

OECD Digital Economy Papers

Growing up in the social media age

No. 385



OECD Digital Economy Papers

Growing up in the social media age



Disclaimers

This paper was approved and declassified by the Digital Policy Committee (DPC) on 27 March 2026.

This document, as well as any data and map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

Photo credits: © New Africa/Shutterstock.

© OECD 2026



Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

This work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence. By using this work, you accept to be bound by the terms of this licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Attribution – you must cite the work.

Translations – you must cite the original work, identify changes to the original and add the following text: *In the event of any discrepancy between the original work and the translation, only the text of the original work should be considered valid.*

Adaptations – you must cite the original work and add the following text: *This is an adaptation of an original work by the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed in this adaptation should not be reported as representing the official views of the OECD or of its Member countries.*

Third-party material – the licence does not apply to third-party material in the work. If using such material, you are responsible for obtaining permission from the third party and for any claims of infringement.

You must not use the OECD logo, visual identity or cover image without express permission or suggest the OECD endorses your use of the work.

Any dispute arising under this licence shall be settled by arbitration in accordance with the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) Arbitration Rules 2012. The seat of arbitration shall be Paris (France). The number of arbitrators shall be one.

Abstract

Young people today interact in a range of digital environments – from browsing the Internet and playing video games to connecting with their peers on social media platforms. As social media has become central to how young people communicate and consume information, parents, educators and policymakers increasingly worry that social media use may contribute to lower academic performance and negatively affect well-being. This paper reviews the literature on the impacts of social media use on young people and then explores trends in how they use social media. It analyses the associations between social media use and academic outcomes and skills, focusing on creative thinking. Finally, the paper discusses how policy can support young people in making the most of social media’s many opportunities while protecting them against related risks in ways that safeguard freedom of expression, privacy, innovation and fair competition.

Foreword

The ongoing digital transformation of the economy and society holds many promises to spur innovation, generate efficiencies and improve services, and in doing so boost growth. Digital technologies empower people by increasing access to information and enabling new forms of social engagement. Yet such benefits come with other challenges as digital transformation changes the nature and structure of organisations, markets and communities, and raises concerns about equity and inclusion. Realising the opportunities and addressing the challenges is not automatic and may require policy action to make digital transformation boost growth and improve well-being.

The OECD-Korea Digital Society Initiative (DSI), under the auspices of the OECD Digital Policy Committee (DPC) and supported by Korea, aims to help advance the DPC's work on the societal aspects of digital transformation, including its implications for human rights, by integrating relevant expertise from across the DPC and its data infrastructures. The DSI provides insights on the impacts of digital transformation and digital technology development on society, and a venue for countries to discuss, exchange and explore policy case studies on related issues. The DSI focuses on three priority areas: digital inclusion and divides; safety; and trust. These themes were chosen as key areas to advance individual and societal well-being in today's highly digital society.

This paper represents an output of the DSI. It contributes to a better understanding of key trends in the digital transformation of societies across OECD Member and partner economies and it identifies innovative policy practices to maximise the opportunities of digital technologies for people and society and to minimise the related risks.

This paper was written by Hanna Pawelec and Molly Leshner with contributions from Angela Attrey, under the direction of Jerry Sheehan and Audrey Plonk. Research by Lorena Giuberti Coutinho in the initial phase of the project is gratefully acknowledged. The paper benefited from feedback from Craig Matasick, Lisa Robinson, Olivier Thevenon and Jeremy West. Mark Foss, Andreia Furtado and Alice Weber provided editorial and communication support.

Table of contents

Disclaimers	2
Abstract	3
Foreword	4
Executive summary	7
1 Introduction	9
2 What is social media and its impacts?	10
The research on social media use and well-being outcomes is complex and nuanced	10
Social media use is ubiquitous among young people, although girls are more intensive users	11
3 The linkages between social media use and academic performance	18
Students who use social media moderately have higher test scores, while excessive use is associated with falling academic performance	18
Moderate social media use is associated with more creative thinking	20
4 Exploring policy approaches to manage social media use by young people	22
Restrictions on digital devices in schools has gained popularity, but implementation is a challenge	22
National and subnational governments are enacting dedicated social media laws over and above laws governing online safety or privacy	24
5 Conclusion	28
Annex A. Time spent by girls and boys on digital leisure activities	29
References	30
Endnotes	38

FIGURES

Figure 1. Almost all young people use social media, but they spend more time browsing than communicating and sharing digital content	14
Figure 2. The average 15-year-old in the OECD spends 35 hours a week using social media	15
Figure 3. Digital leisure activities differ by sex	16
Figure 4. The more young people see their friends right after school, the more time they spend on social media	17
Figure 5. For young people who use social media, mathematics performance tends to decline as time spent increases	19
Figure 6. Moderate social media use is associated with better performance in creative thinking	21
Figure 7. Mobile phone bans in schools are uncorrelated with social media use by young people	24
Figure A A.1. Browsing social media is the most popular digital leisure activity among girls	29

BOXES

Box 1. The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)	13
Box 2. France's ban on mobile phones in middle schools	23
Box 3. Subnational legislation with social media provisions in the United States	25
Box 4. Australia's Social Media Minimum Age Framework for children under the age of 16	27

Executive summary

Digital technologies open new possibilities for education and play, enabling young people to find information faster and offering new opportunities to foster creativity and connection. Young people interact in a range of digital environments – from browsing the Internet and playing video games to connecting with their peers on social media platforms. Social media plays a central role in how young people communicate online. For those born in the early to mid-2000s, communicating via social media platforms is an integral part of their daily lives.

While social media has become central to how young people communicate and consume information, it also has potential downsides. Parents, educators and policymakers increasingly worry about the effect of social media on academic performance, learning environments, risks to mental health and overall well-being. The appeal of social media for young people and its potential for distraction, unhealthy comparisons and harmful information sharing have led several countries to restrict mobile phones in schools. Other countries have enacted laws to regulate how social media companies can offer their services to young people. In addition, some countries have established laws that set a minimum age for social media accounts.

This paper reviews the literature on the impacts of social media use on young people, focusing primarily on 15-year-olds, and explores trends in their social media use. Drawing on newly derived insights from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data for 2022, it analyses the associations between social media use and academic outcomes and skills, particularly creative thinking – a key complementary skill to thrive in highly digital environments. Finally, the paper discusses how policy can support young people in making the most of social media's many opportunities while protecting them against related risks.

Main findings

Social media use is ubiquitous among young people

- On average across the OECD, 15-year-olds spend almost 35 hours per week on social media, exceeding time spent on homework and school lessons.
- Almost all young people use social media, but they spend more time browsing than communicating and sharing digital content. Around 95% of 15-year-olds report browsing social media daily and 88% report communicating or sharing digital content on these platforms.
- Social media use varies across the OECD, ranging from under 26 hours per week in Japan to over 45 hours in Chile.

Digital leisure activities differ by sex and socio-economic background

- Browsing social media is the most common digital leisure activity among girls, whereas boys spend more time playing video games. Overall, girls spend an average of 37.2 hours per week on social media compared to 31.8 hours for boys.
- Girls are especially at risk from the negative effects of social media use, including poor body image and community-based online isolation and exclusion.

- Girls and boys in the lowest socio-economic background quartile report spending on average eight and five hours more, respectively, per week on social media compared to their peers from the highest socio-economic background quartile.

Research on social media use and well-being outcomes is complex and nuanced

- Social media complements rather than substitutes in-person interaction for many young people. Students who spend more time with friends after school also tend to spend more time on social media. Those who see friends daily after school spend close to 40 hours per week on social media, compared to around 30 hours for those who rarely meet friends after school.
- At the same time, social media can reinforce feelings of loneliness and lead to even greater isolation at school. Those 15-year-olds who feel lonely at school use more social media than those who feel well integrated.

Students who use social media moderately have higher test scores, while excessive use is associated with falling academic performance

- Mathematics performance is highest among students who use social media moderately, with both non-users and heavy users performing worse. Performance declines steadily as time spent increases beyond three hours per day.
- Creative thinking scores also peak at moderate levels of browsing social media (one to three hours per day). However, any more than one hour spent using social media to communicate or share digital content on either the weekend or the weekday results in a decline in measured creative thinking scores.
- Declines in performance associated with social media use are more pronounced among advantaged students than disadvantaged students. Weekly social media use of 35 hours is associated with an estimated decline of around 37 points in mathematics performance for advantaged students and 19 points for disadvantaged students.

Restrictions on digital devices in schools and delaying access to social media has gained popularity, but implementation is a challenge

- More jurisdictions are attempting to restrict digital devices in schools. Digital devices, particularly mobile phones, are the primary way in which young people access social media platforms. Restricting device usage in school, or delaying access to social media for children, has widespread support among adults but less so among young people.
- Enforcement poses practical challenges, however, with many students continuing to use their devices during school hours despite restrictions. On average across the OECD, 29% of 15-year-old students in schools that ban mobile phone use reported using their phone at school several times a day. An additional 21% reported using a mobile phone every day or almost every day.

1 Introduction

Digital technologies open new possibilities for education and play, enabling young people to find information faster and offering new opportunities to foster creativity and connection. Young people interact in a range of digital environments – from browsing the Internet and playing video games to connecting with their peers on social media platforms. Social media plays a central role in how young people communicate online. Those born in the early to mid-2000s have grown up connecting on platforms like Snapchat and Instagram. Communicating via social media platforms is thus an integral part of their daily lives.

While social media has become central to how young people communicate and consume information, it also has potential downsides. Parents, educators and policymakers increasingly worry about the effect of social media on academic performance, learning environments, risks to mental health and overall well-being. The appeal of social media for young people and its potential for distraction, unhealthy comparisons and harmful information sharing have led several countries to restrict mobile phones in schools (French Ministry of National Education, 2025^[1]). Other countries have enacted laws to regulate how social media companies can offer their services to young people (OECD, 2025^[2]). In addition, some countries have established laws that set a minimum age for social media accounts (Australian Government, 2024^[3]; Australian eSafety Commissioner, 2026^[4]).

This paper reviews the literature on the impacts of social media use on young people, focusing primarily on 15-year-olds, and explores trends in their social media use. Drawing on newly derived insights from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data for 2022, it analyses the associations between social media use and academic outcomes and skills, particularly creative thinking – a key complementary skill to thrive in highly digital environments. Finally, the paper discusses how policy can support young people in making the most of social media's many opportunities while protecting them against related risks.

2 What is social media and its impacts?

Social media can be understood as the “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content (such as videos)” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2025^[5]). However, academics have defined social media in various ways that have evolved over time (Aichner et al., 2021^[6]). Today, social media is typically characterised by several key features. First, it is understood to enable the *creation and exchange of user-generated content*, typically linked with the user via a profile. Second, it is understood to be *networked*, meaning that it enables both one-to-one and one-to-many communication with other users. Third, it is often understood to enable *interactivity*, whereby users can interact with content and other users, including through liking or messaging (Kapoor et al., 2018^[7]; Aichner et al., 2021^[6]).

Social media use is driven by motivations that are both positive (e.g. strengthening social connections) and negative (e.g. escaping unpleasant offline experiences) (OECD, 2025^[8]). For example, social media can reinforce existing relationships, as well as provide access to new people and communities, including those with shared identities and interests (Odgers and Jensen, 2020^[9]; Berger et al., 2022^[10]). Across the OECD, 40% of 11-15 year-olds have friends they met online and communicate with at least once a week (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study, 2023^[11]; OECD, 2025^[8]). It also facilitates access to information, with many people sourcing their news from social media platforms (OECD, 2024^[12]; Pew Research Center, 2025^[13]). In addition, some researchers have found social media platforms and online communication help reduce social isolation and cope with anxiety, including for elderly and young people (Cauberghe et al., 2021^[14]; James et al., 2023^[15]; Ibsen et al., 2025^[16]).

