The Children's Society

Net Gains? Young people's digital lives and well-being: A research review and new findings

Summary and key points

Since it first became accessible in the 1990s concerns have been expressed about the potentially harmful impact of internet use on young people. The threat to their physical and mental health, the risk of exposure to harmful or hateful content and the challenges for parents of managing and protecting their children online have been a focus for frequent debate.

At the same time, the internet is now taken for granted by most young people as their main resource for communication, entertainment and information-gathering. The amount of time they spend online has grown in recent years and the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased reliance on the internet to maintain relationships, support learning and help to pass the time, has served to further cement the central role of a digital life.

The *Net Gains?* report reviews the evidence on how young people use the internet and the effects this has on them, exploring what is known and what remains less clear about young people's digital lives. It focuses on adolescence, a period of transformation for a young person when digital media can play a significant part in shaping their experiences. It also highlights the relative absence of young people's voices on these issues and presents early findings from research on the links between their well-being online and offline.

Digital connectedness and inequality

Evidence of the ubiquity of the internet in the lives of children and young people in the UK – with greater reach than in most other European countries – is well documented. However, it has recently begun to be acknowledged that a small but significant number of young people lack adequate access, and that a greater number do not have the skills or support to benefit from their digital lives. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced this in revealing the absence in many households of appropriate hardware or consistent connection to enable many young people to engage with online education, and research has found that – even before the pandemic – many young people were not as adept in navigating and interacting with the virtual world as had been believed.

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In some families, poor home resources, compounded by a lack of parental support, confidence or skills, remain a barrier to positive connectedness. Digital inequality can comprise multiple factors which combine to impair the quality of experiences that young people have in their digital lives.

The impacts on young people of being online

Many studies have been published on the impacts of being online on young people – of the effects of excessive internet use, of detriment to physical and mental health and well-being, and on a range of risks and harms from specific experiences (e.g. 'cyberbullying'). Findings include that:

- Screen time alone has little or no negative impact on physical health, or on family or peer relationships – young people's social lives and feelings of belonging (e.g. at school) can be improved through online contact.
- Spending long periods online is more likely to be symptomatic of low well-being, or mental ill health, than its cause. Impacts on mental health are minimal, even when 'excessive' time is devoted to digital devices.
- Relatively few young people report experiencing negative effects of viewing or sharing sexual content (pornography, 'sexting', etc.) – being upset because of violent imagery or hateful content was more prevalent – and most of this activity is 'age normative' (i.e. increases with age through adolescence). Those who experience harm often share characteristics that increase their vulnerability.
- The extent and impact of cyberbullying remain hard to determine. Studies have shown that 'traditional' (offline) bullying was more prevalent among adolescents and had greater independent negative association with mental well-being than cyberbullying.
- Worries about the potentially 'contagious' impact of viewing online imagery of self-harm are difficult to verify. Instead, the evidence on outcomes is mixed, and there is a likelihood that many young people who engage with such imagery on social media have already harmed themselves, or are at high risk, and may even find solace, support and alternative strategies to deal with stress through communicating with peers.
- The benefits and opportunities for young people of being online – including potentially supportive, therapeutic and liberating effects – remain largely unexplored.

Some of these findings are relative to gender and to ethnicity, and many have been shown to be linked to the socio-economic status of a young person's family. Individual characteristics (e.g. personality type) may also have an influence, alongside variations in a young person's maturity during adolescence. In sum, the social and developmental context for young people's digital lives has an important influence on their experiences – both positive and negative.

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Recognising the flaws in research is also important. Sometimes it is hard to interpret findings with clarity and certainty – for a number of reasons. Many studies are limited in their capacity to show 'impact' because of a cross-sectional design (data was collected on only one occasion, preventing consideration of outcomes over time, or the attribution of causality). Much of the research has been done through large-scale surveys, informed by psychological or epidemiological methodologies and in the absence of a young person-centred approach. Many studies have been biased – driven by an assumption that online experiences will be harmful, and framing inquiries to 'prove' this. This means, for example, that we know little about what sexual imagery young people view online as they grow up, or how they understand and express intimacy in their online interactions. Our understanding of who is most at risk of serious online harm, and why, also remains limited – although there is an increasing sense that use of the internet serves to amplify the disadvantages and vulnerabilities that a young person experiences in their offline life.

