

Left to their own devices

Young people, social media
and mental health – summary

By Mihalis Papamichail and Neera Sharma, June 2019

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children**
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Executive summary

Use of social media and digital technology by children and young people has increased over the past decade. At the same time, mental health disorders are on the rise with recent NHS data showing that **1 in 8** children and young people aged between 5-19 in England have at least one mental health disorder.¹

However, there is no conclusive evidence of a causal link between the increase in the use of social media and the decline in children and young people's mental health.²



“Sometimes you don’t need counselling, you just need someone to listen and to talk to. Not just you feeling backed into a corner on your own”



“Social media provides a distorted version of reality”⁵



All children are vulnerable just because they are children.

However, some children face additional life challenges. In its report on vulnerability, the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England³ set out 32 groups of vulnerable children. These include:

- **Children in care**
- **Children in Pupil Referral Units**
- **Young carers**
- **Care leavers**
- **Children involved in gangs**

There is a growing awareness of the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) / trauma. In many cases vulnerable children will have experienced multiple ACEs such as: family breakdown or bereavement; having a parent in prison; domestic abuse; sexual abuse and parental mental illness.⁴

1 NHS Digital (2018) *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017* <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017> accessed on 16.05.2019

2 In written evidence to the 2018 APPG Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing Inquiry, included in the 2018 report 'New Filters – to manage the impact of social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing' <https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/wellbeing/new-filters.html> accessed on 16.05.2019

3 Children's Commissioner (2017) Defining child vulnerability: Definitions, frameworks and groups <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/CCO-TP2-Defining-Vulnerability-Cordis-Bright-2.pdf> accessed on 22.05.2019

4 Liverpool John Moore University, Public Health Institute Adverse Childhood Experiences <http://www.cph.org.uk/case-study/adverse-childhood-experiences-aces/> accessed on 03.06.2019

5 All quotes in this report are from children and young people that Barnardo's supports



From our experience of working with the UK's most vulnerable children we understand that accessing the internet in a safe, appropriate way is important for children and young people. It can be a positive opportunity to learn, to keep in touch with friends and family and to have fun. However, we are also aware that internet use can also expose them to many dangers, such as cyberbullying, online grooming and sexual abuse. Working with the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Knife Crime, we know that gangs use social media to recruit vulnerable children who are often forced to carry knives, traffic drugs and commit other criminal offences.⁶

Recent studies examining the link between social media and children and young people's mental health do not generally consider the impact on the most vulnerable children.

Therefore the aim of this report is to both understand what children, young people and practitioners have to say about the impact of social media on mental health and wellbeing and to shed light on the social media experiences of vulnerable children.

About Barnardo's

As the UK's largest national children's charity, last year Barnardo's worked directly with **301,100** children, young people, parents and carers through more than **1,000** services. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

Mental health and wellbeing is one of Barnardo's key priority areas. We provide specialist support to **32,200** children, young people, parents and carers through mental health services including through our school-based programmes.


To find out more about the effects of social media on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing Barnardo's gathered insight from **80** practitioners across more than **30** services in the UK.⁷

This report primarily looks at children and young people's experience of social media use and provides a picture of some of the positive and negative impacts.

⁶ APPG Knife Crime (2019) *Young People's Perspectives on Knife Crime* report

⁷ As part of this research we surveyed our practitioners, conducted case studies and ran focus groups with the children and young people that we work with. Services include: mental health; family support; early support; child abuse and exploitation; child protection; youth work (including youth justice); advocacy rights and participation; care leavers and looked after children; disability and health services.

Insights from Barnardo's practitioners:⁸



79% of our practitioners said that 11-15 year olds that they work with have found **cyberbullying** impacted their mental health and wellbeing.