At the same time, social media use brings risks, particularly for young people who may be more susceptible to harms from negative peer feedback loops, unrealistic body images and harmful content online. Girls are especially at risk from the negative effects of social media use (OECD, 2024^[17]; Molly Rose Foundation, 2025^[18]; Anses, 2026^[19]). Some researchers also argue that intensive social media engagement may be used to withdraw from offline social interactions, potentially increasing negative feelings like loneliness (Noland, Necka and Cacioppo, 2018^[20]; Roberts, Young and David, 2024^[21]; OECD, 2025^[8]).

Social media clearly presents a multitude of opportunities and risks for young people (OECD, 2024^[17]; OECD, 2025^[22]; OECD, 2025^[8]). This section presents a brief review of the literature on the impacts of social media and well-being outcomes for young people.

The research on social media use and well-being outcomes is complex and nuanced

Researchers typically examine large, nationally representative datasets, including self-reported data on both social media use and outcomes such as mental health or assessments of academic achievement. Most analyses of such data find that excessive social media use is correlated with negative outcomes.

However, researchers disagree on the size of the correlations (Twenge et al., 2020^[23]; Orben and Przybylski, 2020^[24]; Vuorre, Orben and Przybylski, 2021^[25]). Correlations do not prove causality. For example, lower-performing students or those already depressed might be more likely to use social media rather than social media use being the cause of lower test scores or unhappiness. Some researchers suggest that social media use is less likely to affect the mental health of young people relative to other economic factors, such as income level or parental unemployment (Odgers, 2024^[26]). Furthermore, other circumstances, such as parental engagement, homelessness or hunger, may also play a role. OECD work indicates that both contextual and protective factors play a role in understanding the impacts (OECD, 2025^[8]).

Other disagreements about correlations further heighten the need for nuance. The relationship between social media and well-being outcomes may be subject to omitted variable bias, where a third variable is correlated with both variables of interest. Researchers also disagree on the extent to which other factors may explain potential correlations. Some see such factors having a direct causal relationship on young people's outcomes, while others view them as a pathway to negatively affect such outcomes (e.g. closeness with parents, negative attitudes towards school, cyberbullying, disrupted sleep, limited time with friends offline, etc.) (DoE, 2019^[27]; Orben and Przybylski, 2019^[28]; Twenge et al., 2022^[29]). Systematic reviews using rigorous statistical techniques and that account for covariates find a mixture of no, small or mixed correlative associations (Ivie et al., 2020^[30]; Odgers and Jensen, 2020^[9]; Orben, 2020^[31]; Hancock et al., 2022^[32]; Valkenburg, Meier and Beyens, 2022^[33]). Moreover, the associations should be further nuanced as moderating factors, such as age, sex and pre-existing vulnerabilities, may influence the strength and direction of the relationship between social media use and well-being outcomes (OECD, 2025^[8]).

At the same time, several longitudinal studies show that changes in digital technology or social media use are associated with changes in mental health and academic outcomes (Babic et al., 2017^[34]; Boers, Afzali and Newton, 2019^[35]; Shakya and Christakis, 2017^[36]), while others do not (Heffer, Good and Willoughby, 2019^[37]; Orben, Dienlin and Przybylski, 2019^[38]; Mitev et al., 2021^[39]). Some experimental research,¹ including natural experiments and controlled trials, finds positive correlations between participant outcomes and social media use with varying experiment specifications (Hunt et al., 2018^[40]; Allcott et al., 2020^[41]; Fioravanti, Probst and Casale, 2020^[42]; Mosquera et al., 2020^[43]; Lambert et al., 2022^[44]). Others find negative correlations (Hall et al., 2021^[45]; Collins and Eggers, 2022^[46]; Mahalingham, Howell and Clarke, 2023^[47]).

Additional methodological issues complicate the analysis of digital technology use or social media use and young people. First, most cross-sectional studies rely on self-reported data of time spent online. However, a body of research shows that self-reported data on digital technology use may be highly inaccurate (Sewall et al., 2020^[48]), with subjects routinely overestimating their use of digital technologies. Such data also provide aggregate relationships that may mask effects based on age-specific, cultural, family or other characteristics (so-called group-level effects). Overall, the academic research on social media use and well-being outcomes is complex and nuanced.

Social media use is ubiquitous among young people, although girls are more intensive users

Mobile phones are as ubiquitous in the lives of young people as they are for adults. Young people need a digital device to access social media, and this primarily takes place through mobile phones. At 15 years of age, 97% of students have their own smartphone on average across the OECD (OECD, 2025^[49]). However, most receive their first mobile phone between the ages of 10 and 12, with some getting one before turning 5 (McClain et al., 2025^[50]; Hungarian National Media and Infocommunications Authority, 2026^[51]). The first acquisition of a digital device is mainly motivated by educational and entertainment uses

(e.g. video games). The creation of social media accounts comes later, driven by the desire to interact with family members and peers (Arfaoui and Elbaz, 2025^[52]).

The use of devices for educational purposes persists as children grow older. According to data from PISA for 2022 for 15-year-old students across the OECD (Box 1), devices are increasingly used for educational purposes, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Most young people use them for learning activities on average: regularly in the classroom (two hours), before and after school (1.5 hours) and on the weekend (1.6 hours) (OECD, 2025^[8]). Research suggests that some digital technologies can enhance learning outcomes, but their impact depends highly on context. If poorly designed or implemented, digital technologies risk becoming more distracting than beneficial (UNESCO, 2023^[53]). Moderate use of digital technologies for learning is also shown to be positively associated with academic performance (OECD, 2024^[54]): 15-year-olds who use digital tools for learning for up to three hours a day tend to outperform peers who do not, particularly in mathematics.

The use of devices for entertainment purposes likewise continues for children as they age. Limited use of digital technologies for leisure activities (on average under two hours) is associated with improved feelings of belonging and academic outcomes (OECD, 2024^[54]). However, as daily hours of leisure spent in digital environments increase, academic scores decline more rapidly than they do for those who spend an equivalent number of daily hours using digital technologies for learning.

Furthermore, not all leisure activities carried out on digital technologies have the same relationship with students' academic and non-academic outcomes. Students who spend over seven hours per day communicating on social media, for example, score 15 points lower in mathematics than those spending a similar amount of time playing video games. This is the case even after controlling for socio-economic profiles of students and schools (OECD, 2024^[54]).

Box 1. The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

The PISA survey is a cyclical, cross-national and cross-sectional study analysing 15-year-old students (OECD, 2023^[55]). The Programme assesses educational competencies in reading, mathematics, science and other domains like creative thinking and financial literacy. The survey collects detailed information about students, including socio-economic background and reported life satisfaction and the feeling of belonging.

First launched in 1997, with the first data collected in 2000, PISA assesses the academic competences of 15-year-old students across the world. Students also complete a background questionnaire to collect information about their attitudes, homes and schools, and activities. Optional questionnaires are sometimes distributed to students (e.g. additional modules focusing on topics like well-being or financial literacy) or to other people in students' lives, including their parents, teachers and school administrators.

The 2022 assessment surveyed approximately 700 000 students in 81 countries and economies, representing about 29 million 15-year-olds. Some caution is required when interpreting estimates for Australia, Canada, Denmark, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. In these countries, one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (OECD, 2023^[56]).

The optional "ICT questionnaire", in which 53 countries and economies participated, surveyed students on their use of digital devices. This questionnaire included questions on the availability and use of digital resources, as well as time spent in specific leisure activities on the weekend and weekdays. These included activities such as playing video games, browsing social media networks, and communicating and sharing digital content on social media networks.

In addition, 15 countries distributed the "Well-being questionnaire" to students. This included questions about health, body image, number of friends, physical and mental health, and social connectedness (OECD, 2025^[57]). Compared with the other questionnaires, the Well-being questionnaire has a smaller sample of participating students and covers only nine participating OECD Member countries. These data can be used to provide insights on the relationship between social media use and body image or social connectedness.

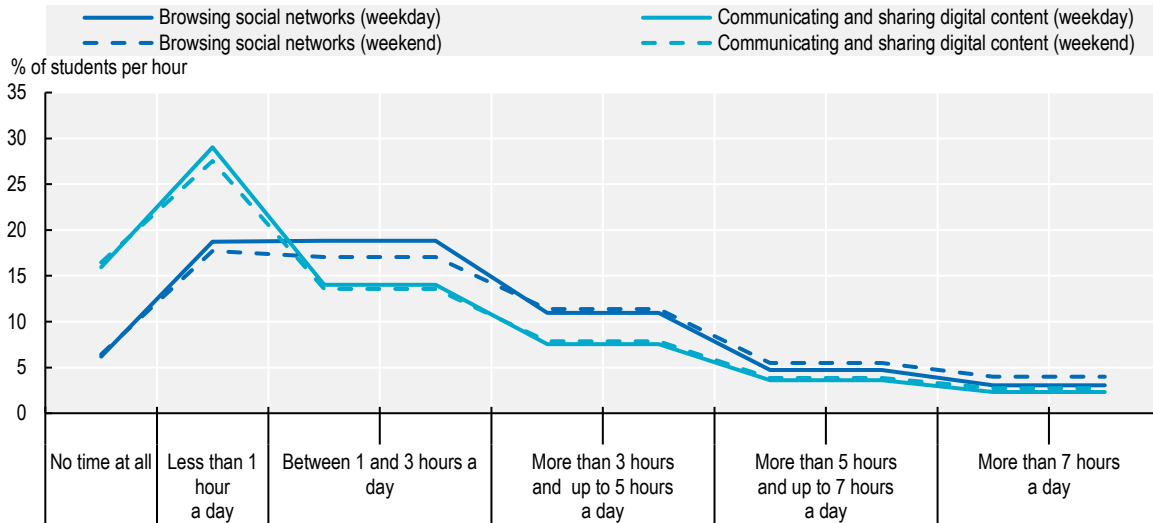
Source: OECD (2023^[56]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>; OECD (2024^[58]), *PISA 2022 Technical Report*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/01820d6d-en>; OECD (2025^[49]), *PISA 2022 Database*, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html>; OECD (2025^[59]), *PISA 2022 ICT Familiarity Questionnaire*.

Young people use digital devices to access social media platforms often. On average across the OECD,² about 95% of surveyed 15-year-old students report browsing social media on a typical day. Meanwhile, 88% report communicating and sharing digital content on social media, with relatively little difference on weekdays and weekends (OECD, 2025^[49]). This may suggest a revealed preference for time spent on social media. They also report spending more time browsing social media, and for longer periods of time, than communicating and sharing digital content on social media or other online communication platforms (Figure 1).

The intensity of social media use varies across countries. A low share of respondents across the OECD (6%) report spending no time at all browsing social media networks on either the weekday or the weekend. However, more than 10% of surveyed 15-year-olds in Israel, Japan, Korea and Türkiye report spending no time at all on social media (OECD, 2025^[49]).

Figure 1. Almost all young people use social media, but they spend more time browsing than communicating and sharing digital content

Percentage of 15-year-old students by time spent browsing social media networks, or communicating and sharing digital content on social media or any communication platform, on weekdays and weekends, OECD average, 2022



Note: Endnote.³

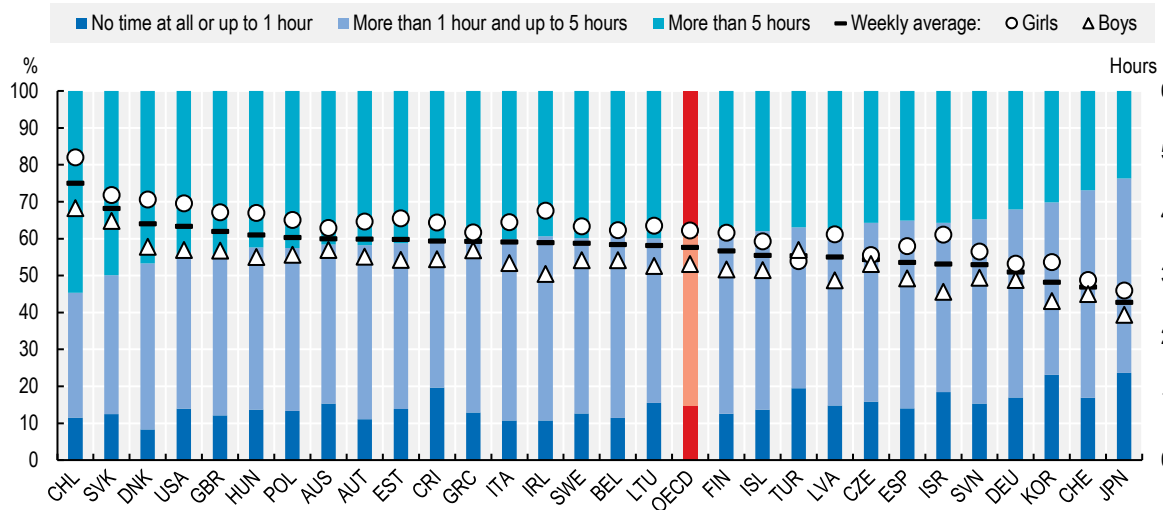
Source: Calculations based on OECD (2025^[49]), *Programme for International Student Assessment Database*, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 24 June 2025).