Parenting and the challenge of supporting young people's digital lives

The role of parents and carers in bringing up adolescent children is pivotal to a healthy and happy transition from the dependency of earlier childhood to the independence of young adulthood. How this plays out in relation to a young person's digital life as they mature presents a variety of challenges, and the parents of teenagers may be particularly fearful of exposure to harm or negative effects.

Parents and carers employ a variety of methods and strategies to support and protect their adolescents online. 'Restrictive' efforts (e.g. using software to block content or limit time online), 'facilitative' approaches (discussing a young person does and sees online, suggesting responses and strategies e.g. for upsetting content, or spending time together online) and 'monitoring' (keeping track of websites visited, contacts made, etc.) all play a part in parental 'mediation.' There is some evidence that supportive and enabling methods are becoming more common in higher income countries such as the UK, and that the age, gender and the digital skill level and confidence of parents themselves make a difference to how they manage their adolescent children's online experiences.

In addition, some studies have highlighted the relevance of relationships within the family and the dynamics of family life during adolescence as a key contributor to whether and how much young people benefit from or have limited or negative online experiences.

But, regardless of how much the interactions within a household may affect the degree to which parents and carers

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can manage their adolescents' digital lives, one thing has become clear. As with other aspects of burgeoning autonomy and independence during adolescence, they cannot fully remove the possibility or risk of their child having negative experiences. Allowing and enabling a young person to explore and expand their online experience – to gain the many potential benefits of an active digital life – brings with it the inevitable potential for upset or harm. As a corollary, some commentators have suggested that this means that the key role of parents and carers (and educators) of adolescents is to encourage and gradually build 'online resilience' among adolescents.

Gaps in research knowledge and understanding

The internet is now central to many aspects of the day-to-day existence of most young people in the UK – and, in that sense, has become mundane and taken for granted by many. At the same time, it has been demonised as the cause of declining mental health or the root of other difficulties and problems for adolescents. Research evidence to support this view of the malign impact of digital engagement is limited, despite the breadth and scope of the literature on this subject. This suggests that, although there are legitimate concerns about negative impacts and online harm, for the most part these apply only to a small number of young people whose vulnerability can be explained through understanding of other aspects of their lives.

There also remain many remain many important gaps in knowledge. Greater clarity could be achieved through:

- The application of research methodologies which are underpinned by a young person-centred approach, to elevate the contribution of youth voice on topics in this field.
- Acknowledgement that only through study of the interplay of a complex set of factors – in particular those that reside offline (e.g. socio-economic status of a young person's family) and the broader societal context (e.g. of sexism, racism, etc.) – can we fully understand why and how internet use links to difficulties and harm in young people's lives.

It is also important to accept that – although there may be ways to reduce online risk and to improve young people's experiences – the rapid shifting and changing of the digital ecosystem which young people inhabit (the devices, apps and language they use) can thwart research efforts to fully appreciate the complexity of young people's digital lives.