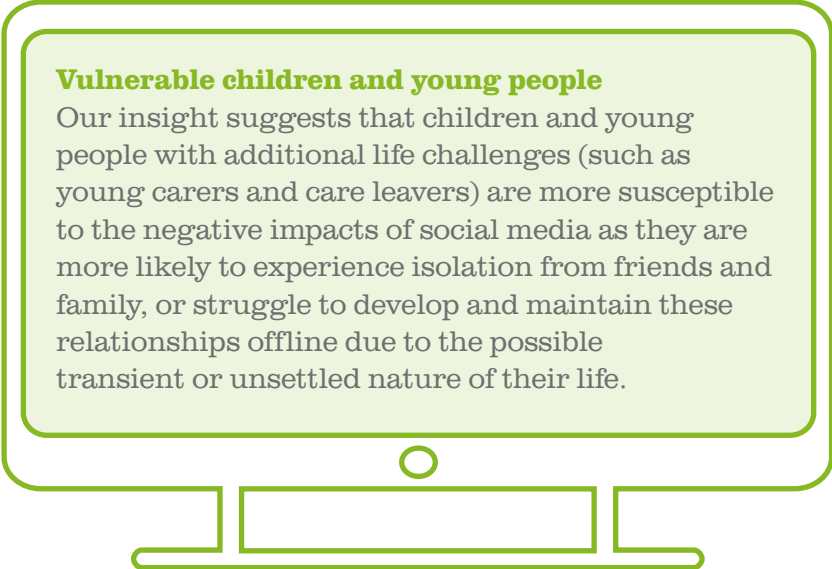


78% of our practitioners reported that children between the ages of 11-15 had accessed **unsuitable or harmful content** through social media.



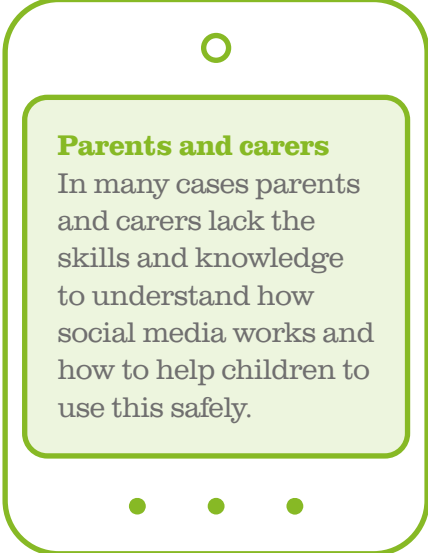
84% of our practitioners highlighted that children between the ages of 11-15 were able to use social media to **access advice and help** for mental health and wellbeing.

Vulnerable children and young people



Our insight suggests that children and young people with additional life challenges (such as young carers and care leavers) are more susceptible to the negative impacts of social media as they are more likely to experience isolation from friends and family, or struggle to develop and maintain these relationships offline due to the possible transient or unsettled nature of their life.

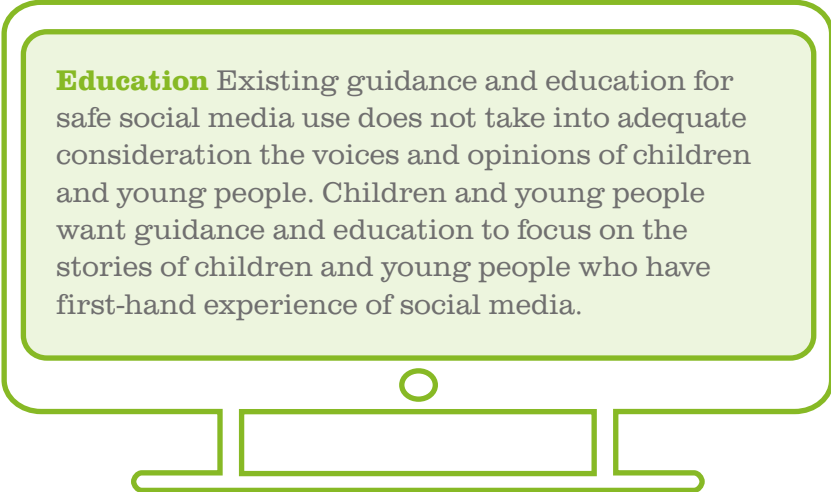
Parents and carers




In many cases parents and carers lack the skills and knowledge to understand how social media works and how to help children to use this safely.

Education

Existing guidance and education for safe social media use does not take into adequate consideration the voices and opinions of children and young people. Children and young people want guidance and education to focus on the stories of children and young people who have first-hand experience of social media.



Family relationships



Practitioners felt that social media played an important role in building and maintaining family relationships, particularly for those aged 11 to 19.

⁸ Percentages included in this section relates to the number of practitioners who responded to survey questions

Policy background – some welcome steps forward:



The Government published its **Green Paper on children’s mental health – ‘Transforming Children and Young People’s Mental Health’** on 4 December 2017. It sets out proposals for a new approach to helping children with their mental health with a greater focus on support in schools. Measures include training a designated senior lead for mental health in every school and college and teaching children about mental health and wellbeing.



The **Online Harms White Paper**, published in April 2019, lays out the Government’s programme of action to tackle content or activity that harms individual users, particularly children. The White Paper identifies a number of harms experienced by children, including child sexual exploitation and abuse online; serious violence and cyberbullying. Such harms can impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the most vulnerable children and young people. The Online Harms White Paper proposes the establishment of a new statutory duty of care. This will make companies take more responsibility for the safety of their users and tackle the harm caused by content or activity on their services.