Although communicating and sharing digital content on social media or other online communication platforms is also widespread, 16% of 15-year-olds do not spend any time carrying out this activity either on the weekday or on the weekend (Figure 1). More so, a third of 15-year-olds in Israel and around a quarter in Costa Rica, Czechia and Türkiye report neither communicating nor sharing content on social media on either weekdays or weekends. In contrast, approximately 12% of those surveyed report spending more than five hours communicating and sharing digital content on weekdays and 13% report spending more than five hours doing so on the weekend. In Chile and Slovakia, around one in five 15-year-olds spend more than five hours on this activity.

Taken together, 15-year-old students in OECD Member countries spent on average almost 35 hours per week browsing, communicating and sharing digital content via social media in 2022 (Figure 2). This cohort also reports different average rates of usage of social media across countries. For example, on average, 15-year-old students spend less than 26 hours per week on social media in Japan and more than 45 hours per week in Chile. By way of comparison, the average 15-year-old OECD student spends almost 24 hours per week learning in regular school lessons (OECD, 2023^[55]) and 10.5 hours per week completing homework (OECD, 2025^[49]).

Figure 2. The average 15-year-old in the OECD spends 35 hours a week using social media

Percentage of 15-year-old students by average time spent on social media per day (left axis), and overall average weekly hours of social media use, total and by sex (right axis), 2022



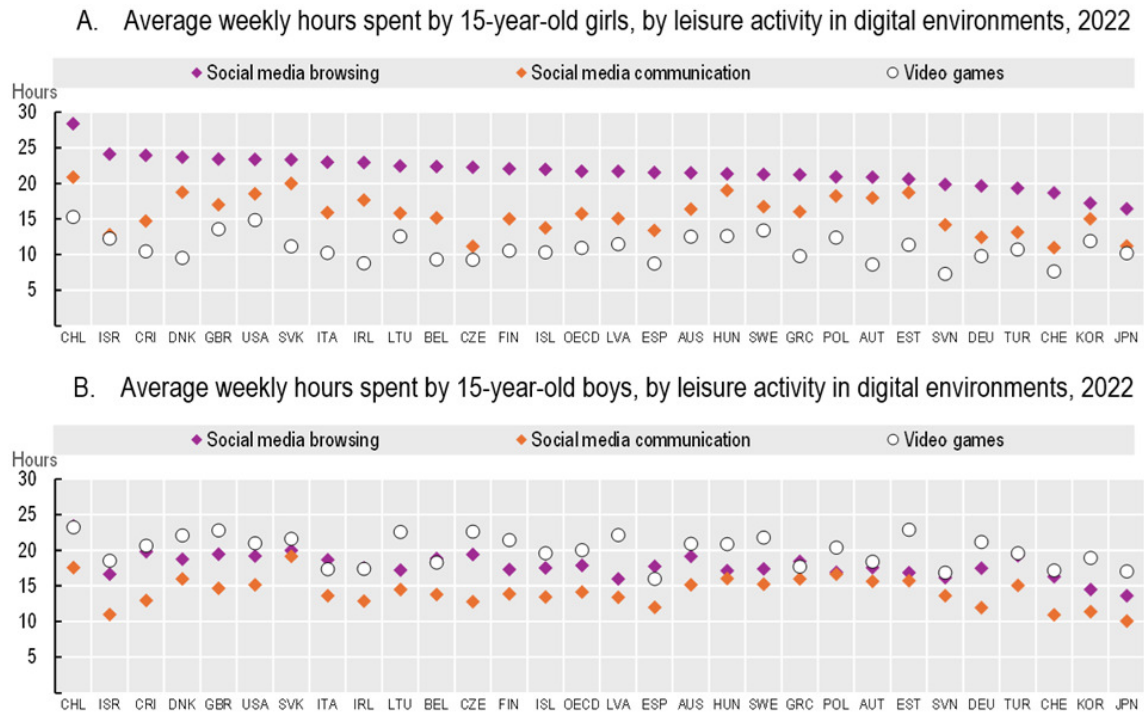
Note: See Endnote.4

Source: Calculations based on OECD (2025^[49]), *Programme for International Student Assessment Database*, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 24 June 2025).

In all OECD Member countries surveyed, girls spend more of their leisure time in digital environments browsing social media than on other activities (Figure A A.1). Conversely, in most countries, playing video games is the top leisure activity in digital environments for boys. On average across the OECD, girls spend 22 hours per week browsing social media and 16 hours communicating and sharing on social media (Figure 3). In contrast, boys spend 18 hours browsing social media and 14 hours on social media communication.

Differences between boys and girls in playing video games are more striking. Boys dedicate 20 hours per week to video games while girls spend only 11 hours doing so (Figure A A.1). Boys and girls alike report spending another 17 hours browsing the Internet. They also spend around ten hours on each of the following: looking for practical information online, learning how to do a specific task or activity (e.g. reading and listening to tutorials and podcasts), and creating and editing online content.

Figure 3. Digital leisure activities differ by sex



Note: See Endnote.⁵

Source: Calculations based on OECD (2025^[49]), *Programme for International Student Assessment Database*, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 24 June 2025).

Considering both browsing and communicating on social media, across the OECD, girls spend an average of 37.2 hours per week on social media – over 5 hours more than boys (31.8 hours) (Figure 2). In Ireland, girls spend ten more hours per week on social media than boys, and other studies have highlighted a higher rate of problematic social media use among girls (OECD, 2024^[17]). Türkiye is the only surveyed country in the OECD in which boys spend more time on social media than girls. Several authors argue that the negative effects of social media may be sex specific, with girls at potentially higher risk of harms like poor body image and community-based online isolation and exclusion (Napp and Breda, 2022^[60]; Svensson, Johnson and Olsson, 2022^[61]; Haidt, 2024^[62]; OECD, 2024^[17]; Molly Rose Foundation, 2025^[18]).

The average differences in social media use tend to be relatively small across other socio-demographic characteristics. For example, across OECD Member countries, young people with tertiary-educated parents spend 33.2 hours on social media per week. This is only slightly less time than their counterparts with parents who have no more than non-tertiary post-secondary education (36.5 hours) or secondary or lower education (36.3 hours). Similarly, on average across OECD Members, 15-year-old students with an immigrant background spend slightly more time (up to 2.1 hours) on social media than native-born students, although the overall differences are small (OECD, 2025^[49]).

Social media interactions can elicit comparisons with others (e.g. peers and celebrities) and increase peer feedback (both positive and negative). Some researchers argue that social media may be used to withdraw from offline social interactions, potentially increasing negative feelings like loneliness. At the same time, 40% of 11-15 year-olds across the OECD have friends they met online and communicate with those friends at least once a week (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study, 2023^[11]; OECD, 2025^[8]).

Social connection is integral to social media. The PISA Well-being and ICT questionnaires are optional, and five countries (Costa Rica, Ireland, Hungary, Slovenia and Spain) implemented both questionnaires in 2022. The data from these countries shed light on the complex interplay between social media usage and social connectedness. In general, students who are well connected with their peers spend, on average, more time on social media. Those who report having ten close friends or more dedicate one extra hour per day to scrolling and communicating compared to those who say they have two or fewer close friends.

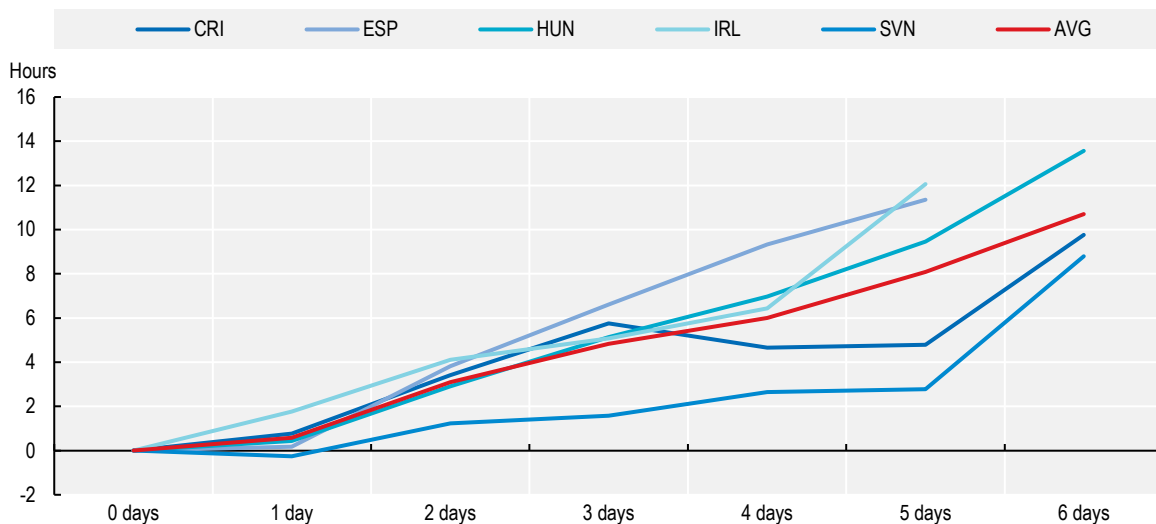
Not surprisingly, students who rarely or never talk to their friends on their phone, send text messages or have contact through social media also report spending less time on social media (around 25 hours per week) than those who communicate several times a day, and who report spending over 38 hours (on average) on social media per week. Interestingly, lower frequency of communication goes together with reduced time spent passively browsing social media.

The more days per week young people spend with their friends after school, the more hours they also spend on social media (Figure 4). Indeed, those who see their friends right after school one day per week or never spend on average around 30 hours per week on social media. Those who see them every day after school spend close to 40 hours per week on social media. This finding suggests that social media does not necessarily reduce in-person interactions but constitutes an intrinsic part of them. Indeed, young people often play video games with their friends simultaneously online, as well as physically located in the same room; they also browse the Internet together, among other online activities.

However, based on PISA 2022 data, social media use among 15-year-olds is higher for those who feel lonely at school compared to those who feel well integrated. Social media can be an escape from loneliness, but it can also reinforce this feeling and lead to even greater isolation at school. Moreover, these data suggest that higher social media usage is associated with lower life satisfaction and more negative body image, in line with existing research (Webster, Dunne and Hunter, 2020^[63]).

Figure 4. The more young people see their friends right after school, the more time they spend on social media

Change in weekly hours spent on social media relative to 15-year-olds who usually never see their friends right after school, 2022



Note: See Endnote.⁶

Source: Calculations based on OECD (2025^[49]), *Programme for International Student Assessment Database*, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 24 June 2025).

3

The linkages between social media use and academic performance

While trends in social media use are helpful, the linkages between using social media and other outcomes, such as academic performance and well-being, are more vital. This section examines several associations between social media use and academic outcomes.

