

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

// SMARTPHONE OWNERSHIP IS ASSOCIATED WITH WELL-BEING

- While there is no doubt a mental health crisis in the U.S. among early adolescents and teens, simply taking away their smartphones might not solve it; in fact, it may make little difference or even cause harm. That kids with smartphones reported greater well-being than kids who don't is not due to household income; kids in wealthier homes are less likely to own a smartphone than kids in low-income homes.
 - Kids with their own smartphone spend more days each week hanging out with friends in-person, on average, than kids without their own smartphone;
 - 20% of kids agreed with the statement “Life often feels meaningless,” and kids without smartphones were more likely to agree than those who own a smartphone (26% vs. 18%);
 - Kids without smartphones were much more likely—on some measures nearly 50% more likely—to report being cyberbullied than kids who own smartphones;
 - Smartphone-owning kids were more likely to say they feel good about themselves than kids who don't own smartphones (80% vs. 69%). The same was true among tablet-owners versus non-owners (82% vs. 71%);
 - “I get very angry and often lose my temper,” found less agreement among kids who own smartphones than among kids who don't (23% vs. 34%);
 - Kids who own smartphones were also slightly less likely to say they felt depressed most days in the prior year than kids who don't own smartphones (21% vs. 26%);
 - We ran analyses on the number of years kids have had their own smartphone and measures of anxiety and depression, and there was no correlation between owning a phone for a longer period and reporting depressive or anxiety symptoms;
 - Kids without their own smartphones were just as likely as kids with smartphones to say that technology impairs their daily lives. Upwards of half of kids in both groups agreed that “I don't do things I'm supposed to because I'm using technology” (46% and 48%, respectively). Kids without smartphones may still use digital media that impose friction in their lives;
 - Kids with their own smartphone are less likely to trust other people, though this may be a good thing, given the universe of strangers that smartphones can expose children to. Thirty-seven percent of kids with smartphones agreed that “Most people can be trusted,” while almost half of kids without smartphones, 49%, agreed.

// DEVICES AND SETTINGS

Despite calls by many researchers, educators, parents, and policymakers to limit digital media use among children, especially kids as young as 11, the sample we observed is more connected than ever. Seventy-eight percent of all respondents have their own smartphone, including 72% of 11-year-olds; 56% have their own tablet.

- 52% of all kids surveyed have their own smartphone and data plan, so they're connected to the internet 24/7.
- For some kids, smartphones are no doubt disruptive; 20% of kids reported that push notifications on their smartphones and other devices are always on.

- 31% of kids said they feel some relief when they're in a situation where they can't use their smartphone (29% disagreed), suggesting many kids want to use their phone less, but require help to do so.
- Kids estimated that they spend an average of 4.4 hours on their smartphone and/or tablet on schooldays, 6.3 hours on non-schooldays.

// SOCIAL MEDIA

- If having a smartphone, even for years, is not apparently harmful to children, what is? Frequently posting publicly online was consistently associated with poorer scores on wellness measures.
- Kids who post or share publicly online often are more likely to report depressive symptoms than those who don't post publicly. Forty-four percent of kids who post online publicly reported depressive symptoms compared with 36% of kids who never post publicly online.
- Kids who post publicly online often were also more likely to report anxiety symptoms than kids who never post publicly (42% vs. 26%).
- Kids who frequently post publicly online consistently reported greater sleep problems than kids who never post.
- Heavy video gamers and heavy social media users (use medium once or multiple times a day) were more likely than lighter users to say technology impairs their lives; among light social media users (use less than once a day) for example, 34% said they don't get enough sleep because they are on their phone or internet late at night, a figure that was 46% among kids who use social media every day or multiple times per day. Fifty percent of light gamers (play less than once a day) said they find it hard to stop using technology once they start, a number that jumps to 62% among daily gamers.
- Just over half of kids (51%) said they'd rather spend more time online than hang out with people. Girls were more likely to affirm this than boys (55% vs. 47%).
- One in three kids agreed with the statement "Social media causes more harm than good," and about the same proportion disagreed with that statement (34% and 33%, respectively). Three in 10 kids (29%) agreed A.I. causes more harm than good, and respondents were slightly more likely to agree with the statement if they'd previously used A.I. tools (32% vs. 28%).
- The "requirement" that children be 13 years old to open accounts on major social media platforms is little more than meaningless. Sixty percent of 11- and 12-year-olds have their own accounts on You Tube, 55% on TikTok, 42% on Instagram, and 41% on Facebook. While the penetration rates for 13-year-olds are higher than for those ages 11-12, there seems to be little to nothing keeping underage kids from signing contracts with major platforms.
- Many kids, more than one in four, admitted to lying about their age when signing up for a social media account, and three in 10 said they've posted information on social media that was false.
- Florida law as of Jan. 1, 2025, makes it illegal for kids under 14 to have social media accounts. Perhaps the law should've focused on kids 10 and younger, because most 11- to 13-year-olds already have social media accounts, and many of them easily lied to do so. A statute that also became law Jan. 1 holds that 14- and 15-year-olds must get parental permission to have social media accounts, but, again, most kids already do.
- In Florida, social media platforms are supposed to be blocked on public school Wi-Fi, per a 2023 law, but roughly four in 10 kids at public schools and at charter schools said social media aren't blocked at their school. Of course, 52% of kids in our sample have their own smartphone and data plan, so they can access social media on their own.