In January 2019 **the NHS Long Term Plan** was published. This sets out a new plan for the NHS to improve the quality of patient care and health outcomes. It also details how the £20.5 billion budget settlement for the NHS (which was announced by the Prime Minister in 2018), will be spent over the next 5 years.



Recommendations

Research

This report shows that although social media can benefit children and young people in a number of ways, there are potentially multiple negative impacts. Not enough is known about the impact of social media on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing⁹ and this has been noted in recent studies. In particular, vulnerable groups of children are often excluded from research examining the effect of social media on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendation 1

The Government should commission more research on the impact of social media to help establish a solid evidence base. This research should specifically include the experience of vulnerable children and young people.

Education

From 2020 schools, including Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), will be teaching Relationships, Health and Sex Education (RSE) based on updated Government guidance, which includes education on social media.¹⁰ However, some vulnerable children who need social media guidance the most may also not be attending school regularly. It is crucial that children who are not in school can access this education.

Parents and carers should also be included in any education initiatives so that they are familiar with how to use social media safely as well as the potential positive and negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing.

Children have the right to be heard and their opinions should be taken into consideration when developing any educational programme or guidance (this includes online guidance). Children and young people as well as Barnardo's practitioners have raised concerns that guidance is often designed and delivered by adults. In many cases, children may not trust adults (because they believe that they are simply trying to stop young people using social media) or because children and young people may have a more advanced knowledge of social media than those who have designed educational programmes.

Recommendation 2

The Government should ensure that all children and young people are able to access education and guidance on social media use. Professionals should be educated on how best to work with children and young people on the subject. Parents and carers should be supported to learn how to help children and young people to use social media safely, drawing on existing guidance.¹¹

9 This has been noted extensively by numerous experts in the field. For example see: Orben A et al. (2019) *Social media's enduring effect on adolescent life satisfaction* PNAS <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/early/2019/04/30/1902058116.full.pdf> accessed on 16.05.2019;

As well as - Written evidence received by CLOSER (home of longitudinal studies at University college London's Institute of Education) to the APPG 2018 APPG Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing Inquiry, included in the 2018 report '#New Filters - to manage the impact of social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing' <https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/wellbeing/new-filters.html> accessed on 16.05.2019

10 Department for Education *Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education, and Health Education in England* Draft statutory guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, teachers Feb 2019 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/781150/Draft_guidance_Relationships_Education_Relationships_and_Sex_Education_RSE_and_Health_Education2.pdf accessed on 17.05.2019

11 For example, Parentzone <https://parentzone.org.uk/advice/parent-guides>

In addition:

- **The Government should support schools to deliver programmes which are age appropriate and take into consideration the individual circumstances and vulnerabilities of children.**
- **Guidance should be developed with and centred on the stories of children and young people who have first-hand experience of the positive and negative impacts of social media.**
- **The Government should work with the NHS to ensure that professionals in health and social care and in education settings receive education on social media use and the impact this has on children and young people.**

Mental health support

Although we support the direction of travel set out by the Government in its response to the consultation on the ‘Transforming Children and Young People’s Mental Health Provision’ Green Paper, these lack ambition and would leave too many children waiting too long for the help they need. The Government’s goal is to roll out the new approach to at least a fifth or a quarter of the country by the end of 2022/23.

This means that young people in three quarters of England would see no improvement in mental health support at school in five years’ time.

Recommendation 3

Some of the newly proposed funding for the NHS (as detailed in the NHS 10 Year Plan) should be used to implement a more ambitious approach to mental health support in schools. In particular this funding could be used for: faster roll out of the Green Paper proposals; and specialist training on social media

for mental health teams with a focus on early intervention and prevention.

Regulating the internet

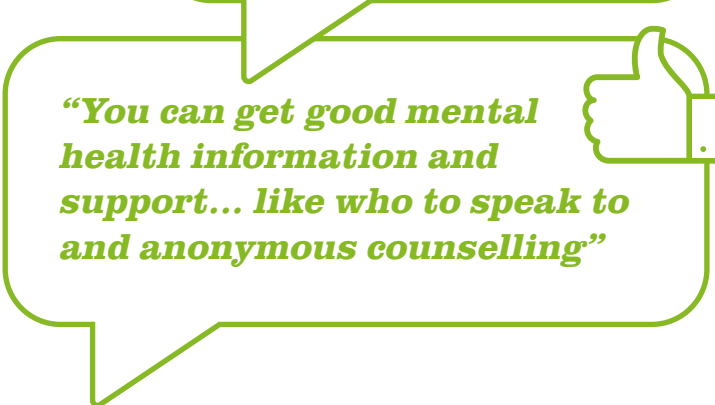
The Online Harms White Paper is a step in the right direction as the internet is not currently safe enough for children, and the safety or best interests of children are not properly considered in the design or delivery of online services. However, insight from our services as well as from children and young people who we have spoken with highlights the dangers that online harms (such as cyberbullying and other harmful content) can cause, especially to vulnerable children. Implementation must therefore include a focus on the most vulnerable children within the context of promoting positive mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendation 4