Students who use social media moderately have higher test scores, while excessive use is associated with falling academic performance

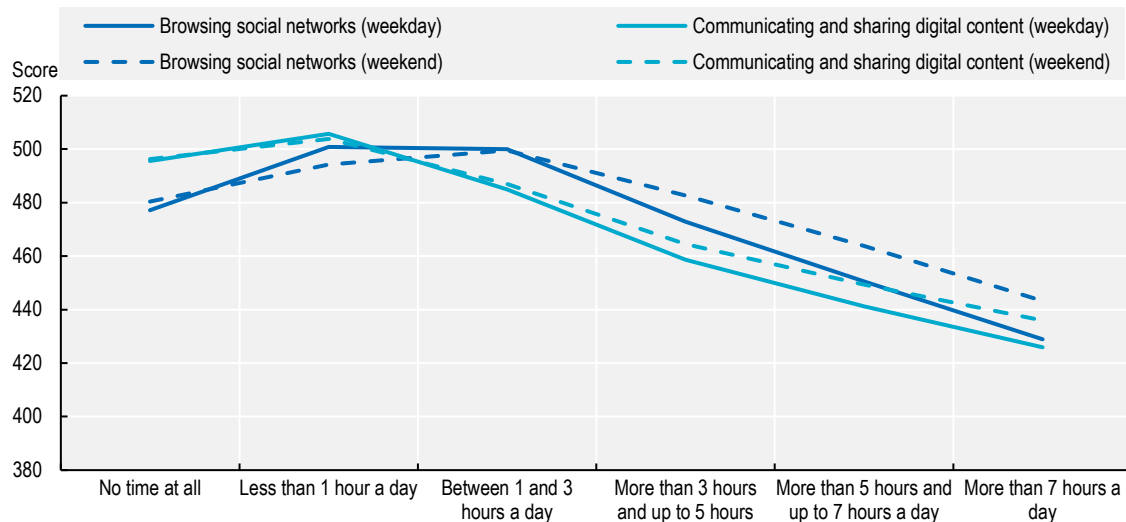
A key worry for parents and educators is that social media use may negatively affect academic performance. For example, young people who use social media may become easily distracted by and attracted to the interactive nature of social media, diverting their time and focus from academic activities (OECD, 2023^[55]). Some researchers also argue that use of digital applications like social media could have a direct cognitive effect on the brain's development (Firth et al., 2019^[64]; Montag and Markett, 2023^[65]). In contrast, social media use might generate positive effects for young people, including increasing access to information and fostering social connections.

While the relationship between self-reported social media use and academic performance is an association rather than a causal relationship, data from PISA shed light on this issue. Young people who report moderate social media browsing and communication tend to have better mathematics performance compared to those with no or excessive social media use (Figure 5). Indeed, in 2022, young people who reported browsing social media on weekdays for less than one hour a day, or from one to three hours per day, outperformed the overall OECD mean score in mathematics (472 points). These cohorts also scored more in mathematics on average than students who spent no time at all browsing on weekdays. Similar results are observed for science, although those students who report spending between one to three hours browsing on weekdays score higher in reading than those who browse for less than an hour or not at all per weekday.

On the weekend, young people can browse for longer with lower associated declines in their academic performance. Across the OECD, those who browse one to three hours per day on the weekend score higher on mathematics assessments than those who do not browse at all, as well as those who browsed for less than an hour. A similar pattern is observed with other academic outcomes, including reading and science scores. Here, on average, students who browse one to three hours on the weekend outperformed their peers.

Figure 5. For young people who use social media, mathematics performance tends to decline as time spent increases

Average mathematics score by time spent browsing social media networks, or communicating and sharing digital content on social media or any communication platform, OECD average, 2022



Note: See Endnote.⁷

Source: Calculations based on OECD (2025^[49]), *Programme for International Student Assessment Database*, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 24 June 2025).

A slightly different story emerges for communicating and sharing digital content on social media. On both weekdays and weekends, average performance peaks at less than one hour per day of social media communication and sharing digital content across mathematics, reading and science performance. For example, on average across the OECD, students who spend up to one hour communicating and sharing content on social media per weekday score higher in mathematics on average than their counterparts who spent no time on this activity on weekdays and much higher than their peers who spent more than seven hours per day.

Despite cross-country variation in the extent to which young people use social media, a consistent trend is observable across almost all OECD Member countries. For young people who use social media, mathematics performance tends to decline as time spent on social media increases. Excessive social media use correlates with lower performance: mathematics scores decline sharply for students who use social media for more than three hours per day on average. The lowest scores are often seen in the group that spends more than 11 hours per day on social media.

Socio-economic background is a strong determinant of academic performance and an important determinant of social media use. On average across the OECD, students with a disadvantaged socio-economic status scored 93 points lower in mathematics than counterparts who are socio-economically advantaged (OECD, 2023^[56]). For reference, 20 points roughly correspond to one year of schooling (OECD, 2023^[56]).

In parallel, girls and boys in the lowest socio-economic background quartile report spending on average eight and five hours more, respectively, per week on social media compared to their peers from the highest socio-economic background quartile. Analysis of PISA data exploring mathematics performance, social media and demographic variables suggests that declines in performance associated with social media use are more pronounced for students from privileged backgrounds. Indeed, weekly use of 35 hours corresponds to an estimated decrease of around 37 points in mathematics performance in students from

advantaged backgrounds and to an estimated decrease of 19 points in students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Moderate social media use is associated with more creative thinking

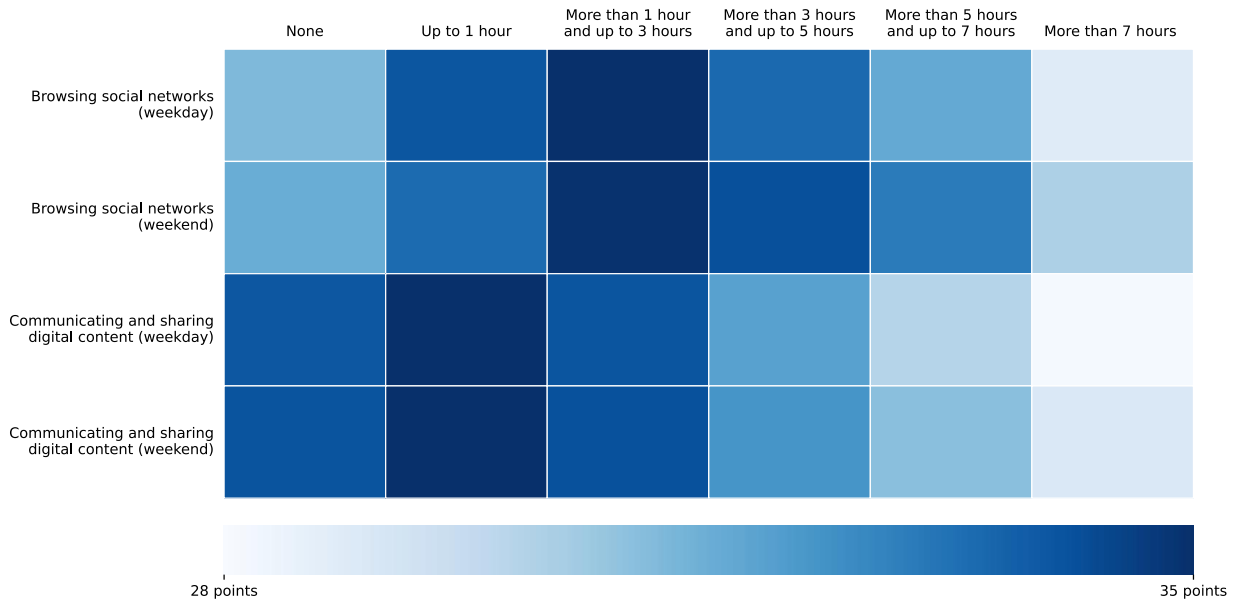
Social media offers opportunities to young people to be creative and express themselves in new ways (Anderson et al., 2022^[66]; Favero, Anderson and Park, 2025^[67]). This is in part because social media exposes young people to diverse perspectives, content and ideas, which can stimulate creativity. Similarly, social networks available on social media platforms may also provide an avenue for feedback and collaboration with other people. This can help young people practise their ability to evaluate and improve their ideas – a key component of creative thinking (OECD, 2025^[68]). On the other hand, some argue that the potential cognitive and attentional effects of digital technology use may be detrimental for creativity (Aru and Rozgonjuk, 2022^[69]).

Creative thinking is an increasing focus for many education systems across the OECD (OECD, 2024^[70]) and a core part of the complementary set of skills needed to thrive in highly digital environments (OECD, 2020^[71]). In 2022, PISA assessed performance in creative thinking, defined as “the ability to generate, evaluate and improve ideas to produce original and effective solutions, advance knowledge and create impactful expressions of imagination” (OECD, 2024^[72]). This assessment focused on young people’s cognitive capacity for creative work in four domains: visual expression, social problem solving, written expression and scientific problem solving.

As with the other academic competencies, a moderate amount of social media use is associated with better performance in creative thinking. Creative thinking scores peaked at a higher level of social media browsing (one to three hours) on either the weekend or weekday compared to sharing or communicating digital content on social media (Figure 6). Any more than one hour spent using social media to communicate or share digital content on either the weekend or the weekday results in a decline in measured creative thinking scores. Even after accounting for sex and socio-economic status of students and schools, students who spend at least one hour communicating and sharing digital content on social media or communication platforms scored two points⁸ below in creative thinking than those who spend less than one hour (OECD, 2024^[72]).

Figure 6. Moderate social media use is associated with better performance in creative thinking

Average creative thinking score of 15-year-old students, by time spent browsing social media networks, or communicating and sharing digital content on social media or any communication platform, OECD average, 2022



Note: See Endnote.⁹

Source: Calculations based on OECD (2025^[49]), *Programme for International Student Assessment Database*, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 24 June 2025).

The data presented in this paper highlight that both no use and excessive use of social media are associated with poorer academic performance, while moderate use – typically less than three hours per day – is associated with better outcomes. This association is sometimes referred to as the “Goldilocks hypothesis”, meaning that a moderate amount of digital technology use offers benefits (OECD, 2024^[17]). This hypothesis suggests that, on average, the effects of technology or social media use worsen at increasingly intense levels of usage. Researchers differ on how to interpret these associations and the extent to which they can be used to infer causality given that other factors, such as skills, can play a role.

4 Exploring policy approaches to manage social media use by young people

Given the complex relationship between social media use and academic performance and well-being outcomes, many parents, educators and policymakers are acting to curtail or regulate young people's social media use. While a range of actions could be taken, this section discusses two types of approaches that aim to foster the benefits afforded by social media use for young people while protecting them from the risks: restrictions on digital devices in schools; and dedicated laws regulating the way in which social media companies offer their services to children – defined as those aged under 18 – at the national and subnational level.

Restrictions on digital devices in schools has gained popularity, but implementation is a challenge

More jurisdictions are attempting to restrict digital devices in schools. Digital devices, particularly mobile phones, are the primary way in which young people access social media platforms. An increasing number of jurisdictions are implementing restrictions on digital device use at school, including the United Kingdom (UK Department of Education, 2024^[73]) and France (Box 2). Approximately 34% of 15-year-old students in OECD Member countries surveyed in PISA in 2022 were learning in schools in which the use of mobile phones was not allowed on the premises (OECD, 2025^[49]). In one study, some 30% of global education systems in 2023 had some kind of restriction or policy on smartphone use in schools within their laws or policies (UNESCO, 2023^[74]).

While the impact of restrictions on digital devices at school is uncertain, there is still much support for the policy. Studies suggest limited evidence for the effectiveness of such policies (Rahali, Kidron and Livingstone, 2024^[75]). However, recent polling indicates that restricting device usage in school or delaying access to social media for children (inside or outside school), has widespread support among adults (Ipsos, 2025^[76]). Still, government restrictions on freedom of expression that focus on content, even if they do not favour one viewpoint over another, can harm freedom of expression. Such policies could constitute censorship in some contexts within some OECD Member countries.