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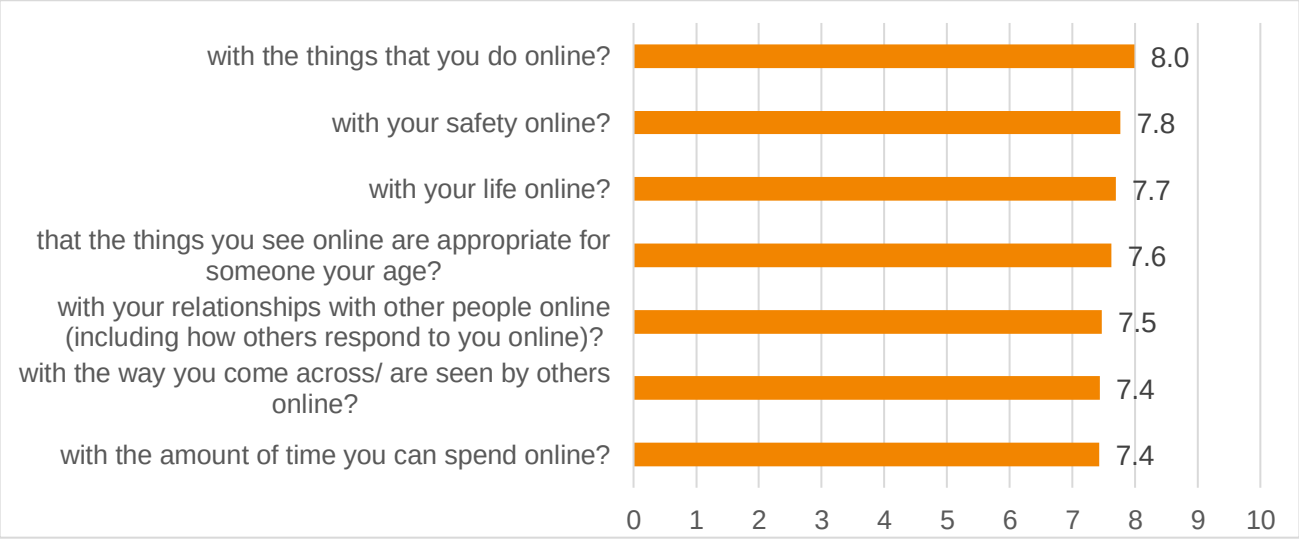
Young people's digital lives and well-being

One way to better understand young people's digital lives is to ask them how happy they are with them. In our 2020 Good Childhood survey we asked just over 2,000 10-17 year olds questions on their views on the internet and their own use, the impacts they felt this had on them and their online experiences. We also looked at the link between their answers to these questions and their overall responses to other questions on their well-being (e.g. on life satisfaction).

Most of the young people in our sample 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that there were positive aspects of being online (e.g. 'I like what I do online' – 90%; 'I like using online devices' – 92%). On the whole, young people reported either a positive or a 'mixed' impact of their digital lives, (e.g. 38% said the impact was mixed on 'How you feel overall'; 39% said the impact was mixed on 'How you feel about yourself'). 46% said the impact was mostly positive on 'Relationships with friends you often see in person' and this was the question which registered the highest number of positive responses – whereas the question which prompted the most negative responses (13%) was impact on 'Your school life (e.g. your relationships with other children and teachers at school).'

We also asked young people to rate their happiness with various aspects of being online using a scale from 0 (for 'very unhappy') to 10 ('very happy') – see Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Young people's (aged 10 to 17) mean scores (on a scale of 0 to 10) when asked 'How happy are you...'



Source: The Children's Society's Household Survey, Wave 19, April-June 2020

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For the most part, young people said they were relatively happy with all of the things we asked about, with the mean scores for each item ranging from 8.0 for 'the things you do online' (with 92% of young people reporting scores above the mid-point of the 0-10 scale), to 7.4 for 'the way you come across / are seen by others online' and 'the amount of time you spend online' (83% of young people reporting scores above the mid-point).

The two issues for which there were lower scores might be linked to other underlying issues, for example worries about time spent online may suggest that young people are picking up on mainstream debates about how this may be harmful, and concerns around 'the way you come across' may be to do with digital literacy (in the broadest sense of 'netiquette' – knowing what to say / how to be accepted or belong according to unwritten rules online) or they may relate to sensitivities around physical appearance.

Analysis of the relationship between 'online happiness' (expressed in responses to these questions) and overall happiness (measured through our Good Childhood Index (GCI)[1] – of ten items including happiness with family, friends and school alongside questions on life satisfaction) found only moderate correlations between aspects of online and offline happiness. Regression analysis with GCI items showed that overall online happiness did not increase the amount of explained variation or significantly contribute to a model of children's life satisfaction.[2]

Although it is important to be aware that this was initial, exploratory work – and that the data were collected during the first COVID-19 lockdown – these findings suggest that young people are, for the most part, happy with their digital lives. They may also indicate that looking at issues related to online and offline life in isolation (as has often happened in research on young people's internet use) may not be helpful for generating comprehensive and informative insight.

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[1] See 'The Good Childhood Report, 2021' https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2021

[2] Based on a multi-item measure (also see 'The Good Childhood Report').

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