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Is the rise in screen use helpful or harmful to adolescent well-being?

Transcript of webinar for parents/carers

June 2024

Background to this webinar transcript

Teens are immersed in the online world where screens have become a popular medium for entertainment, connection, and learning. While we know that screens provide numerous benefits and opportunities, it is crucial to examine their impact on adolescent mental health. Understanding this will help us, as a society, find the best ways to support teens to thrive in the digital world.

The Future Proofing Study researchers have been investigating this and, with the team in the Teens & Screens project, they have compiled a webinar for parents documenting their findings about teens and screens, and some optional ways to support young people to use screens positively.

If you would like to watch this webinar on YouTube, please click and follow this link.

Please reach out to us through this form if you have any questions or feedback.

Is the rise in screen use helpful or harmful to adolescent well-being?

A webinar for parents/carers of adolescents

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This project is proudly supported by the Bupa Foundation

Hello and thank you for being here today to listen to our webinar about the impact of screen use on adolescent well-being. My name is Kate Maston and I'm a Senior Program Manager at the Black Dog Institute, which is located in Sydney on Gadigal and Bidjigal Land. I work on the Future Proofing Study, which is currently the most comprehensive longitudinal study of adolescent mental health in Australia. I'll be taking you through some of our latest findings in this webinar.

The amount of time children spend on screens

Children's safety online

Content that children are exposed to online

Before we put together this webinar, we asked parents to tell us what concerned them most about their children's screen use. When we consolidated these responses, we found three main themes of concern emerging from parents. These were:

1) The amount of time that their kids are spending on screens.
2) Their children's safety online, for example, exposure to strangers, predators and bullying.
3) The content that their children are exposed to online. Particularly, this is around age- inappropriate content or potentially harmful content like extremist ideas or unrealistic beauty standards.

I really do want to emphasise how uncharted this territory is for parents. We grew up in a world that looked very different to the world that teens are living in today. I have two young teenagers myself, and I know that parents are just trying to do the best that they can. It's not just childhood that's changed – parenting has also changed, and the feedback that we're hearing from many parents is that they feel at a loss about how best to approach technology use in their home.

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Webinar overview

1. What are we learning about adolescent screen use and mental health?

2. Information about how families can support their children to navigate the online world

To address this, the webinar today has two aims.

First, I'll talk you through what we're learning about screen use and mental health from our own research here at the Black Dog Institute, research involving many thousands of adolescents.

Towards the end of the webinar, I will share some options that might be helpful for parents and carers to think about when navigating the digital world with their kids.

Digital technology and young people

99%

Of young people in Australia have a personal screen-based device

50% have 5 or more personal screen-based devices

We know that young people today are the most connected age group of all time. 99% have a personal screen-based device, and 50% have five or more devices They just can't conceive of a time before the smartphone and the online world.

For adolescents, this is all happening at a stage in their development where their social connections are central to their identity formation. In addition, risk taking is at its peak and mental health problems like depression and anxiety typically first begin to emerge.

Digital technology is a billion-dollar business

≈ $11 billion USD

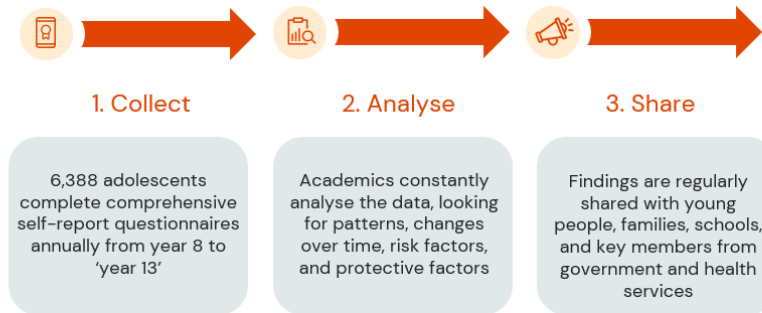**Predicted revenue** from social media ads aimed at children and teens (0–17yrs)

Raffoul, A., Ward, Z. J., Santoso, M., Kavanaugh, J. R., & Austin, S. B. (2023)

You might find this interesting…. a study conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health showed that across 6 popular social media apps, adverts aimed at children and teenagers brought in almost 11 billion U.S. dollars in a single year. So, it's no surprise that the algorithms on these apps are designed to predict our kids interests, keep them engaged, and keep them using these products for as long as possible.