Box 2. France's ban on mobile phones in middle schools

In 2018, France imposed restrictions on mobile phone use during class hours in middle schools, which affects students aged 11 to 15 years. The restrictions aimed to improve academic performance and student well-being, while reducing cyberbullying and misuse of social media during the school day. In April 2025, the French government introduced a new national policy tightening these restrictions. Starting in September 2025, middle school students in France must give up their mobile phones upon arrival at school, locking them in designated areas for the entire school day. France is also considering a ban on mobile phones in high schools.

These new restrictions follow on the heels of an experiment during the 2024/25 school year. In this study, more than 32 000 students participated in trials that kept phones away from them during the school day. The government has reported that the trials resulted in positive outcomes in school climate, student concentration and general well-being. Cyberbullying and incidents related to social media have also decreased noticeably. At the same time, some school administrators have identified significant challenges in enforcing the restrictions, citing shortages related to material, finances and especially personnel to collect the phones and return them potentially every hour.

Source: Borde (2025^[77]), *Nous n'avons ni les moyens humains, ni matériels d'interdire le portable au collège, assure le syndicat des professeurs*, <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/education/nous-n-avons-ni-les-moyens-humains-ni-materiels-d-interdire-le-portable-au-college-bruno-bobkiewicz-snpden-uns-a-5535455>; French Ministry of National Education (2025^[11]), *Interdiction du téléphone portable dans les écoles et les collèges et pause numérique*, <https://www.education.gouv.fr/interdiction-du-telephone-portable-dans-les-ecoles-et-les-colleges-et-pause-numerique-455181>; French Ministry of National Education (2025^[78]), *Pour un numérique raisonné à l'école, au collège et au lycée*, <https://www.education.gouv.fr/pour-un-numerique-raisonne-l-ecole-au-college-et-au-lycee-463044>.

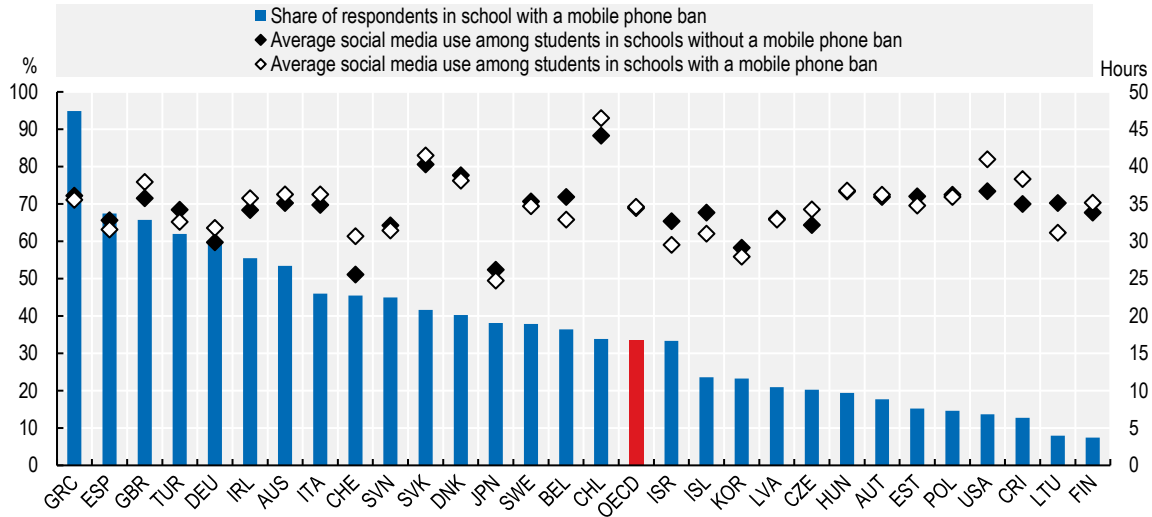
Policies to ban digital devices in schools typically find less support among young people (Anderson, Gottfried and Park, 2024^[79]; Ipsos, 2025^[76]). This is consistent with results from PISA 2022, where just a quarter of students across the OECD agree or strongly agree that schools should prevent students from accessing social media platforms (OECD, 2025^[49]). Those students who strongly agree that schools should set up restrictions also tend to use social media intensively. This suggests these students may not be able to self-regulate their social media (OECD, 2025^[49]).

Restrictions on certain types of content and outright bans on mobile devices represent two different approaches to prevent students from accessing social media and other online content. Some schools aim to control use of mobile phones by restricting some kinds of content. However, to protect freedom of expression, content-restricting laws should be narrowly tailored and clearly defined. They must also be subject to legal safeguards. Some OECD Member countries ban digital devices all together. However, OECD (2023^[55]) shows that, on average across the OECD, 29% of students in schools that ban mobile phone use reported using their phone at school several times a day. An additional 21% reported using a mobile phone every day or almost every day, suggesting that enforcement is an issue.

Indeed, data on OECD 15-year-old students suggest that mobile phone bans in schools are uncorrelated with overall social media use (Figure 7). On average across OECD Member countries, young people in schools with a mobile phone ban spend as much time as students in schools without such a measure. Even after controlling for socio-economic background, mobile phone bans lead to a significant but small decrease in overall social media usage (around 30 minutes a week) and time spent using digital technologies for leisure at school (20 minutes).¹⁰ These are marginal effects, considering that, on average, young people spend almost 35 hours per week using social media (Figure 2).

Figure 7. Mobile phone bans in schools are uncorrelated with social media use by young people

Percentage of 15-year-olds in school with a mobile phone ban (left axis) and overall average weekly hours of social media use (right axis) by school mobile phone ban status, 2022



Note: See Endnote. 11

Source: Calculations based on OECD (2025^[49]), *Programme for International Student Assessment Database*, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 24 June 2025).

National and subnational governments are enacting dedicated social media laws over and above laws governing online safety or privacy

As young people’s activities increasingly move online, safety in digital environments becomes more important. Online safety laws, policies, regulations and practices aim to prevent, reduce and counter harms that people can experience online or that are facilitated by the Internet. Moreover, they increasingly focus on social media use and children.

Online safety also involves addressing mental health risks. Such risks are associated with online spaces, as well as with freedom from the negative effects of illegal, manipulated and deliberately misleading content online. However, defining “harmful content online” is often a challenge, given varying social, cultural and developmental contexts and limited guidance and research on age-specific harm assessments. In addition, terms like “misleading content”, “disinformation”, “misinformation” and “hate speech” are not always well defined. Some OECD Members remain concerned that such terms can be, and are, used as pretexts to promote censorship and intolerance of freedom of expression.

A range of laws provide protection for children online. Online safety-specific laws often go beyond safety to help ensure special protection for children’s data and prohibit deceptive online practices, among others. Social media services are implicated in these laws as they apply to a broad set of online services, but the laws are not specific to them (OECD, 2025^[2]). In recent years, however, several laws specific to social media and the protection of children on these services have emerged. OECD (2025^[2]) identified several online safety laws specific to social media. It also found provisions specific to social media directed at children, many of which have emerged at the subnational level in the United States (Box 3).

Box 3. Subnational legislation with social media provisions in the United States

Since 2023, state legislatures in the United States have introduced a growing number of laws with social media provisions. As of February 2026, 17 of these laws have been passed, although some are subject to court injunctions.¹² These measures vary in scope and approach, but several themes can be identified.

- **Age limits and/or parental consent for account creation:** Some, but not all, of the laws set a minimum age at which a service can allow a child to open an account. Sometimes, these laws allow children to open an account even if they are below the stated minimum age if they have parental consent (e.g. in Louisiana and Nebraska). Other laws require parental consent in addition to a process for assuring age (e.g. in Georgia) or that consent be obtained for specific age groups above the minimum age (e.g. in Florida, children under age 14 cannot be offered an account at all and children aged 14-15 need parental consent to open an account). The minimum age varies from 14 to 18.
- **Time limits and rules around sending notifications to child users:** Utah's law establishes that child accounts (for those aged under 18) should not have use of an "algorithmically curated" service for more than 3 hours in a 24-hour period. It also requires that a child user not be able to access the service between 22:30 and 6:30. Colorado requires that child users (those aged under 18) receive notifications on their devices if their cumulative use goes beyond more than 1 hour in a 24-hour period, or if they are using the service in the evening (22:00 to 6:00). Laws in California and New York establish rules prohibiting children (those aged under 18) from being sent notifications during school hours or overnight.
- **Mental health and algorithmically curated feeds:** Laws in California, New York and Utah are concerned with ensuring that children (those aged under 18) are not delivered an "addictive" or "algorithmically curated feed". However, in New York and Utah a parent can consent to a child being served such a feed. California's law is specifically concerned with providing child users (those aged under 18) with information about risks to their mental health and to brain development associated with social media use.
- **Parental supervision:** Both Tennessee and Texas require social media companies to provide parents with tools to supervise the account of their child (those aged under 18).
- **Data protection and targeted advertising:** Laws in Georgia, Louisiana and Texas all have provisions to protect children's data (those aged under 16 in Georgia and Louisiana, and those aged under 18 in Texas) and to prohibit targeted advertising to them.
- **Age assurance:** Some, but not all, of the laws have an express requirement that a social media service establish an age assurance mechanism for meeting the respective age limits. In addition, some, but not all, of the laws pair that requirement with one that limits the use of any data collected in assuring age beyond that purpose.
- **Enforcement mechanisms:** The laws have different enforcement mechanisms. In some cases, a state body allows for civil penalties. In other cases, the laws only provide for a private right of action; sometimes, only a parent has standing to sue.

The United States also has a law with social media provisions at the federal level – the Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule (COPPA).¹³

Source: Federal Trade Commission (1998^[80]), *Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule (COPPA)*, <https://www.ftc.gov/legal-library/browse/rules/childrens-online-privacy-protection-rule-coppa>; Federal Trade Commission (2026^[81]), *FTC issues COPPA policy statement to incentivize the use of age verification technologies to protect children online*, <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2026/02/ftc-issues-coppa-policy-statement-incentivize-use-age-verification-technologies-protect-children>; The Age Verification Providers Association (2025^[82]), *US state age assurance laws for social media*, <https://avpassociation.com/us-state-age-assurance-laws-for-social-media/>; Nebraska Legislature (2025^[83]), *Legislative Bill 383*, <https://legiscan.com/NE/text/LB383/2025>; OECD (2025^[2]), *The legal and policy landscape of age assurance online for child safety and well-being*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/4a1878aa-en>.

At the national level, there is also growing support for strict age limits for social media use in some countries. While Australia was the first country to enact such a law (Box 4), support in other countries is gaining ground. In 2025, the UK Parliament debated a petition to introduce 16 as the minimum age to hold a social media account (UK Government and Parliament Petition, 2025^[84]). In France, the National Assembly adopted a bill restricting access to social media for those aged under 15 (Tual and Morin, 2026^[85]). As a final example, Norway launched a public consultation for a law to prohibit social media platforms from offering their services to those under the age of 15 years (Norwegian Government, 2025^[86]).

International multistakeholder dialogues and initiatives exploring this issue have also emerged. Such initiatives involve experts from various sectors and aim to advance a holistic and principles-based approach to age assurance from a variety of regional and global perspectives. The emergence of such groups has underscored that the issue is far from settled. Among other concerns, they are examining whether parental responsibility and controls may be better in some contexts than establishing a minimum age for social media or other regulatory solutions. They are also exploring the appropriate scope for any regulations, and how best to balance protecting children with rights such as freedom of expression, and privacy and innovation. These dialogues suggest there is no “one size fits all” solution.

Moreover, consensus on a definition of “harmful content” for children continues to be challenging. The varying social, cultural and developmental contexts and the limited guidance on age-specific harm assessments reduces comparability across jurisdictions and platforms.

The multistakeholder dialogues have also focused on difficulties around enforceability and the ability for users to bypass restrictions (e.g. via false age claims, using adults’ accounts, virtual private networks (VPNs)). More research and dialogue will be needed to explore how best to manage social media use by young people. On the one hand, policy should enable young people to make the most of social media. On the other, it needs to guard against related risks in ways that protect freedom of expression, privacy rights, innovation and fair competition.

