

The Expose

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Nearly One Million UK Toddlers Hooked on Social Media

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The Shocking Stats Behind Social Media Addiction in Children



Children as young as three are scrolling social media feeds built for adults. New analysis has emerged suggesting almost a million UK children aged 3-5 years old are using platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat and TikTok. That includes an increase of 220,000 this year alone, with usage spiking despite application age limits and an ever-mounting pile of harmful evidence.

Former education minister Lord Nash calls it “deeply alarming”, and lawmakers now face a decision that most ordinary people would find obvious. Should the platforms and the overall “attention economy” be regulated for minors, or should we continue letting algorithms trained on adult engagement shape the developing brains of pre-schoolers?

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Shocking Stats Just Surfaced

Nursery-aged children are creating or accessing accounts on platforms designed to get adults addicted, and they're being fed the same engagement-maximising content. This is *not* simply early adoption of phones and social media, or an increase in tech literacy. This is an enormous structural exposure problem. Unlike other media like kids' TV, social feeds aren't sequences for age or learning goals, but are instead optimised for increasing time spent on the platform.

Nine in ten UK children own phones before age 11, according to a House of Commons Library brief. Six in ten kids between 8-12 years old have their *own* social media platforms despite many minimum age restrictions being 13. If upper-primary children are already deeply embedded online, then pushing the start line as far down as the age of three means the attention economy is catching kids right as they learn to self-regulate.

The Real-Life Risks

Research keeps pointing in the same direction: as kids' digital exposure gets earlier and heavier, their sleep gets poorer, anxiety worsens, and attention spans shorten drastically. Policymakers are gradually connecting the dots of social media usage in young people with school outcomes and behavioural problems – but it's all happening too slowly. Hundreds of thousands of under-fives are swiping through adult-optimised feeds, and an entire generation is at huge risk.

Parenting Failures, or Addiction by Design?

Whether the finger can be pointed at the platforms or parents is up for debate. Many argue that parents rarely set out to deliberately hand their three-year-old a fully exposed adult-designed feed. But giving a child a logged-in device as a distraction that perhaps starts as a few cute videos quickly turns into an addictive habit.

However, others argue that the alarming trend is particularly worrying because it exposes that the platforms are working *exactly as they are designed* – they *want* to divert as much attention to their apps, and keep newcomers online regardless of age. So, rather than individual parents suddenly becoming reckless, the numbers indicate that the engagement-optimised platforms are actually trying to encourage this kind of usage. Over 800,000 pre-schoolers are on social media. 90% of kids own a phone by age 11. These numbers are no longer outliers based on irresponsible parenting – they are generational trends transcending all classes, upbringings and social circumstances.

What Are Governments Doing About It?

As of 10 December 2025, Australia will ban under-16s from accessing social media platforms. Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, X/Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, Discord, and Threads must then block new sign-ups, remove any existing under-16 accounts, and require real age verification. Fines could stack up to \$50 million for any platforms found to be non-compliant with the new rules.

Australia is the first major developed nation to go this far. Others have taken partial steps – such as France requiring parental consent for under-15s, parts of the US such as Florida banning under-14s, and Brazil and Malaysia discussing similar under-16 rules) but Australia is mandating a uniform, all-encompassing solution. The world will be watching the rollout while more damning statistics about underage social media usage ruining childhood development continue to surface. Many expect a bumpy launch, but eyes will be on the verification process and ensuring circumvention of the rules becomes difficult, if not totally impossible.

Older Children Also At Huge Risk

- The American Psychological Association deems tech use and social media – particularly within an hour of bedtime – strongly correlated with sleep disruption in teens, leading to shorter duration and poorer overall quality
- ScienceDirect reports significant associations between social media use, poorer sleep, and heightened mental health problems in adolescents, citing blue light, late-night engagement, and dangerous rumination
- A damning report by the US Surgeon General says using social media for more than 3 hours per day doubles the risk of mental health problems in young people – with the average US teen already averaging way more than this amount
- In the same Surgeon General report, 46% of 13-17s admitted that social media made them feel worse about their bodies. Higher levels of anxiety and depression were observed as a result, also leading to increased cyberbullying and self-harm in youngsters
- JMIR Mental Health reported higher depression, anxiety and stress in children and teenagers exposed to social media
- PubMed's own studies found the same correlation of higher social media usage with increased symptoms of depression, worse sleep disruption, more online harassment, and lower self-esteem.

Final Thought

We're way past the point of kids simply dabbling online. Allowing children to access social media platforms is linked with a staggering amount of long-term physical and mental health problems. Between three and five years old, we're risking their overall development; up to 16 they're exposed to body image anxiety, bullying, self-harm, sexual harassment, stress and depression. Late-night scrolling undermines sleep – the single strongest and most consistent harm – and excessive screentime worsens attention spans and lowers test scores in school.

With Australia putting a stake in the ground as the first meaningful nationwide action we've seen anywhere in the world, other countries must follow urgently. We're dicing with future generations' cognitive abilities and mental health – and for what?

Join the Conversation

What's the single most effective change that could help – real age checks, night-time curfews, or creating kid-only modes on social media? Do you blame the parents or the platforms? Add your thoughts below.

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