Q: Is the rise in screen use helpful or harmful to adolescent well-being?
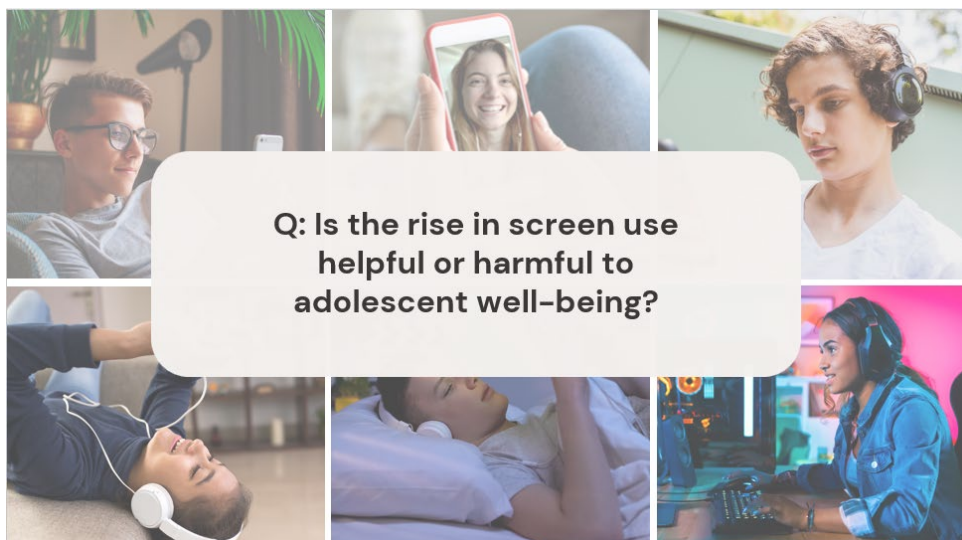
So naturally, there are a lot of questions about whether the rise in screen use is helpful or harmful to adolescent well-being.

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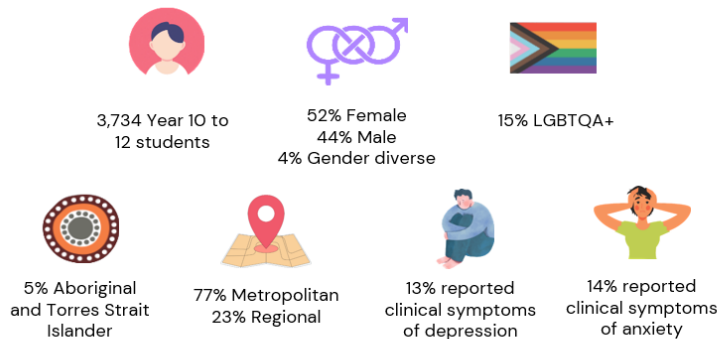
The Future Proofing Study

1. Collect
6,388 adolescents complete comprehensive self–report questionnaires annually from year 8 to 'year 13'

2. Analyse
Academics constantly analyse the data, looking for patterns, changes over time, risk factors, and protective factors

3. Share
Findings are regularly shared with young people, families, schools, and key members from government and health services

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Before I go on to present our findings, I would like to tell you briefly about where this data comes from.

The Future Proofing Study has been running at the Black Dog Institute since 2019, and it involves thousands of the same adolescents completing annual, confidential, online surveys for six years, starting from when they're in Year 8. Along the way, teams of academics are analysing this data, and our findings are regularly shared with key decision makers and stakeholders – hence this webinar with us reporting our findings back to you.

Characteristics of participants who provided data in 2023

3,734 Year 10 to 12 students

52% Female
44% Male
4% Gender diverse

15% LGBTQA+

5% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

77% Metropolitan
23% Regional

13% reported clinical symptoms of depression

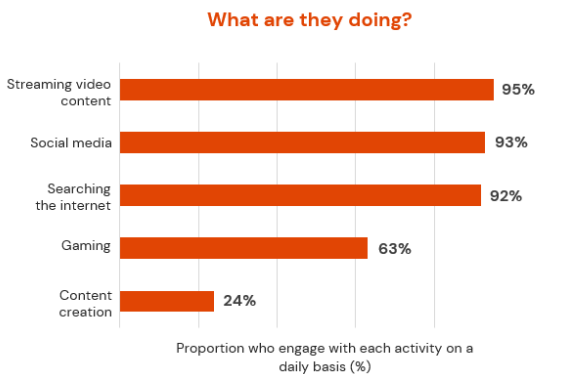14% reported clinical symptoms of anxiety

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Today's findings are from over 3700 Australian students in Years 10, 11 and 12 who completed these surveys last year. In this slide you can see some of the participant characteristics.

