# UK paediatrician warns of 'screendemic' threatening children’s mental health



Concerns over the impact of smartphone and social media use on children’s mental health have reached alarming levels, with Dr Sanjiv Nichani, a consultant paediatrician and founder of Leicester Children’s Hospital, sounding the alarm on what he describes as the UK's “screendemic.” He argues that this pervasive phenomenon is contributing significantly to the erosion of mental well-being among young people, dubbing it a poison that threatens their development and future prospects.

Dr Nichani's assertions come at a time when the government appears hesitant to enact robust measures to mitigate the risks associated with excessive screen time. He cites an “epidemic of mental health illness” among children, with increasing numbers displaying early developmental issues. This aligns with findings from Oxford University, which highlight a clear correlation between time spent on social media and heightened levels of anxiety and depression, particularly among teenage users. The research, involving over 7,000 participants, indicates that around 60% of 16- to 18-year-olds spend substantial amounts of time—some up to eight hours—on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. The implications for mental health are profound and require urgent attention.

Dr Nichani's firsthand observations in his clinic reveal a troubling trend: many young children are exhibiting a “glazed appearance” and showing an alarming disconnection from typical developmental milestones. He urges action amidst a backdrop of legislative proposals that he deems inadequate, arguing that the current recommendations for screen time and digital interactions are ineffective in addressing the scale of the crisis.

The concerns raised go beyond anecdotal evidence; surveys reveal that nearly half of the British public supports an outright ban on smartphones in schools. This sentiment is echoed by institutions like Thomas Mills High School in Suffolk, which has instituted a strict policy prohibiting smartphone use during school hours to combat the mental health issues catalysed by their usage. This policy was partly inspired by tragic events, such as the suicide of Molly Russell, a young girl who suffered after being exposed to harmful online content. In Parliament, calls for more stringent regulations are gaining traction, with proposals to raise the age of digital consent from 13 to 16 and a full ban on algorithms targeting under-16s.

Dr Nichani's warnings are further corroborated by insights from other experts in the field, such as Dr Emily Sehmer, a child psychiatrist who has noted a surge in mental health challenges linked to smartphone use. She describes children today as increasingly impulsive and emotionally unstable, with the average UK 12-year-old spending nearly 30 hours a week on their smartphones. Dr Sehmer advocates for immediate government intervention to impose stricter regulations on technology use, underscoring the urgent need for policies that prioritise the well-being of younger generations.

As trends continue to mirror these alarming statistics across various demographics, with rising rates of depression particularly pronounced among teenage girls, the dialogue on screen time and mental health remains critical. Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist, highlights in his recent book that the excessive integration of screens in children’s lives is devoid of the unstructured play that fosters resilience and emotional regulation. He, too, advocates for delaying smartphone access until high school and banning their use in schools to cultivate healthier environments conducive to learning and social development.

The evidence is mounting in favour of decisive policy changes and increased public awareness about the risks associated with screen time. As mental health services in the UK experience unprecedented demand, with the number of children requiring support doubling since 2016-17, it is imperative that moves to protect children from the perils of unnecessary screen exposure gain momentum. Addressing the roots of this “screendemic” is not merely a matter of concern but a fundamental responsibility to safeguard the mental health of future generations.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2059810/doctor-warns-uks-screendemic-poisoning), [[4]](https://time.com/6968942/jonathan-haidt-2/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2059810/doctor-warns-uks-screendemic-poisoning), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/bced2138-366b-448f-ab12-3c068199145a), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/9b928dc8-c873-4132-8cf8-916cc061a283)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2059810/doctor-warns-uks-screendemic-poisoning), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jan/03/psychiatrist-children-smartphones-mental-health-harm), [[7]](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/blogs/screen-time-and-childrens-mental-health-what-does-evidence-say)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-11500084), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/9b928dc8-c873-4132-8cf8-916cc061a283)
* Paragraph 5 – [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jan/03/psychiatrist-children-smartphones-mental-health-harm), [[4]](https://time.com/6968942/jonathan-haidt-2/)