Box 4. Australia's Social Media Minimum Age Framework for children under the age of 16

In late 2024, the Australian parliament passed the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act. The legislation took effect on 10 December 2025 and requires “age-restricted social media platforms” to take reasonable steps to prevent children and young people under the age of 16 years in Australia from creating or maintaining social media accounts. In the first half of December, 4.7 million accounts were reportedly removed (Australian eSafety Commissioner, 2026^[41]). The Australian eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) is further considering a range of insights to assess platforms’ compliance, including ongoing information-gathering notices, stakeholder engagement, public submissions and research. An independent statutory review will be initiated within two years of the legislation taking effect.

The burden of compliance lies with social media platforms. No penalties are foreseen for young people gaining access to social media, or parents and educators who may provide such access. Although circumvention strategies exist (VPN use, age misrepresentation, proxy access), the law is part of a wider strategy aimed at protecting children from exposure to harm and to safeguard their health and well-being.

Age-restricted social media platforms are those with a sole or significant purpose of enabling online social interaction between two or more users. They allow users to link to or interact with one another, and to post material. The Act further provides discretion to the Minister for Communications to expressly exclude or include services. Major social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube, will be included in the minimum age obligation. However, online gaming and standalone messaging applications have been excluded under legislative rules issued by the Minister in July 2025.

Australia’s eSafety has published the Social Media Minimum Age Regulatory Guidance (“the Guidance”) on reasonable steps that social media platforms must take to comply with the new law. Stakeholder consultation began in June 2025, engaging technology industry, civil society, academia, nongovernment actors, parents and carers. Providers are expected to implement reliable, accurate and robust age assurance methods. These should accurately detect and deactivate underage accounts, while protecting user privacy and complying with privacy laws. For this reason, age assurance methods should be periodically tested and audited.

In addition, age assurance needs to be designed with clear and accessible information about how age is verified. Users should also be allowed to make complaints and seek review for fairness. Lastly, the Guidance underscores the importance of investment in technological tools and research, including artificial intelligence to improve detection and prevention of underage accounts. Documentation is required to demonstrate compliance, covering evaluation processes such as testing, audits and improvements over time.

Source: Australian Government (2024^[31]), *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act*, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/C2024A00127/asmade/text>; Australian eSafety Commissioner (2025^[37]), *Social Media Minimum Age Regulatory Guidance*, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-09/eSafety-SMMA-Regulatory-Guidance.pdf?v=1759432170564>; Australian eSafety Commissioner (2026^[41]); *Platforms restrict access to 4.7 million under-16 accounts across Australia*, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/newsroom/media-releases/platforms-restrict-access-to-47-million-under-16-accounts-across-australia>; Australian eSafety Commissioner (2026^[38]), *Social media age restrictions*, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/industry-regulation/social-media-age-restrictions>.

5 Conclusion

Young people today interact in a wide range of digital environments. Those born in the early to mid-2000s are a voice generation, preferring to send short voice messages over social media platforms rather than text messages or e-mails like their parents. They have grown up in the social media age, and chatting on social media plays a central role in how they communicate online and access information about the world around them. Despite efforts by social scientists and other researchers, the literature on the impacts of social media use on academic outcomes and skills of young people is ambiguous. This makes the path forward harder to navigate for those that wish to nurture and protect young people.

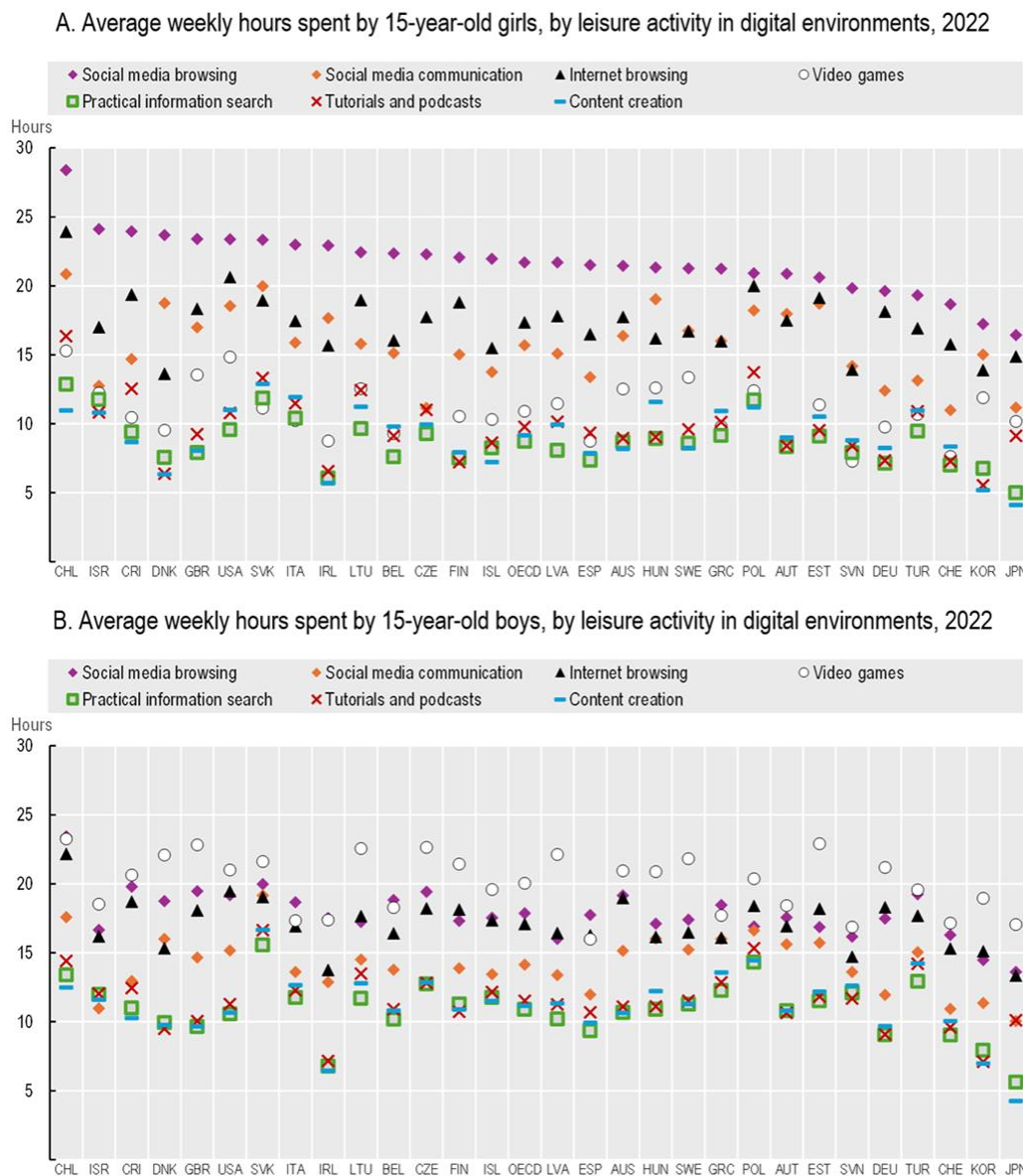
Despite these difficulties, policymakers are pursuing ways to help young people benefit from the many opportunities of social media. At the same time, they strive to protect young people against the related risks of social media and to safeguard rights, including freedom of expression and privacy, as well as innovation and fair competition. This paper considers two approaches – digital device bans in schools; and online safety policies, regulations and practices. However, other policies, such as strengthening young people’s social media literacy from an early age, are also important.¹⁴ These efforts are recent, and peer learning on how to avoid implementation challenges is needed. As digital technologies evolve and societies adapt, more changes on the horizon for young people are certain. The parents, educators and policymakers that seek to keep them happy and safe need to be creative and ready to adapt.

Indeed, changes are already apparent. The number of active social media users grew by about 5% between 2024 and 2025 to 5.66 billion worldwide (We Are Social, 2025^[89]). However, evidence suggests that time spent on social media has been falling since 2022 across all age groups. Meanwhile, the nature of social media itself has been changing (Burn-Murdoch, 2025^[90]). Social media began as an online space to easily share updates on one’s life with friends and family. However, from a space to communicate with friends and family in real time, social media has become increasingly populated with curated videos of influencers unboxing toys, playing video games and promoting brands. It is now poised to become a place where AI-generated videos are uploaded to provide entertainment (Tech Crunch, 2025^[91]; Tech Crunch, 2025^[92]).

The challenge for society is to continuously seek to understand the rapidly changing social media landscape and how it affects young people today and in the future. As those born in the early to mid-2000s reach adulthood, they will be well placed to help the generations that come next in navigating the opportunities and risks of social media for our youth. Until then, parents, educators, policymakers and young people themselves must continue experimenting with approaches to help ensure that social media brings more upsides than downsides for young people today.

Annex A. Time spent by girls and boys on digital leisure activities

Figure A A.1. Browsing social media is the most popular digital leisure activity among girls



Note: See Endnote 15

Source: Calculations based on OECD (2025^[49]), *Programme for International Student Assessment Database*, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 24 June 2025).

References

- Aichner, T. et al. (2021), “Twenty-five years of social media: A review of social media applications and definitions from 1994 to 2019”, *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, Vol. 24/4, pp. 215-222, <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2020.0134>. [6]
- Allcott, H. et al. (2020), “The welfare effects of social media”, *American Economic Review*, Vol. 110/3, pp. 629-676, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20190658>. [41]
- Anderson, M., J. Gottfried and E. Park (2024), “Most Americans back cellphone bans during class, but fewer support all-day restrictions”, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/10/14/most-americans-back-cellphone-bans-during-class-but-fewer-support-all-day-restrictions/> (accessed on 4 March 2026). [79]
- Anderson, M. et al. (2022), “Connection, creativity and drama: Teen life on social media in 2022”, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/11/16/connection-creativity-and-drama-teen-life-on-social-media-in-2022/> (accessed on 3 March 2026). [66]
- Anses (2026), “Sécuriser les usages des réseaux sociaux pour protéger la santé des adolescents”, French Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health and Safety, <https://www.anses.fr/fr/content/securiser-les-usages-des-reseaux-sociaux-pour-protger-la-sante-des-adolescents> (accessed on 5 March 2026). [19]
- Arfaoui, M. and J. Elbaz (2025), “Numérique adolescent et vie privée”, *HAL Open Science*, <https://hal.science/hal-04919994>. [52]
- Aru, J. and D. Rozgonjuk (2022), “The effect of smartphone use on mental effort, learning, and creativity”, *Trends in Cognitive Science*, Vol. 26/10, pp. 821-823, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2022.07.002>. [69]
- Australian eSafety Commissioner (2026), “Platforms restrict access to 4.7 million under-16 accounts across Australia”, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/newsroom/media-releases/platforms-restrict-access-to-47-million-under-16-accounts-across-australia> (accessed on 21 January 2026). [4]
- Australian eSafety Commissioner (2026), “Social media age restrictions”, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/industry-regulation/social-media-age-restrictions> (accessed on 25 January 2026). [88]