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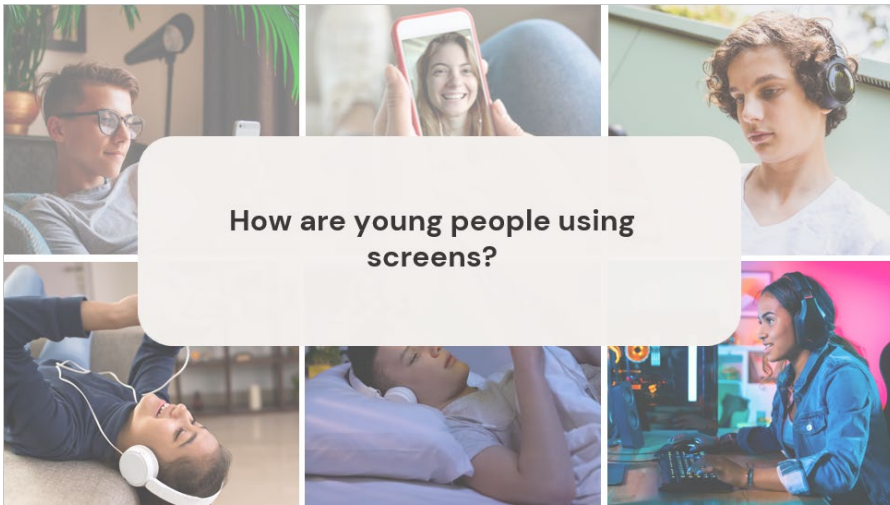
To begin with, let's look at what adolescents told us about how they're using screens.

The adolescents in our study reported that they most commonly used screens for streaming video content (like Netflix or YouTube), engaging with social media, and searching the internet.

Less common was gaming, around 2/3 of adolescents reported gaming regularly. And then, we had about 1/4 of adolescents who said they were creating their own content, and this might include things like coding or recording and sharing videos.

We also learned from our participants that, on average, young people were spending about 3 to 4 hours a day on screens. This is outside of schoolwork. And two to three hours of that was spent on social media.
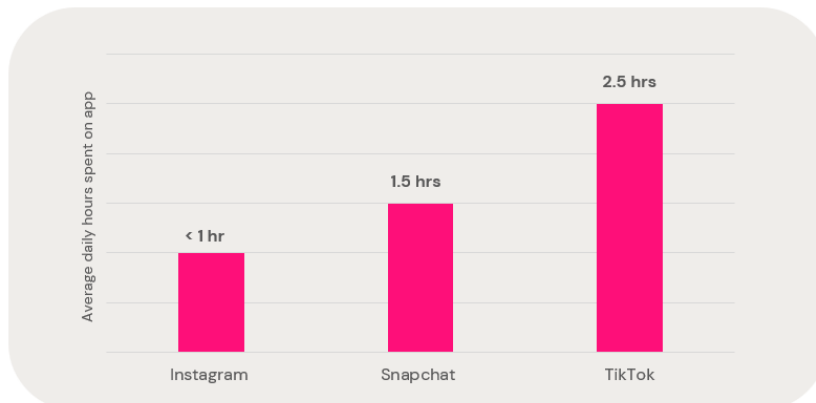
How are young people using social media?
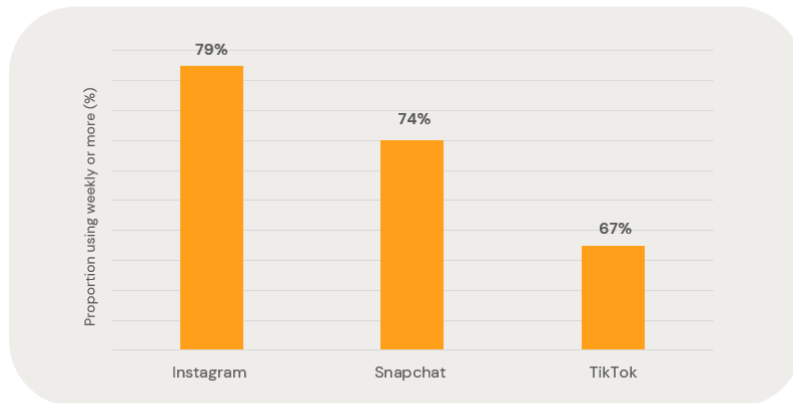
Instagram is the most popular app in this age group, with 79% of students reporting that they were using it at least weekly. This is followed by Snapchat and then TikTok.

How are young people using social media?

However, as you can see on this graph, adolescents spend significantly more time each day on TikTok: an average of two and a half hours, compared to one and half hours a day on Snapchat, and an hour or less on Instagram.

We know that TikTok is particularly engaging because of its seemingly endless stream of short videos that feature things like music and dances and challenges and memes and so on. This really does appeal to adolescent's particular focus on social connection.

How are young people using social media?

82%	**70%**	**17%**	**14%**
Communicating with peers	Scrolling or viewing other people's content	Communicating with people they've met online	Sharing or posting content publicly

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Next, we asked detailed questions about how young people are using social media, and we learned that 82% of adolescents use social media to communicate with their real-life peers. This really fits with what many teenagers are saying, which is that they no longer distinguish between online and offline relationships. They exist as part of the same continuum.

We had 70% who told us that they were regularly scrolling or viewing other people's content. And far fewer adolescents reported that they communicate with people that they've met online, or that they share content publicly.

