

Teenagers' mental health at risk from extreme web use

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More than a third of British teenagers are "extreme" internet users despite clear links between time spent online and risks to mental health, a study suggests.

It found that 37 per cent of children in the country aged 15 spent more than six hours a day online on a typical weekend. This was far higher than the average across developed nations, where 26 per cent did so. A higher proportion also spent between four and six hours a day online.

Similarly 24 per cent of the British teenagers were online outside school for at least six hours on weekdays, compared with 16 per cent in other wealthy countries.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which collected the figures, defines such behaviour as "extreme" internet use. Only Chile had a higher proportion of 15-year-olds who spent longer online.

Children are also increasingly accessing the internet in private, either in their bedrooms on smartphones or in groups on instant messaging services.

The OECD has shown that each additional hour per day spent online is associated with poorer mental health, with extreme internet users having an average life satisfaction score of 6.59 out of 10 compared with 7.4 for moderate users.

The Office for National Statistics has

also found a clear association between wellbeing and time online, with symptoms of mental ill health found among only 12 per cent of children who do not use social media but among 27 per cent of those who use such networks for more than three hours daily.

A study by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) think tank concluded it was "futile" trying to restrict access and suggested that emphasis be placed on building resilience to maintain emotional and mental wellbeing. Some teenagers used the internet to make friendships and develop social skills, express themselves or be creative, while others sought advice or emotional support from counselling services, it said. These should be balanced against risks such as bullying, sharing personal or compromising information, exposure to images or live streaming about self harm, suicide or body image.

Government policy until now has focused on trying to shield young people from inappropriate content online such as by requiring internet service providers or companies to have blocking filters or parental controls. But the study said the next strategy, expected later this summer, should emphasise how young people and their parents can develop digital skills and awareness to recognise and deal with threats.

Emily Frith, director of mental health at the EPI, said: "Our research highlights the importance of equipping young people with skills that help them counter emerging online risks."

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