# Britain’s screendemic ‘poisoning children’ as calls grow for urgent regulation



Britain's burgeoning “screendemic” has emerged as a serious concern, with consultant paediatrician Dr Sanjiv Nichani asserting that excessive smartphone and social media use is “poisoning our children” and exacerbating a mental health crisis among young people. Dr Nichani, who played a pivotal role in establishing Leicester Children’s Hospital, expressed alarm over the growing epidemic of mental health illnesses in juveniles, characterising the impact of screens as not merely a public health concern but a profound threat to societal wellbeing.

In recent years, research has increasingly linked high levels of screen time to a variety of mental health issues in children, including anxiety, depression, and developmental delays. Dr Nichani’s observations resonate with wider evidence; he notes that children as young as toddlers are exhibiting concerning symptoms. “They have this glazed appearance on their face,” he elaborated, stressing how many of these children spend excessive time in front of screens rather than engaging in meaningful interactions or activities. Furthermore, his clinic frequently sees teenagers presenting symptoms akin to Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder attributed to prolonged screen exposure and social media usage.

The urgency of Dr Nichani's message is underscored by concerns that governmental responses have been insufficient. He argues that current legislation aimed at addressing these issues, now under parliamentary discussion, lacks the potency needed to effect real change. Conservative MP Kit Malthouse has drawn a stark parallel, comparing addictive smartphone use to “smoking for the brain,” highlighting how the issue transcends individual choice and poses a significant societal challenge.

This rising concern is echoed across Europe, where families in France have taken legal action against TikTok, claiming that harmful content on the platform contributed to their children’s suicides. The plaintiffs assert that TikTok's failure to adequately moderate harmful content demonstrates a shocking neglect for the welfare of vulnerable youths—a sentiment echoed by psychological experts who caution that while a direct link between social media use and mental health problems remains unproven, there is considerable agreement that these platforms can worsen pre-existing conditions.

In response to mounting distress over the impact of smartphones, various UK schools have adopted strict regulations. For instance, Thomas Mills High School has instituted a complete smartphone ban during school hours, motivated by increasing evidence tying smartphone use to mental health issues such as depression and eating disorders. This initiative reflects a growing consensus among educators and parents that stricter measures are necessary to protect young people. In fact, surveys indicate that nearly half of the British public supports outright bans on smartphones in educational settings.

Calls for regulation are further amplified by initiatives like the proposed Kids Online Safety and Privacy Act (KOSPA) in the United States, which seeks to ensure that online platforms safeguard children without compromising the rights of marginalised communities. Critics argue, however, that overregulation could hinder beneficial access for certain groups. Yet, mounting evidence suggests that social media disproportionately harms these vulnerable populations, a concern amplified by testimonies and research revealing the detrimental influence of digital interactions on youth mental health.

Expert committees, including one commissioned by French President Emmanuel Macron, have also drawn attention to the dire implications of excessive screen exposure. Their findings spotlight a plethora of negative health outcomes, recommending measures such as limiting screen use amongst young children and advocating for the exclusion of computers and televisions in early education settings. While acknowledging the benefits of digital technology, the committee emphasises the vital need for society as a whole to implement interventions aimed at mitigating individual and collective risks.

The general sentiment across both the UK and beyond highlights a pressing need for collective action. There’s a growing recognition that addressing the challenges posed by excessive screen time requires involvement from parents, educators, and policymakers alike. As society grapples with the ramifications of a digitally saturated environment, many advocate for a balanced approach that prioritises the mental health and development of the younger generation amidst an ever-evolving digital landscape.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2059810/doctor-warns-uks-screendemic-poisoning), [[4]](https://time.com/7177874/teen-video-viewing-guidance-apa/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2059810/doctor-warns-uks-screendemic-poisoning), [[2]](https://www.apnews.com/article/fa8f979c3121a3c5712d52a300c9005f), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/9b928dc8-c873-4132-8cf8-916cc061a283)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.apnews.com/article/fa8f979c3121a3c5712d52a300c9005f), [[5]](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/09/social-media-lgbtq-teens-harms/679798/?utm_source=apple_news)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/9b928dc8-c873-4132-8cf8-916cc061a283), [[6]](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2024/05/02/kids-and-screentime-what-the-committee-appointed-by-macron-recommends_6670225_7.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[6]](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2024/05/02/kids-and-screentime-what-the-committee-appointed-by-macron-recommends_6670225_7.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[5]](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/09/social-media-lgbtq-teens-harms/679798/?utm_source=apple_news)

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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.apnews.com/article/fa8f979c3121a3c5712d52a300c9005f> - Families in France have filed a lawsuit against TikTok, alleging that the platform's harmful content contributed to their children's suicides. The plaintiffs accuse TikTok of failing to effectively moderate such content and targeting vulnerable teenagers for profit. TikTok claims it prohibits and removes harmful content, directing users to mental health services. Critics argue that TikTok's moderation efforts are insufficient, pointing out that harmful content can bypass detection through coded language. Psychological experts emphasize that while social media's direct link to mental health issues isn't firmly established, it can exacerbate the conditions of already vulnerable teens. The litigation aims for reparations and calls for stricter content regulations similar to those on TikTok's Chinese counterpart, Douyin. The French legal system may take months to process the case, seeking accountability and protective measures against the platform’s potential harm to youth.
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/7177874/teen-video-viewing-guidance-apa/> - The article discusses the increasing issue of excessive screen time and harmful content exposure in teenagers' lives, largely due to online videos and social media. A report by the American Psychological Association (APA) highlights the psychological and emotional risks associated with such content, including aggressive behavior, cyber-hate, body shaming, self-harm, and other negative influences. The article suggests that responsibility should be shared among parents, educators, policymakers, and content creators to ensure healthier video consumption. Parents can limit screen time, discuss viewed content with teens, and model healthy viewing habits. Educators can enhance digital literacy and teach about the adolescent brain. Content creators should regulate algorithms and comment sections to reduce harm. Policymakers can enforce regulations and create teen-specific accounts to enhance online safety. The article underlines the need for collective action to prioritize teenagers' mental health and development in digital environments.
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://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2024/05/02/kids-and-screentime-what-the-committee-appointed-by-macron-recommends_6670225_7.html> - A report commissioned by French President Emmanuel Macron examined the impact of screen exposure on young people, revealing significant concerns about their omnipresence. The expert committee, which studied scientific literature and consulted hundreds of experts and young individuals, found substantial negative effects on children's health, development, and future due to excessive screen time. Recommendations include avoiding screen use before age three, discouraging it until age six, and restricting mobile and internet access until later ages. They also suggest prohibiting computers and televisions in early education settings and emphasize the need for collective societal intervention, including stricter industry regulations. The report highlights risks such as reduced sleep quality, physical inactivity, weight gain, and exposure to harmful content. Despite acknowledging the benefits of digital tools, the committee stresses the necessity of a balanced approach and heightened awareness to mitigate adverse effects, particularly noting the complex impact on mental health and the pressing need for further research.