Is there an association between screen use and mental health?
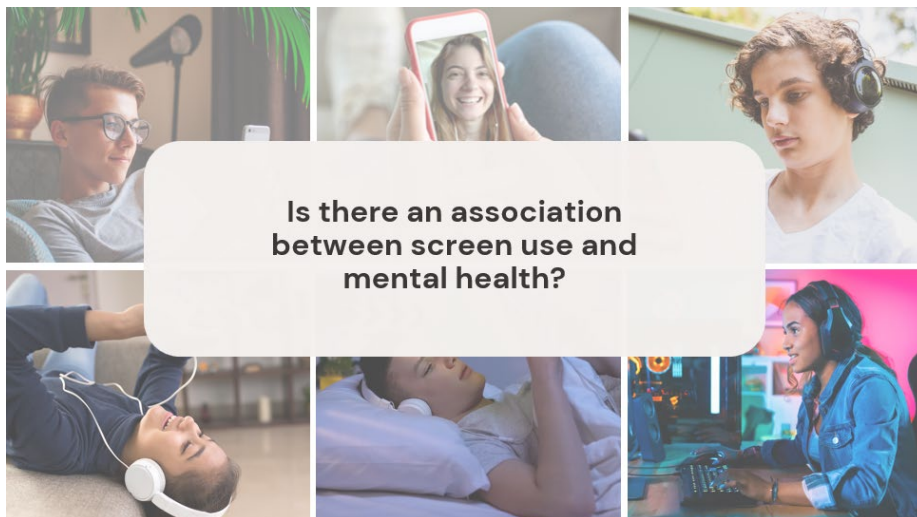
But is there an association between screen use and mental health?

To answer this question, first I'm going to talk you through some of our findings, and then I'm going to discuss findings from other researchers around the world.

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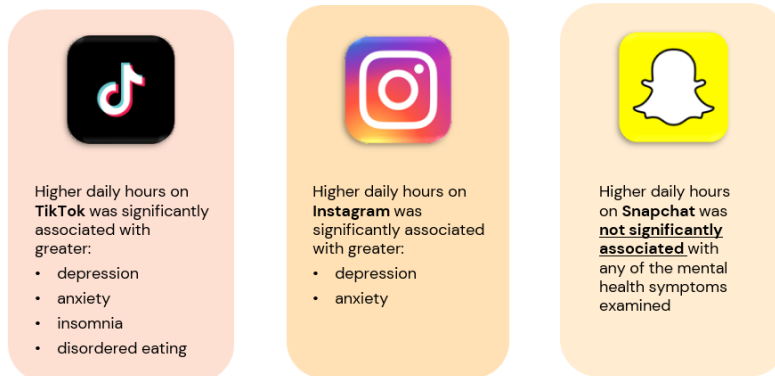
Screen time and depression

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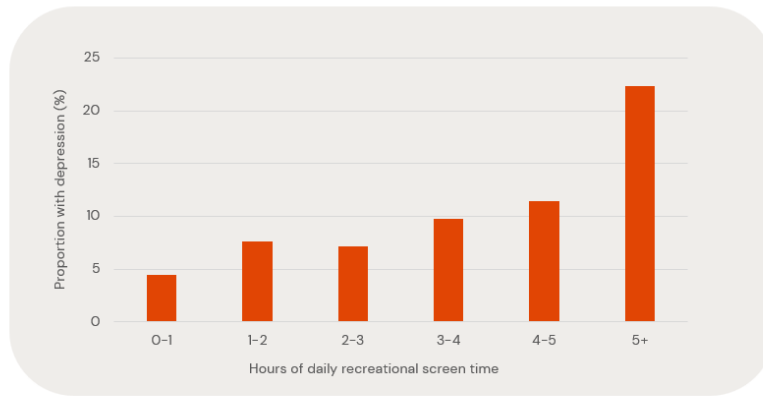
What we do know from the Future Proofing Study and from other research, is that there is an association between daily screen hours and mental health.

As you can see on this graph, our data shows that as the hours of screen time increase, there is an increase in the percentage of adolescents experiencing symptoms of depression. In fact, we learnt that 22% of the adolescents in our study who use screens for five or more hours a day met criteria for depression. And the patterns for anxiety and psychological stress look very similar.

Social media apps and mental health

Higher daily hours on **TikTok** was significantly associated with greater:
- depression
- anxiety
- insomnia
- disordered eating

Higher daily hours on **Instagram** was significantly associated with greater:
- depression
- anxiety

Higher daily hours on **Snapchat** was <u>**not significantly associated**</u> with any of the mental health symptoms examined

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All analyses controlled for gender and socioeconomic background

We also looked at whether different ways of using screens was associated in different ways with mental health. Firstly, we analysed the relationship between the amount of time spent per day on the top three social media apps and a range of mental health symptom measures.

We did find that higher daily hours on TikTok was significantly associated with greater depression, anxiety, insomnia, and disordered eating. Higher hours on Instagram was associated with greater depression and anxiety. However, we found that higher hours on Snapchat was not significantly associated with any of the mental health symptoms that we examined. We think that the reason for this is because Snapchat is predominantly a messaging app for teens to stay in touch with their friends, compared to TikTok and Instagram which expose us to a much wider world of curated and often idealised content, and, in some cases, content that is distressing or age-inappropriate as well.

