/cd5ab9d7b12dbbca8c3ab3be860cbf28)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/25/my-parents-didnt-have-a-clue-why-many-digital-natives-would-not-give-their-kids-smartphones> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://time.com/7288539/kids-online-safety-act-status-what-to-know/> - The Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA), initially stalled in 2024, was reintroduced in May 2025 and is under renewed consideration by Congress. Aimed at addressing children's privacy and mental health concerns stemming from social media and internet use, KOSA would require tech companies to exercise a "duty of care" to minimize harmful content exposure, including material related to eating disorders and bullying. The bill includes provisions to enhance parental controls and restrict features like autoplay and in-game purchases that promote addictive behaviors. Despite bipartisan support and backing from companies like Apple, Microsoft, and X (formerly Twitter), KOSA faces criticism for potentially enabling censorship. Groups like the ACLU and LGBTQ+ advocates argue that the bill could restrict free speech and expose vulnerable communities to targeted regulation. Concerns have been partially addressed in the revised bill, which now clarifies that it does not authorize content-based lawsuits. KOSA is currently awaiting further Congressional action and presidential approval from Donald Trump, with Donald Trump Jr. publicly supporting the bill. The legislation joins a broader global trend in online child protection, parallel to similar efforts in states like Utah and countries like Australia.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/c122775a-f664-4c06-90c2-eba077367757> - The debate on children's smartphone use often falls into two extremes: one side claims it harms mental health, advocating for strict bans, while the other sees it as an overblown moral panic. Social psychologist Sonia Livingstone posits a middle way, emphasizing that the quality of screen time is more significant than the quantity. Livingstone, instrumental in the UK's Online Safety Act, believes tech companies should be more responsible, suggesting changes like turning off autoplay features. She advocates for empowering parents and children through guidance and flexible rules rather than stringent bans, recognizing the complex impact of smartphones on mental health. Livingstone also stresses the need for constructive online experiences and responsible parental modeling. While recognizing the challenges, she supports a balanced, evidence-based approach to regulation, acknowledging that there is no single solution to youth anxiety but potential multiple contributory measures.
4. <https://apnews.com/article/cd5ab9d7b12dbbca8c3ab3be860cbf28> - Prince Harry addressed the Clinton Global Initiative in New York City, citing social media as a contributing factor to an "epidemic" of anxiety, depression, and social isolation among today's youth. He criticized these platforms for their addictive designs and the negative content they expose to children. Harry emphasized that corporate accountability should be heightened and shareholders should demand ethical standards and changes. His advocacy efforts include initiatives from the Archewell Foundation, such as The Parents Network, which supports those affected by online harms. He highlighted the importance of global efforts to ensure child safety online, including the upcoming conference in Bogotá. Harry also participated in other humanitarian events, advocating for causes connected to his late mother, Princess Diana. His message was positively received, inspiring a call to action to protect children and promote safe use of digital technology.
5. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/09/social-media-lgbtq-teens-harms/679798/?utm_source=apple_news> - The social-media industry is utilizing tactics similar to the historical approach by the tobacco industry by denying or obscuring the harm their products cause to teens. Despite mounting evidence showing the negative impact of social media on youth mental health, particularly body image, sleep, eating habits, and anxiety, companies like Meta claim their platforms are generally beneficial. Legislation is being proposed under the Kids Online Safety and Privacy Act (KOSPA) to mitigate these harms, requiring companies to ensure their platforms are safe for children without disadvantaging marginalized communities. Critics argue that regulation might strip away benefits for these groups, but substantial evidence reveals that social media disproportionately harms marginalized teens. Many tech executives severely restrict their own children's use of these platforms, highlighting a disingenuous stance towards wider public safety. There is a strong demand for regulatory action to protect children, supported by empirical research and youth testimony on the adverse effects of social media.
6. <https://time.com/6211192/kids-phone-safety/> - Parents today face the dilemma of deciding when to provide their children with a smartphone and how to manage its use. A significant percentage (43%) of kids own a smartphone by age 12. Experts in child development suggest waiting until middle school before giving a child a phone, ensuring that they can handle responsibility and keeping it simple with devices like flip phones or smartwatches. Parental controls are vital to safeguard younger children from exposure to inappropriate content and cyberbullying. Parents should guide kids, set usage boundaries, monitor online activities, and encourage discussions about potential online hazards. Creating a phone contract and modeling responsible phone usage can also help children adapt better to smartphone ownership.