- Australian eSafety Commissioner (2025), *Social Media Minimum Age Regulatory Guidance*, Australian eSafety Commissioner, Canberra, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-09/eSafety-SMMA-Regulatory-Guidance.pdf> (accessed on 2 October 2025). [87]
- Australian Government (2024), *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act*, Australian Government, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/C2024A00127/asmade/text>. [3]
- Babic, M. et al. (2017), “Longitudinal associations between changes in screen-time and mental health outcomes in adolescents”, *Mental Health and Physical Activity*, Vol. 12, pp. 124-131, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhpa.2017.04.001>. [34]
- Berger, M. et al. (2022), “Social media use and health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth: Systematic review”, *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, Vol. 24/9, <https://www.jmir.org/2022/9/e38449/>. [10]
- Boers, E., M. Afzali and N. Newton (2019), “Association of screen time and depression in adolescence”, *JAMA pediatrics*, Vol. 173/9, pp. 853-859, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2019.1759>. [35]
- Borde, L. (2025), “‘Nous n’avons ni les moyens humains, ni matériels d’interdire le portable au collège’, assure le syndicat des proviseurs”, *Ici*, <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/education/nous-n-avons-ni-les-moyens-humains-ni-materiels-d-interdire-le-portable-au-college-bruno-bobkiewicz-snpden-uns-a-5535455> (accessed on 3 October 2025). [77]
- Burn-Murdoch, J. (2025), “Has the world passed a social media peak?”, *The Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/a0724dd9-0346-4df3-80f5-d6572c93a863> (accessed on 5 March 2026). [90]
- Cauberghe, V. et al. (2021), “How adolescents use social media to cope with feelings of loneliness and anxiety during COVID-19 lockdown”, *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, Vol. 24/4, pp. 250-257, <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2020.0478>. [14]
- Collins, A. and F. Eggers (2022), “Effects of restricting social media usage on wellbeing and performance: A randomized control trial among students”, *PLoS ONE*, Vol. 17/8, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0272416>. [46]
- DoE (2019), “State of the Nation 2019: Children and Young People’s Well-being”, *UK Department of Education*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/838022/State_of_the_Nation_2019_young_people_children_wellbeing.pdf. [27]
- Faverio, M., M. Anderson and E. Park (2025), “Teens, social media and mental health”, *Pew Research Center*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2025/04/22/teens-social-media-and-mental-health/> (accessed on 3 March 2026). [67]
- Fioravanti, G., A. Probst and S. Casale (2020), “Taking a short break from Instagram: The effects on subjective well-being”, *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, Vol. 23/2, <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2019.0400>. [42]
- Firth, J. et al. (2019), “The “online brain”: How the Internet may be changing our cognition”, *World Psychiatry*, Vol. 18/6, pp. 119-129, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20617>. [64]

- French Ministry of National Education (2025), “Interdiction du téléphone portable dans les écoles et les collèges et pause numérique”, <https://www.education.gouv.fr/interdiction-du-telephone-portable-dans-les-ecoles-et-les-colleges-et-pause-numerique-455181> (accessed on 3 March 2026). [1]
- French Ministry of National Education (2025), “Pour un numérique raisonné à l’école, au collège et au lycée”, <https://www.education.gouv.fr/pour-un-numerique-raisonne-l-ecole-au-college-et-au-lycee-463044> (accessed on 3 March 2026). [78]
- FTC (2026), “FTC issues COPPA policy statement to incentivize the use of age verification technologies to protect children online”, <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2026/02/ftc-issues-coppa-policy-statement-incentivize-use-age-verification-technologies-protect-children> (accessed on 5 March 2026). [81]
- FTC (1998), “Children’s Online Privacy Protection Rule (COPPA)”, <https://www.ftc.gov/legal-library/browse/rules/childrens-online-privacy-protection-rule-coppa> (accessed on 13 March 2026). [80]
- Haidt, J. (2024), *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, Penguin, New York. [62]
- Hall, J. et al. (2021), “Experimentally manipulating social media abstinence: Results of a four-week diary study”, *Media Psychology*, Vol. 24, pp. 259-275, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2019.1688171>. [45]
- Hancock, J. et al. (2022), “Psychological well-being and social media use: A meta-analysis of associations between social media use and depression, anxiety, loneliness, eudaimonic, hedonic and social well-being”, *SSRN Electronic Journal*, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4053961>. [32]
- Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study (2023), *Data browser (findings from the 2021/22 international HBSC survey)*, (dataset), <https://data-browser.hbsc.org> (accessed on 13 March 2026). [11]
- Heffer, T., M. Good and T. Willoughby (2019), “The longitudinal association between social-media use and depressive symptoms among adolescents and young adults: An empirical reply to Twenge et al. (2018)”, *Clinical Psychological Science*, Vol. 7/3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702618812727>. [37]
- Hungarian National Media and Infocommunications Authority (2026), “Digital childhood starts ever earlier”, https://english.nmhh.hu/article/256912/Digital_childhood_starts_ever_earlier (accessed on 4 March 2025). [51]
- Hunt, M. et al. (2018), “No more FOMO: Limiting social media decreases loneliness and depression”, *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 37/10, <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2018.37.10.751>. [40]
- Ibsen, T. et al. (2025), “The role of social media in mitigating the long-term impact of social isolation on mental and cognitive health in older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic: The HUNT study”, *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, Vol. 40/5, p. e70097, <https://doi.org/10.1002/gps.70097>. [16]

- Ipsos (2025), *Ipsos Education Monitor 2025*, Ipsos, Paris, [76]
https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2025-09/Education_Monitor_2025.pdf.
- Ivie, E. et al. (2020), "A meta-analysis of the association between adolescent social media use and depressive symptoms", *Journal of Affective Disorders*, Vol. 275, pp. 165-174, [30]
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.06.014>.
- James, K. et al. (2023), "Peer connectedness and social technology use during COVID-19 lockdown", *Research on Child and Adolescent Psychopathology*, Vol. 51/7, pp. 937-948, [15]
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-023-01040-5>.
- Kapoor, K. et al. (2018), "Advances in social media research: Past, present and future", [7]
Information Systems Frontiers, Vol. 20, pp. 531-558, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10796-017-9810-y>.
- Lambert, J. et al. (2022), "Taking a one-week break from social media improves well-being, depression, and anxiety: A randomized controlled trial", *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, Vol. 25/5, [44]
<https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2021.0324>.
- Mahalingham, T., J. Howell and P. Clarke (2023), "Assessing the effects of acute reductions in mobile device social media use on anxiety and sleep", *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, Vol. 78, [47]
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbtep.2022.101791>.
- McClain, C. et al. (2025), "How parents manage screen time for kids", [50]
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2025/10/08/how-parents-manage-screen-time-for-kids/>
(accessed on 4 March 2026).
- Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2025), "Social media", [5]
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media> (accessed on 1 October 2025).
- Mitev, K. et al. (2021), "Social media use only helps, and does not harm, daily interactions and well-being", *Technology, Mind, and Behavior*, Vol. 2/1, [39]
<https://doi.org/10.1037/tmb0000033>.
- Molly Rose Foundation (2025), "Children's exposure to suicide, self-harm, depression, and eating disorder content online", *Survey Findings Report*, Molly Rose Foundation, London, [18]
<https://mollyrosefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Molly-Rose-Foundation-childrens-exposure-to-harmful-content-1.pdf>.
- Montag, C. and S. Markett (2023), "Social media use and everyday cognitive failure: Investigating the fear of missing out and social networks use disorder relationship", *BMC Psychiatry*, Vol. 1/23, p. 872, [65]
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-023-05371-x>.
- Mosquera, R. et al. (2020), "The economic effects of Facebook", *Experimental Economics*, [43]
Vol. 23, pp. 575-602, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10683-019-09625-y>.
- Napp, C. and T. Breda (2022), "Daily use of social media is associated with more body dissatisfaction of teenage girls in a large cross-cultural survey", *Discussion Paper Series*, [60]
No. 15811, IZA Institute of Labor Economics, Deutsche Post Foundation,
<https://docs.iza.org/dp15811.pdf>.
- Nebraska Legislature (2025), "Legislative Bill 383", [83]
<https://legiscan.com/NE/text/LB383/2025>
(accessed on 3 March 2026).

- Noland, R., E. Necka and J. Cacioppo (2018), “Loneliness and social Internet use: Pathways to reconnection in a digital world”, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Vol. 13/1, pp. 70-87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691617713052>. [20]
- Norwegian Government (2025), “Norway moves forward with age limit for social media”, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/norway-moves-forward-with-age-limit-for-social-media/id3108682/> (accessed on 3 October 2025). [86]
- Odgers, C. (2024), “The great rewiring: Is social media really behind an epidemic of teenage mental illness?”, *Nature*, Vol. 628/8006, pp. 29-30, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-024-00902-2>. [26]
- Odgers, C. and M. Jensen (2020), “Annual research review: Adolescent mental health in the digital age: Facts, fears, and future directions”, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 61/3, pp. 336-348, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13190>. [9]
- OECD (2025), “Creative minds in action: Students’ imagination and ideas in storytelling, design and problem solving tasks on the PISA test”, *OECD Education Policy Perspectives*, No. 120, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/5b718eb2-en>. [68]
- OECD (2025), *How’s Life for Children in the Digital Age?*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/0854b900-en>. [8]
- OECD (2025), *PISA 2022 Database*, (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 2 June 2025). [49]
- OECD (2025), *PISA 2022 ICT Familiarity Questionnaire*, OECD, Paris, <https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/data/datasets/pisa/pisa-2022-datasets/questionnaires/ICT%20QUESTIONNAIRE%20PISA%202022.pdf>. [59]
- OECD (2025), *PISA 2022 Student Questionnaire*, OECD, Paris, <https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/data/datasets/pisa/pisa-2022-datasets/questionnaires/COMPUTER-BASED%20STUDENT%20questionnaire%20PISA%202022.pdf>. [93]
- OECD (2025), *PISA 2022 Well-being Questionnaire*, OECD, Paris, <https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/data/datasets/pisa/pisa-2022-datasets/questionnaires/WELL-BEING%20QUESTIONNAIRE%20PISA%202022.pdf>. [57]
- OECD (2025), *The legal and policy landscape of age assurance online for child safety and well-being*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/4a1878aa-en>. [2]
- OECD (2025), *Transparency reporting on child sexual exploitation and abuse online 2025*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a89e3f08-en>. [22]
- OECD (2024), “Managing screen time: How to protect and equip students against distraction”, *PISA in Focus*, No. 124, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/7c225af4-en>. [54]
- OECD (2024), “Mental health and digital environments”, in *OECD Digital Economy Outlook 2024 (Volume 1): Embracing the Technology Frontier*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a1689dc5-en>. [17]
- OECD (2024), “New PISA results on creative thinking: Can students think outside the box?”, *PISA in Focus*, No. 125, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b3a46696-en>. [70]

- OECD (2024), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume III): Creative Minds, Creative Schools*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/765ee8c2-en>. [72]
- OECD (2024), *PISA 2022 Technical Report*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/01820d6d-en>. [58]
- OECD (2024), “The OECD Truth Quest Survey: Methodology and findings”, *OECD Digital Economy Papers*, No. 369, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/92a94c0f-en>. [12]
- OECD (2023), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>. [56]
- OECD (2023), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en>. [55]
- OECD (2020), “Going Digital integrated policy framework”, *OECD Digital Economy Papers*, No. 292, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/dc930adc-en>. [71]
- OECD (forthcoming), “Mapping media literacy initiatives”, *OECD Digital Economy Papers*, OECD Publishing, Paris. [94]
- Orben, A. (2020), “Teenagers, screens and social media: A narrative review of reviews and key studies”, *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, Vol. 55, pp. 407-414, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-019-01825-4>. [31]
- Orben, A., T. Dienlin and A. Pszybylski (2019), “Social media’s enduring effect on adolescent life satisfaction”, *PNAS*, Vol. 116/21, pp. 10226-10228, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1902058116>. [38]
- Orben, A. and A. Przybylski (2020), “Reply to: Underestimating digital media harm”, *Nature Human Behaviour*, Vol. 4, pp. 349-351, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0840-y>. [24]
- Orben, A. and A. Przybylski (2019), “The association between adolescent well-being and digital technology use”, *Nature Human Behaviour*, Vol. 3, pp. 173-182, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0506-1>. [28]
- Pew Research Center (2025), *Social Media and News Fact Sheet*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/social-media-and-news-fact-sheet/> (accessed on 3 March 2026). [13]
- Rahali, M., B. Kidron and S. Livingstone (2024), “Smartphone policies in schools: What does the evidence say?”, *Digital Futures for Children*; London School of Economics and Political Science; 5Rights Foundation, <https://www.digital-futures-for-children.net/our-work/smartphone-policies>. [75]
- Roberts, J., P. Young and M. David (2024), “The epidemic of loneliness: A 9-year longitudinal study of the impact of passive and active social media use on loneliness”, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 52/5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672241295870>. [21]
- Sewall, C. et al. (2020), “How psychosocial well-being and usage amount predict inaccuracies in retrospective estimates of digital technology use”, *Mobile, Media and Communications*, Vol. 8/3, pp. 379-399, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157920902830>. [48]