And, as we also saw just before, teens are spending much longer amounts of time on TikTok, which could be another explanation for why we're seeing stronger links with mental health symptoms.

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Passive vs active social media use and mental health
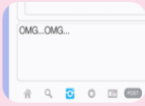
Active social media use
e.g., communicating with friends you know in real life

Associated with **lower** depression and anxiety ⌄

Passive social media use
e.g., scrolling/viewing other people's content

Associated with **higher** ⌃ depression and anxiety

We also found that using social media actively, so that's mostly to communicate with people or friends that teens know in real life, was actually associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety. This is really good news, and it echoes what other research is showing, which is that online interactions with genuine friends can enhance mental well-being by improving those connections.

However, on the flip side, we did find that using social media mostly to scroll or to view other people's content was linked to higher levels of depression and anxiety.

Gaming and mental health

Higher daily hours spent gaming was **not significantly associated** with:

• anxiety
• insomnia
• disordered eating
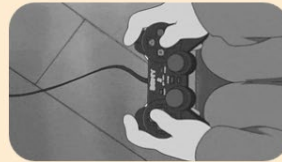
Higher daily hours spent gaming was significantly associated with greater:

• depression

*Driven by those gaming 6+ hours per day.*

And what about gaming? We know that many kids enjoy gaming, and encouragingly, most research to date has found little evidence of a link between gaming and mental health because video game players are not usually socially isolated, they play with friends, which has a lot of benefits.

Our study found that higher daily hours spent gaming was not associated with elevated anxiety, insomnia, or disordered eating. However, we did find an association with higher gaming hours and depression, which was really only driven by those adolescents who reported gaming six or more hours per day. We found about 1/4 of those who were gaming over six hours a day met criteria for depression.

Like everything, there's got to be a 'sweet spot' with gaming. We know it provides benefits for most teens, but once they are playing for many hours and especially late into the night where it can start having an effect on sleep and functioning the next day, then this can cause issues.
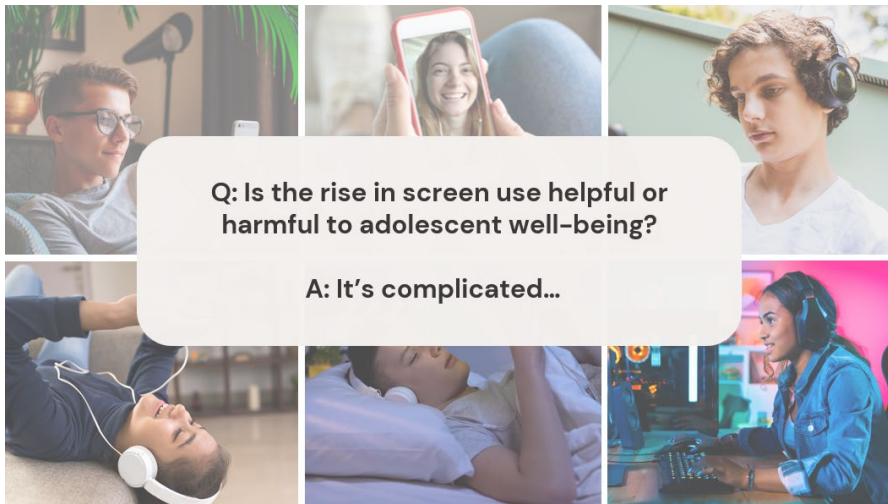
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Q: Is the rise in screen use helpful or harmful to adolescent well-being?

A: It's complicated…

So, what does all of this mean for the question of whether the rise in screen use is helpful or harmful to adolescent well-being?

Well, the answer is… it's complicated. And I'll tell you the reasons why.

It's complicated because…

1. What you're doing online matters
2. Direction of the relationship between screens and mental health is unclear
3. More likely, screens and mental health impact each other over time
4. Long term effects?

So, it's complicated because….

1) What teens are doing online really seems to matter. Teens can be using screens in so many different ways and these have different effects: as we just saw in our study texting and gaming with friends was not really associated with worse mental health, but spending long amounts of time just scrolling, especially on TikTok, does seem to be linked to poorer mental health. And this makes it really difficult to make blanket statements about screens being harmful for mental health because we know that screens can also offer many benefits, particularly with social connectivity which is really important for well-being generally and teen well-being particularly.

2) It's also complicated because when we measure screen use and mental health at the same point in time, like the data I've just shown you, there is clearly an association. However, what we don't know is which direction this association goes in. In other words, it might not be the case that spending longer using screens is creating mental health problems; It could be that when someone is experiencing mental health problems, then they're more likely to be using screens for longer periods of time.

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3) What the research is starting to show is that the link between screens and mental health is more likely to be bidirectional. So, for example, if a teenager is feeling down or stressed, they might spend more time online to distract themselves. But the more time they spend online, the more likely they are to encounter things that could make them feel even worse. And so it could become a cycle where their mood affects their screen time, and their screen time effects their mood.

