



Social Media and Mental Health: Let Our Schools Be Safe Zones

Today's generation of young people are in the unenviable position of being always connected while also being increasingly isolated. With social media, they can be in constant touch with other people – those they know personally and those they don't – giving them a feeling of being part of something and being "in the know." An unfortunate effect of such connectedness is that the time spent on social media is time not spent connecting with real life. Even worse, behind all that "connection" lies the frightening reality that social media is having a negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young people.

Social media is not "harmless fun"

According to [research](#) by the Education Policy Institute (EPI), which looked at the internet habits of young people in OECD countries, there is a correlation between extreme use of social media and harmful effects on young people's wellbeing. Heavy users of social media are more likely to experience cyber bullying and be exposed to inappropriate content like websites promoting self-harm. The report also noted that evidence points to a link between periods spent on social media and a rise in mental health problems.

That is not to say social media has no place in the lives of young people; on the contrary it can be a great way to stay in touch with family and friends, especially those not in the immediate vicinity. However, high use of social media can have a negative impact on youth self-esteem for both boys and girls, as they seek validation from this online world, which is often so far removed from reality, with the photo-shopped, airbrushed and edited version of life they often present. Other impacts come from addiction, with people constantly checking social media feeds or playing games even in bed, which affects sleep.

Everyone on board

Unfortunately, parental attitudes to this issue have not helped matters. Research suggests that many [parents do not monitor](#) their teenagers' social media use for various reasons – lack of awareness about the dangers associated with social media, being ill equipped to provide proper guidance to their children or even the fact that they are grappling with their own constant usage.

Yet it is important that we, as a society, do not blindly allow this mental health problem to develop and get out of control. We need to stop it in its tracks so that it does not become the big mental health issue of our time.



At Cycle Against Suicide, we educate and empower all sections of society, including young people, to understand and deal with mental health issues. Part of our strategy is delivering programmes that help build resilience in young people. However, we recognise that we cannot stem the tide of social media-induced mental health issues through such programming alone. It requires the cooperation and involvement of all. In particular, those who hold positions of influence in young peoples' lives – parents, schools, care givers and young people themselves.

Schools as safe zones

Schools have a big role to play. As the place where most young people form significant friendships, build bonds and interact with their peers, schools ought to be a safe zone where they can truly interact without the distraction of social media feeds. They should be able to talk face to face, look into each other's eyes and enjoy normal human interactions. Cycle Against Suicide applauds the decision taken by Principal Terry O'Sullivan of Blennerville National School and calls on all secondary schools to ban the use of phones during school hours. This is not such a radical idea – France has already indicated an intention to prevent students from [using mobile phones while in school](#), starting in the upcoming new school year. While students can bring their phones to school, they cannot be used at any time during the school day, including during breaks. There is no doubt that the absence of social media distraction will leave children with more time to interact with each other, building healthy relationships and the necessary social skills to thrive emotionally, mentally and physically. There is no reason why Ireland cannot do the same in our schools.

Schools cannot do this on their own, of course. Ultimately, parents have to buy into the idea in order for it to be implemented and to be successful. Cycle Against Suicide is standing with schools and parents who want to prevent social media-induced mental health problems from becoming an epidemic. Let us make our schools safe zones where our children can just be children – unplugged and free to be themselves.