- Shakya, H. and N. Christakis (2017), “Association of Facebook use with compromised well-being: A longitudinal study”, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, Vol. 185/3, pp. 203-211, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kww189>. [36]
- Svensson, R., B. Johnson and A. Olsson (2022), “Does gender matter? The association between different digital media activities and adolescent well-being”, *BMC Public Health*, Vol. 1/22, p. 273, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-12670-7>. [61]
- Tech Crunch (2025), “Meta launches ‘Vibes,’ a short-form video feed of AI slop”, <https://techcrunch.com/2025/09/25/meta-launches-vibes-a-short-form-video-feed-of-ai-slop/> (accessed on 5 March 2026). [92]
- Tech Crunch (2025), “OpenAI is launching the Sora app, its own TikTok competitor, alongside the Sora 2 model”, <https://techcrunch.com/2025/09/30/openai-is-launching-the-sora-app-its-own-tiktok-competitor-alongside-the-sora-2-model/> (accessed on 3 March 2026). [91]
- The Age Verification Providers Association (2025), “US state age assurance laws for social media”, <https://avpassociation.com/us-state-age-assurance-laws-for-social-media/> (accessed on 3 March 2026). [82]
- Tual, M. and V. Morin (2026), “France’s Assemblée Nationale approves social media ban for under-15s”, *Le Monde*, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2026/01/27/french-lawmakers-approve-social-media-ban-for-under-15s_6749844_7.html (accessed on 5 March 2026). [85]
- Twenge, J. et al. (2020), “Underestimating digital media harm”, *Nature Human Behaviour*, Vol. 4/4, pp. 346-348, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0839-4>. [23]
- Twenge, J. et al. (2022), “Specification curve analysis shows that social media use is linked to poor mental health, especially among girls”, *Acta Psychologica*, Vol. 224, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2022.103512>. [29]
- UK Department of Education (2024), “Guidance for schools on prohibiting the use of mobile phones throughout the school day”, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mobile-phones-in-schools/mobile-phones-in-schools> (accessed on 6 March 2026). [73]
- UK Government and Parliament Petition (2025), “Introduce 16 as the minimum age for children to have social media”, <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/700086> (accessed on 3 October 2025). [84]
- UNESCO (2023), “Technology in education: A tool on whose terms?”, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2023*, United Nations, <https://doi.org/10.54676/UZQV8501>. [53]
- UNESCO (2023), “To ban or not to ban? Monitoring countries’ regulations on smartphone use in school”, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/smartphones-school-only-when-they-clearly-support-learning> (accessed on 3 March 2026). [74]
- Valkenburg, P., A. Meier and I. Beyens (2022), “Social media use and its impact on adolescent mental health: An umbrella review of the evidence”, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Vol. 44, pp. 58-68, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.08.017>. [33]
- Vuorre, M., A. Orben and A. Przybylski (2021), “There is no evidence that associations between adolescents’ digital technology engagement and mental health problems have increased”, *Clinical Psychological Science*, Vol. 9/5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702621994549>. [25]

We Are Social (2025), "Digital 2026", <https://wearesocial.com/uk/blog/2025/10/digital-2026/> [89]
(accessed on 13 March 2026).

Webster, D., L. Dunne and R. Hunter (2020), "Association between social networks and subjective well-being in adolescents: A systematic review", *Youth & Society*, Vol. 53/2, pp. 175-210, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X20919589>. [63]

Endnotes

¹ Experimental designs typically compare statistically similar cohorts after varying exposure to the variable of interest (in this case, social media). Much of this research studies adults (usually of college age) because children are a difficult cohort to experiment with for both technical and ethical reasons. Studies ask a treatment group of experimental subjects to reduce their social media use and examine their outcomes relative to a control group. Another body of work asks participants to use a type of social media in a controlled setting, usually for a limited period, and measures outcomes relative to the control group.

² These data refer to respondents in the 29 OECD Member countries participating in the PISA ICT questionnaire.

³ 15-year-old students were asked, “During a typical weekend day [/weekday], how much time do you spend doing the following leisure activities?”, where two responses were: “Browse social networks (e.g. <Instagram®>, <Facebook®>)”; and “Communicate and share digital content on social networks or any communication platform (e.g. <Facebook®>, <Instagram®>, <Twitter®>, emails, chat)”. OECD average does not include Canada, Colombia, France, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway or Portugal.

⁴ 15-year-old students were asked, “During a typical weekend day [/weekday], how much time do you spend doing the following leisure activities?”, where two responses were: “Browse social networks (e.g. <Instagram®>, <Facebook®>)”; and “Communicate and share digital content on social networks or any communication platform (e.g. <Facebook®>, <Instagram®>, <Twitter®>, emails, chat)”. The daily and weekly averages were calculated assuming five weekdays, two weekend days and seven days in a week. The time spent on social media is calculated as a sum of the two variables using range midpoints and assuming eight hours for the upper limit (“More than 7 hours”). Although the items were measured through separate sub-questions, the activities could be performed simultaneously, and their aggregates should be interpreted with caution. OECD average does not include Canada, Colombia, France, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway or Portugal.

⁵ 15-year-old students were asked, “During a typical weekend day [/weekday], how much time do you spend doing the following leisure activities?”, where the seven responses were: “Play video-games (using my smartphone, a gaming console or an online platform or Apps)”, “Browse social networks (e.g. <Instagram®>, <Facebook®>)”; “Browse the Internet (excluding social networks) for fun (e.g. reading news, listening to podcasts and music or watching videos)”, “Look for practical information online (e.g. find a place, book a train ticket, buy a product)”, “Communicate and share digital content on social networks or any communication platform (e.g. <Facebook®>, <Instagram®>, <Twitter®>, emails, chat)”, “Read, listen to or view informational materials to learn how to do something (e.g. tutorial, podcast)”, and “Create or edit my own digital content (pictures, videos, music, computer programs)”. The weekly average was calculated

assuming five weekdays and two weekend days. OECD average does not include Canada, Colombia, France, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway or Portugal. Although the items were measured through separate sub-questions, the activities could be performed simultaneously, and their aggregates should be interpreted with caution.

⁶ 15-year-old students were asked, “During a typical weekend day [/weekday], how much time do you spend doing the following leisure activities?”, where two responses were: “Browse social networks (e.g. <Instagram®>, <Facebook®>)”; and “Communicate and share digital content on social networks or any communication platform (e.g. <Facebook®>, <Instagram®>, <Twitter®>, emails, chat)”. The weekly average was calculated assuming five weekdays, two weekend days and seven days in a week. The time spent on social media is calculated as a sum of the two variables using range midpoints and assuming eight hours for the upper limit (“More than 7 hours”). Although the items were measured through separate sub-questions, the activities could be performed simultaneously, and their aggregates should be interpreted with caution. OECD average does not include Canada, Colombia, France, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway or Portugal.

⁷ 15-year-old students were asked, “During a typical weekend day [/weekday], how much time do you spend doing the following leisure activities?”, where two responses were: “Browse social networks (e.g. <Instagram®>, <Facebook®>)”; and “Communicate and share digital content on social networks or any communication platform (e.g. <Facebook®>, <Instagram®>, <Twitter®>, emails, chat)”. OECD average does not include Canada, Colombia, France, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway or Portugal.

⁸ PISA scores for creative thinking are not measured on the same scale as scores for mathematics, sciences and reading. A one-score point change (“small” change) corresponds to a one-tenth of the OECD standard deviation in creative thinking performance. A three-score points change (“large” change) is roughly equivalent to one-quarter of the OECD standard deviation in creative thinking performance. A change of two points is thus considered to be a “moderate” difference (OECD, 2024^[72]).

⁹ 15-year-old students were asked, “During a typical weekend day [/weekday], how much time do you spend doing the following leisure activities?”, where two responses were: “Browse social networks (e.g. <Instagram®>, <Facebook®>)”; and “Communicate and share digital content on social networks or any communication platform (e.g. <Facebook®>, <Instagram®>, <Twitter®>, emails, chat)”. Data include the share of students reporting “No time at all”. OECD average does not include Canada, Colombia, France, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway or Portugal.

¹⁰ Based on the Ordinary Least Squares regression model, controlling for the socio-economic background (national percentile of PISA ESCS index) and sex. Standard errors are clustered at the school level to account for intra-school correlation.

¹¹ A question whether the use of [cell phones] is not allowed on the school premises was asked in the school questionnaire: 15-year-old students were asked, “During a typical weekend day [/weekday], how much time do you spend doing the following leisure activities?”, where two responses were: “Browse social networks (e.g. <Instagram®>, <Facebook®>)”; and “Communicate and share digital content on social networks or any communication platform (e.g. <Facebook®>, <Instagram®>, <Twitter®>, emails, chat)”. The weekly average was calculated assuming five weekdays and two weekend days. The time spent on social media is calculated as a sum of the two variables using range midpoints and assuming eight hours for the upper limit (“More than 7 hours”). Although the items were measured through separate sub-questions, the activities could be performed simultaneously, and their aggregates should be interpreted

with caution. OECD average does not include Canada, Colombia, France, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway or Portugal.

¹² As of January 2026, many of these laws (including those of Louisiana, Texas, Florida, Tennessee and California) were being challenged across 8 (out of 13) federal appellate court circuits, including for allegedly violating First Amendment and freedom of expression rights.

¹³ The Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule (COPPA) defines a child as any person under the age of 13. It requires that websites and online services obtain verified parental consent for processing a child's data and that they put in place specific protections when processing children's data. A website or online service that is either directed at a child or has actual knowledge that a child is accessing its service, and fails to meet these requirements, will be in violation of COPPA. In February 2026, the Federal Trade Commission declared it will not bring a COPPA violation action against general or mixed audience sites and services that collect, use or disclose personal information without first obtaining verifiable parental consent if it is for the sole purpose of determining a user's age.

¹⁴ Media literacy and education are essential to equip young people with critical skills and knowledge needed to safely navigate social media and exercise their right to empowerment. More information on online media literacy and education can be found in OECD (forthcoming^[94]).

¹⁵ 15-year-old students were asked, "During a typical weekend day [/weekday], how much time do you spend doing the following leisure activities?", where the seven responses were: "Play video-games (using my smartphone, a gaming console or an online platform or Apps)", "Browse social networks (e.g. <Instagram@>, <Facebook@>)", "Browse the Internet (excluding social networks) for fun (e.g. reading news, listening to podcasts and music or watching videos)", "Look for practical information online (e.g. find a place, book a train ticket, buy a product)", "Communicate and share digital content on social networks or any communication platform (e.g. <Facebook@>, <Instagram@>, <Twitter@>, emails, chat)", "Read, listen to or view informational materials to learn how to do something (e.g. tutorial, podcast)", and "Create or edit my own digital content (pictures, videos, music, computer programs)". The weekly average was calculated assuming five weekdays and two weekend days. OECD average does not include Canada, Colombia, France, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway or Portugal. Although the items were measured through separate sub-questions, the activities could be performed simultaneously, and their aggregates should be interpreted with caution.

Growing up in the social media age

No. 385

Young people today interact in a range of digital environments – from browsing the Internet and playing video games to connecting with their peers on social media platforms. As social media has become central to how young people communicate and consume information, parents, educators and policymakers increasingly worry that social media use may contribute to lower academic performance and negatively affect well-being. This paper reviews the literature on the impacts of social media use on young people and then explores trends in how they use social media. It analyses the associations between social media use and academic outcomes and skills, focusing on creative thinking. Finally, the paper discusses how policy can support young people in making the most of social media’s many opportunities while protecting them against related risks in ways that safeguard freedom of expression, privacy, innovation and fair competition.