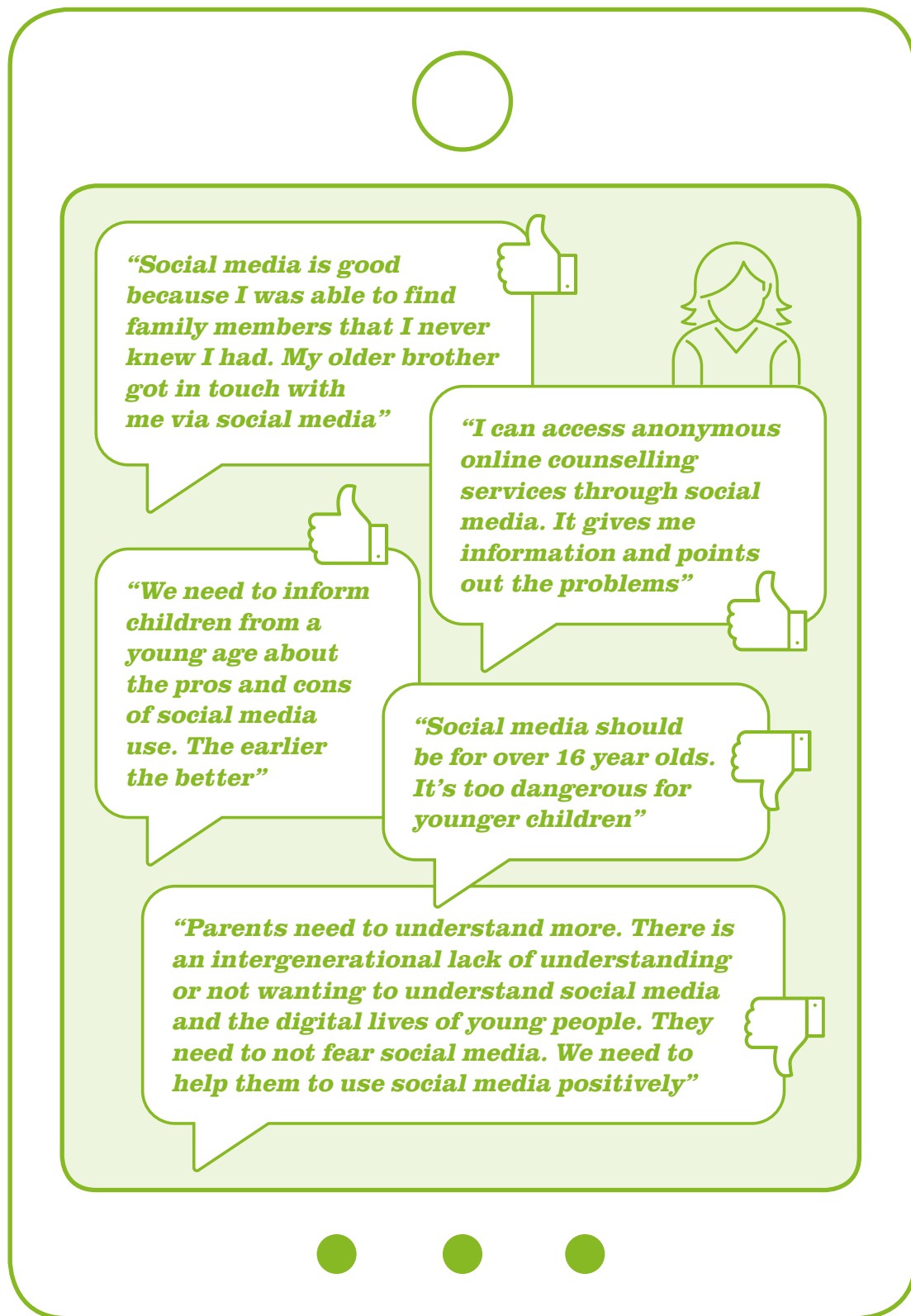
The Government’s Online Harms White Paper does not adequately address specific groups of vulnerable children with additional challenges. The additional needs of vulnerable children should be factored into the scope and implementation of the White Paper, for example, when developing guidance on cyberbullying for children, parents, carers and professionals.



“On social media you don’t know what’s real and what’s not real”



“You can get good mental health information and support... like who to speak to and anonymous counselling”



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