4) And what about the long-term effects? Well, interestingly, the research that's been done looking at the long-term effects of screen use on teenage well-being hasn't been able to provide conclusive evidence that screen use is actually causing mental health problems. So, this really is an area that needs more long term research in order to better understand what's going on. And there are many people who are working on this, including our team at the Black Dog Institute.

What we do know…

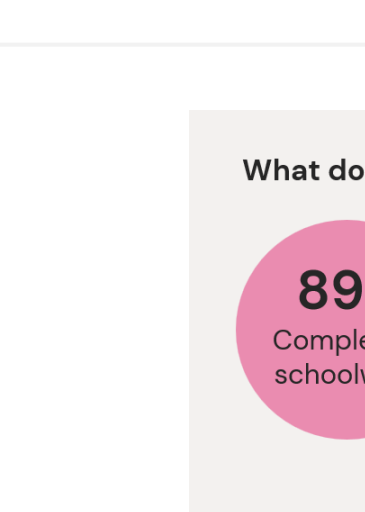| 1 | Screens may act like an amplifier for existing issues |
2	Offline and online risks may mirror each other
3	Age and gender matters
4	Risks may also include being socially isolated, neurodivergent, etc.
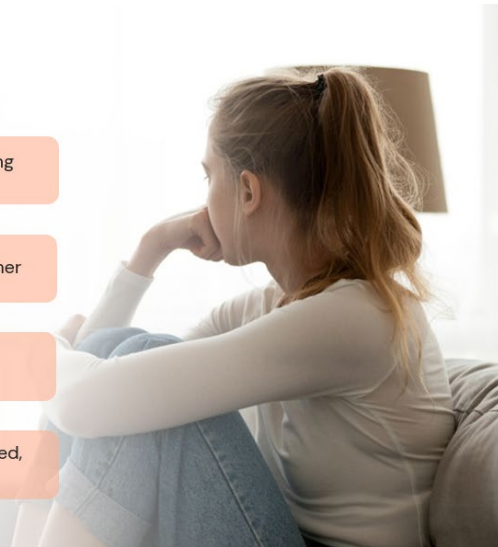
What do we know?

1) We know that screens may act like an amplifier for existing issues, particularly for children with additional needs or mental health challenges. It makes sense that who you are and what you're going through when you go onto a screen is going to make a difference to how your screen use affects you. So, if you know that your child is struggling, then it is probably a good idea to keep a close eye on their screen use and the type of content that they're engaging with.

2) We also know that online and offline risks may mirror each other. For example, a child who is being bullied at school is at higher risk for being bullied online.

3) We know that age and gender also matters, so younger children aren't going to have the maturity and impulse control to regulate their screen use. And research is starting to show that girls seem to be most susceptible to the well-being effects of social media when they're aged between 11 and 13, whereas for boys, it's when they're 14 to 15.

4) And some of the other factors that may increase risk for online harm include being socially isolated or already having struggled with mental health symptoms or being neurodivergent (for example, having Autism or ADHD). All of these may introduce additional complications into your child's experiences with technology.

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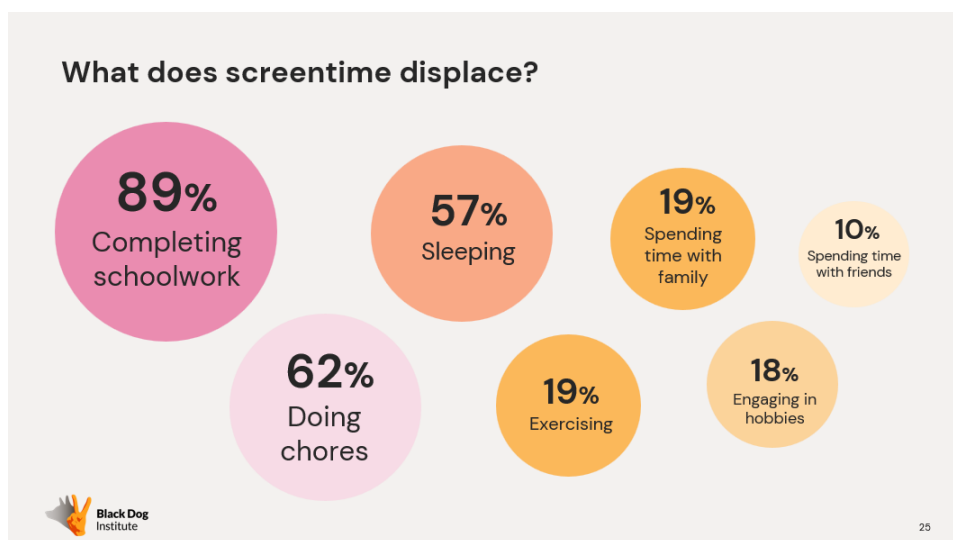
How screen use may exacerbate mental health symptoms

- Upward social comparisons
- Exposure to harmful, age-inappropriate, or distressing content
- Time spent on screens displaces other important and rewarding activities

To give you some examples of the ways that screen use might exacerbate mental health symptoms, research shows that there are several important factors.