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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.ft.com/content/bced2138-366b-448f-ab12-3c068199145a> - A study from Oxford University found a strong correlation between social media use and increased levels of anxiety and depression in teenagers. The research, involving over 7,000 participants, revealed that about 60% of 16- to 18-year-olds spent two to four hours daily on social media, with some reporting up to eight hours of usage. Platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp, and YouTube were most frequently used, with higher usage linked to more severe mental health issues, particularly among girls. Enhancing sleep and exercise were suggested as significant improvements for teenagers' mental health. This ongoing study aims to provide a comprehensive 10-year mental health map of the adolescent population. The number of children receiving NHS mental health services has doubled since 2016-17, with teenage girls being the most affected. The researchers stress the need for substantial evidence-based studies to bridge the gap between science and policy in addressing youth mental health issues.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/9b928dc8-c873-4132-8cf8-916cc061a283> - Thomas Mills High School in Framlingham, Suffolk, led by headteacher Philip Hurst, has introduced a strict ban on smartphones to address concerns over the impact on children's mental health. Since September, students aged 11 to 16 must lock away their phones for the entire school day. This initiative follows increasing evidence linking smartphone use to mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and eating disorders among young people. The tragic case of Molly Russell, a British teenager who committed suicide after viewing harmful content online, partly motivated the ban. A survey revealed that nearly half of the British public supports a total ban on smartphones in schools. In parliament, Labour MP Josh MacAlister is pushing for legislation to make schools phone-free and enhance regulations on smartphone features to protect children. Despite some resistance, there's growing support from parents and policymakers for stricter smartphone regulations in schools to foster better learning environments, mental health, and social interactions among students.
4. <https://time.com/6968942/jonathan-haidt-2/> - Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at New York University's Stern School of Business, initially aimed to write about social media's impact on democracy but shifted focus to its effects on teenagers after uncovering alarming research. His findings revealed a near doubling of depression and anxiety rates among U.S. adolescents from 2010 to 2019, with suicide rates increasing significantly, especially among young girls. These trends are mirrored in other English-speaking countries. Haidt's latest book, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, discusses how overprotecting children in real scenarios and under-protecting them online contributes to this crisis. He highlights the lack of unstructured independent play and excessive screen time, leading to loneliness. Haidt suggests solutions including increased free play, banning phones in schools, restricting social media before age 16, and delaying smartphone usage until high school. He stresses that collective action among parents can create effective national norms to address these issues.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-11500084> - A UK study suggests that children who spend more than two hours a day in front of a computer or TV are more likely to suffer psychological difficulties than other youngsters. Researchers found that those children who spent more than two hours per day watching TV or using a computer were at an increased risk of psychological difficulties. This risk increased if they also failed to meet the guidelines on physical activity. The study says that those children who did fewer than 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day were at an increased risk of psychological difficulties if they spent more than two hours using a computer or watching TV. The study, which forms part of the University of Bristol's PEACH Project, was funded jointly by the National Prevention Research Initiative (NPRI) and the World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF).
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jan/03/psychiatrist-children-smartphones-mental-health-harm> - Dr. Emily Sehmer, a child and adolescent psychiatrist in the NHS, expresses deep concern over the impact of smartphones on children's mental health. She observes that many children over 10 now have smartphones, with a significant proportion experiencing difficulties related to technology use. Sehmer highlights issues such as excessive social media use, online bullying, screen addiction, and exposure to online child sexual exploitation. She notes that children are increasingly unable to sleep, are inattentive, impulsive, emotionally dysregulated, and aggressive. The average UK 12-year-old now spends 29 hours a week on their smartphone, equivalent to a part-time job. Sehmer emphasizes that the online world is forcing children to grow up before they are ready and calls for government intervention to combat these harms.
7. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/blogs/screen-time-and-childrens-mental-health-what-does-evidence-say> - The Mental Health Foundation discusses the impact of screen time on children's mental health, noting that 99.9% of a large sample of English 15-year-olds use at least one kind of digital technology every day. The foundation highlights concerns that increased screen use may lead to sedentary behavior, which is associated with poorer physical health, well-being, and mental health. There are also worries about the impact of screen use on sleep, with evidence suggesting that using screens at bedtime is linked to fewer hours of sleep, poorer sleep quality, and increased tiredness. Studies have found that higher levels of screen use in children and adolescents are associated with reduced physical activity, increased risk of depression, and lower well-being.