- Many kids, at least one in five, have more than one account on at least one social media platform. “At least 1 in 5” because kids were asked if they’ve created a second account on a platform for privacy reasons, but the figure may be greater than this as some kids may have multiple accounts but for other reasons.

// ATTITUDES

- Half of children said it’s OK to use A.I. to solve their math homework, while 43% said it is okay to use A.I. to write an essay for them, and 35% to answer exam questions. More older boys than older girls have used A.I. to do their schoolwork (55% vs. 42% for 13-year-olds).
- As with adults in other studies, kids reported some conflicting attitudes about freedom of expression. On one hand, 70% of respondents said people should be free to express unpopular ideas online, but when asked which is more important, being able to speak freely online or feeling welcome and safe online, 60% chose the latter.
- Some kids said they’ve taken measures to protect their privacy on social media, such as: used a fake name (31%), switched an account from public to private (34%), or deleted or deactivated an account (16%). Thirteen percent of respondents, though, said they’d taken no steps to guard their privacy on social media.
- A plurality of kids in the sample said they trust the U.S. government to do what’s right “just about always” or “most of the time” (42%).
- Nearly half of kids (49%) said they use technology to avoid feeling sad or to get relief from negative feelings.

// CYBERBULLYING

- More than half of the kids sampled (57%) reported being cyberbullied at least once in the prior three months. Respondents were asked if, in the last three months, they’d experienced online: being called mean or hurtful names; having lies or rumors spread about them; having mean or hurtful photos or videos about them shared; and other affronts. About 40% cited enduring each of these harms at least once in the past three months; about 20% said they experience such harms once a week or more often.
- Cyberbullied kids were almost four times as likely as un-bullied kids to say they get very angry and often lose their temper (36% vs. 10%).
- Cyberbullied kids were nearly three times as likely as un-bullied kids to say they felt depressed most days in the prior year (32% vs. 11%). What is particularly striking about this is how low the threshold for cyberbullying in our study was. A child who said someone called them mean names online once in the last three months was categorized as cyberbullied. This helps shed light on how destructive even minimal cyberbullying can be.

// SLEEP AND EXERCISE

- One area where the existence of a smartphone causes harm is sleep. One in four kids sleeps with their smartphone in their hand or in bed with them. Kids who literally sleep with their phone get 8.6 hours of sleep per school night, short of doctors’ recommendation of 9-12 hours a night. Even kids who sleep with the phone in the room but out of reach don’t get enough sleep: 8.9 hours. Only kids who sleep with a phone in another room get a bare minimum of 9.3 hours on school nights.
- Kids who use social media everyday get, on average, less than the 9 hours minimum of Dr.-recommended sleep for young adolescents, while kids who use social media less often (never or a few times a week) do get the minimum (8.7 vs. 9.2 hours).
- Heavy social media users are far more likely to exercise everyday than lighter users of social media (50% vs. 31%).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Rather than generate a long list of do's and don'ts, this report is meant to be exploratory and descriptive, painting a broad picture of the digital lives and mental health of adolescents. However, this study may be the most in-depth survey of young adolescent media use ever conducted, and some of the data are so compelling that a few recommendations are in order.

// RECOMMENDATION 1

Giving kids as young as 11 years of age their own smartphone is likely fine and may be beneficial.

Giving kids their own smartphones may help them, and withholding phones from them or taking them away may hurt them. The most consistent trend in our data is that kids with their own smartphones are healthier and better adjusted than kids without their own phones. The former are less likely than the latter to be depressed, to be isolated from in-person friendships, to be cyberbullied, to say they often lose their temper, and to experience numerous other harms.

The reason is not socioeconomic; kids in wealthier homes are much less likely to have their own smartphone than kids in low-income homes.

And we looked at the relationship between the number of years kids have had their own smartphone and anxiety and depression, and there was no correlation between owning a phone at a very young age and reporting depressive or anxiety symptoms.