1) **The first one is upward social comparisons.** This is where we compare ourselves to others who we see as superior, a more successful than us in some way, and this might be related to body image or lifestyle or something else. Anyone who's ever been on social media will have experienced this, and we know that this can be highly problematic for teens who are struggling with well-being issues, and for younger teens who are not yet able to critically analyse the content that they see online.
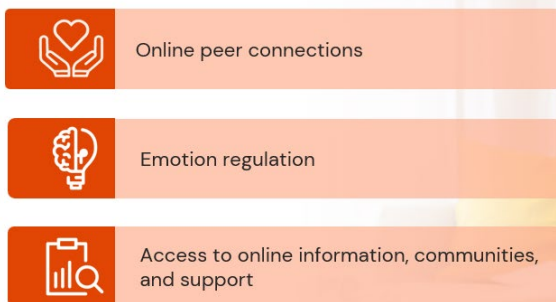
2) **Secondly, exposure to age, inappropriate or explicit content,** and this includes sexual content, can be problematic. Sadly, we do know that algorithms on social media apps have been shown to increase exposure to psychologically harmful content to susceptible individuals, and this is mostly related to disordered eating and self-harm. Which then can further exacerbate these issues in those young people who are already at risk.

3) **And finally, the amount of time spent on screens,** which incidentally was the top concern of parents, is important because of the way that it can displace other healthy and important activities.

What does screentime displace?

- **89%** Completing schoolwork
- **62%** Doing chores
- **57%** Sleeping
- **19%** Exercising
- **19%** Spending time with family
- **18%** Engaging in hobbies
- **10%** Spending time with friends

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So what is it displacing? Well, when we asked young people in our study, their top three responses were: schoolwork, chores and sleeping. None of these are particularly exciting activities for most teenagers, but they are obviously all very important and probably the most likely to generate some degree of conflict at home as well. From a mental health perspective, the impact of screens on sleep is of particular concern because we do know that insufficient sleep increases the risk of mental health problems for adolescents.

How screen use can support mental health

- Online peer connections
- Emotion regulation
- Access to online information, communities, and support

However, I really do want to emphasise that researchers have also found that, for many young people, screen use can positively support mental health.

1) One of the first ways I'm going to talk about is **online peer connections**. Screen use is often shown to increase social connectivity and relationships amongst teens. If a teenager is having a difficult time, they may have trouble engaging with friends face to face and instead prefer interacting online. So as one student told us in a focus group: *"I find it really hard to connect with kids at school because I don't have a lot in common with them, but I have an awesome group of online friends who I game with and that's one of the happiest parts of my day."*

2) Next is **emotion regulation**. Many young people report using screen-based activities to help regulate their emotions as a coping mechanism to switch off or distract themselves from negative thoughts or feelings. This means of digital emotion regulation can be beneficial for many people, and perhaps you've used it yourself to unwind from a stressful day. As one student put it really clearly: *"It's exhausting being in my brain. Sometimes I just like being by myself and scrolling for a bit. It helps me to relax."* And we know that neurodivergent teens especially report the benefits of using screens for emotion regulation.

3) And, finally, as we all know, the internet does **offer excellent opportunities to learn and connect and find support.** This is particularly true for marginalised groups of young people, where the online space is somewhere that they can be themselves and find safe communities to connect with. There's also a wealth of really informative content available online that many young people are leveraging to educate themselves and to develop their skills.

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Q: Is the rise in screen use helpful or harmful to adolescent well-being?

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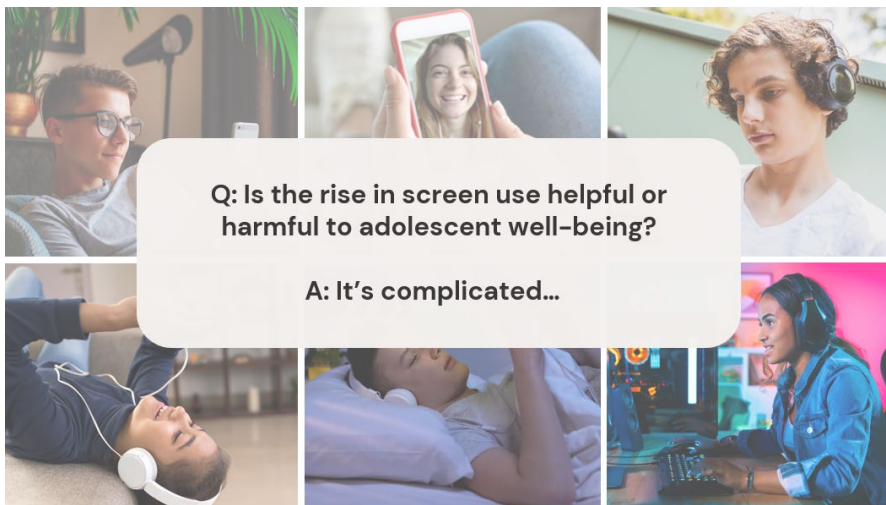
So, what can families do to support their children to navigate the digital world?

The good news is, positive relationships with parents and families has been shown to be a significant protective factor for teen mental health, and this includes when engaging online.

Mitigating the potential impacts of screentime

1 Promoting alternative activities e.g., sports, art and hobbies

2 Facilitating offline social engagements

3 Prioritising and role modelling physical activity

4 Proactively developing teens' socio-emotional skills

5 Prioritising and role modelling good sleep

Starting with the basics – and many parents are already doing this – helping to mitigate the potential impacts of screen time. This entails thinking about what we can be doing to ensure a balance when it comes to engagement and other activities, things like ensuring regular access to offline social engagements and particularly physical activity. There is good evidence now linking higher daily screen hours with childhood obesity.

But it also means prioritising 8 to 10 hours of quality sleep for your teen given the clear association between sleep and good mental health. And this does mean, where possible, removing digital devices from the bedroom.

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Educating children about online risks, algorithms, and appropriate content sharing

1. Communicating about digital technology from a young age

2. Encouraging critical thinking and considering other perspectives

3. Having tough conversations about sensitive topics

Next, as parents we have a wonderful opportunity to talk about and educate our kids about the online world from a young age – including safety and the risks of course, which most parents are already doing, but also about the intentional design of social media apps, about how they are designed to keep us using them for as long as possible, because these companies make a lot of money from our time and attention, and about the role of algorithms in shaping the content we see, which often means shaping our viewpoints about all sorts of topics.

Related to this is teaching our kids how to critically analyse the sources of their information, particularly if it comes from social media, and, if appropriate, discussing alternative perspectives about divisive issues.

Finally, with sensitive topics like pornography, extremist material, body image or self–harm content, kids are going to be less likely to come to their parents with these issues. It is often be up to us, as parents, to proactively raise these topics, so that in the future, if and when they do encounter this content, our children are better informed, and they may feel more comfortable coming to us and talking about their experiences.

Switching from monitoring to mentoring

1. Acknowledging that technology is an integral part of modern life

2. Setting boundaries (e.g., keeping bedtime and mealtime tech-free)

3. Looking for the positives in our children's online interests

4. Connecting with our children online together

5. Checking in with them to see how their virtual life is going

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Finally, I just want to say that this is all really challenging. There's no guidebook and we know that banning technology from teenagers doesn't work. These devices are here to stay. They're a part of our life. So perhaps, see if you can find a middle ground and throw away the parent guilt. To do this, it might help to consider a shift in our role from monitoring to mentoring.

This still includes setting boundaries and limits, of course. And if you had to choose two times of the day to go tech free, consider bedtime and mealtimes as the most important for well-being. As I said earlier, insufficient or poor-quality sleep is a known risk factor for depression, and tech free mealtimes provide a whole lot of benefits for family connection and communication.

But it's also important to have a look at the positives in your child's online interests. Try to engage and get to know these platforms. Think about how you might be able to work together as a family to make changes if you feel that you need to do that. Get your young person to reflect – *What's healthy for me? How am I feeling when using these devices? S*o that they can also be an active participant in these conversations.

And, if you can, try to connect with your kids online. They really want to invite us into their worlds, especially younger children. And you might already be playing video games with them or sharing memes or exploring content together. These are all really great.

If they don't want that, you can still check in with them every day to see how things are going in their virtual life, just as you'd ask them about their day at school or other aspects of their lives.

For more specific advice about screen use in children, the eSafety Commissioner is an Australian government agency that offers excellent support and a huge amount of information for parents.

One feature which could be especially useful is the eSafety guide that I have screenshot for this slide. This guide provides information for parents about the features and potential risks associated with the most popular social media, gaming and other apps that are available to Australian children. This site is it's regularly updated to keep up with the changing apps and games.

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We are hugely grateful to the students, school staff and families who contribute to the Future Proofing Study.

www.futureproofing.org.au

So that's it for now.

Thank you for listening/reading and a very big shout out to the students, school staff and families who have been contributing every year to the Future Proofing research.
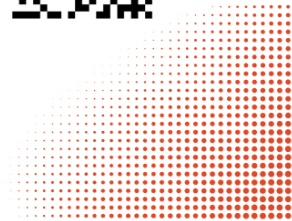
We welcome your questions and feedback, please take a few minutes to complete the feedback form.

Please submit your questions and feedback using the link or QR code.

https://bit.ly/Screensandteenswebinar

This project is proudly supported by the Bupa Foundation

We'd really love to receive your questions and hear your feedback so, if you do have a minute, please visit our feedback form to share your thoughts. You can use the QR code or right click and follow this link. Thank you so much for your time.

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