Nearly eight in 10 children in our sample have their own smartphone, and that may be a good thing.

It's worth noting that our cross-sectional survey is not able to determine any long-term effects on children of having a smartphone starting at a young age. Also, among the things we did not measure was attention span. One of the key harms that Haidt (2024) says smartphones and social media visit upon children is attention fragmentation. It's possible that kids in our sample who have had their own smartphones since a young age have attention problems.

// RECOMMENDATION 2

Try to keep kids from social platforms where they are likely to post or share publicly.

Repeatedly in our study, posting or sharing on social media was associated with adverse outcomes. Kids who post publicly—especially those who do so often—are more likely than kids who don't post to report symptoms of depression and anxiety, to report numerous sleep problems, and to get less sleep than experts recommend. Of course, the act of posting itself is not likely what contributes to depression and sleep deprivation in children, but instead what potentially follows: negative feedback from peers and/or strangers, cyberbullying, unfriending or blocking, doxxing, or any number of other online ills.

Given the challenge of letting a child use social media but keeping them from posting, it may be easier—and more beneficial—to enforce a no-social-media policy, at least for children as young as 11, 12, and 13 years old. And heavy social media use was associated with some problems reported by kids in the sample; heavy users were more likely than lighter users or non-users to say they'd rather spend more time online than engage with people, to say they feel restless or irritated when they can't check their phone, and to say they lose sleep because they're on their phone late at night.

Hall (2024) recently published a paper, “Ten myths about the effect of social media use on well-being.” Among the statements he claims are myths, and refutes, are “Social media are the main cause of problems teens are facing” and “Compared to other harms, the harm of social media use is far greater.”

Broadly speaking, Hall’s arguments hold up in our data. We did not find that social media use was consistently associated with harm to young adolescents. In fact, heavy social media use was associated with an increased likelihood to exercise. However, some of our data partially support one of Hall’s alleged myths: “Spending more time on social media will inevitably make users depressed, anxious, sad, and lonely.” Posting publicly to social media was associated with these outcomes.

// RECOMMENDATION 3

Be on alert for the slightest signs of cyberbullying and do all you can to stanch it.

If a child in our study said they’d been called mean or hurtful names online once in the last three months, they were categorized as “cyberbullied.” While there were four other questions we used to assess cyberbullying, the threshold for being in the cyberbullied category was low. And yet, the outcomes appear dire. Cyberbullied kids are much more likely than un-bullied kids to say life often feels meaningless, that they felt depressed most days in the prior year, that they often lose their temper, and several other negatives. We knew cyberbullying was a major scourge among children, we just perhaps didn’t know that even the most fleeting amounts of cyberbullying can be harmful. And a scourge it is; using our metric, 57% of kids in the sample are cyberbullied, and about 20% are bullied online at least once a week.

// RECOMMENDATION 4

Don’t let kids and smartphones sleep in the same room.

Children who sleep with their phones in their room—and especially those who sleep with their phone in their hand and/or in bed with them, who were 24% of respondents—don’t get enough sleep, on average. Kids who sleep with a phone in another room, however, exceeded the minimum number of hours prescribed by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine for young adolescents (9.2 hours; AASM recommends 9-12 hours).

// LIMITATIONS AND SUBSEQUENT RESEARCH

There are three criteria for establishing causality in science, and cross-sectional surveys meet just one of them: establishing that variables are correlated with each other (the other two are causal priority and eliminating possible alternative explanations for the relationship).

Given that we can’t establish causality, we are cautious throughout the study to speak of associations rather than causation, and this is also why we make just four straightforward recommendations above.

Again, however, this study may be the most thorough examination of digital media use among young adolescents to date. And when we see correlations again and again—like that between publicly posting online and indicators of harm—the likelihood that there’s an underlying relationship increases.

Another cautionary note about this study is that we cannot make long-term predictions about young adolescents from our data or analyses. We took a snapshot of young adolescents’ lives. The findings from our data and analyses are limited to what the respondents have said, are doing, and how they feel about things *currently*. All this may change in the future. For example, as in Recommendation 1, we note that letting 11-year-olds own smartphones may be beneficial; however, this does not necessarily mean that kids with smartphones at 11 will do better later in life; we simply do not know. To understand how digital media impacts the trajectory of an individual’s life, we need to track the same kids throughout their lives.

As discussed in the Foreword, this is why we believe a longitudinal study is crucial for understanding the impact of media on young adolescents as they transition into adulthood. The *Life in Media Survey* will continue tracking 11- to 13-year-olds in the future, allowing us to discuss causal relationships with greater certainty. For now, though, this study gives us plenty of new knowledge and a lot to think about before tracking digital media use and wellness across the lifespan.

