

Alan Farrell, TD  
Chairman, Oireachtas Committee on Children & Youth Affairs

20 February 2018

Dear Mr Farrell

Please find attached the PSI submission to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs.

The PSI welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this review. We would also welcome an opportunity to meet with your Committee to outline the thinking behind our submission. As the only professional membership body representing Psychologists in Ireland, we believe that it is important that our views influence and are incorporated into the final report.

We look forward to further dialogue in due course.

Sincerely



Brendan O Connell  
President  
Psychological Society of Ireland



Terri Morrissey  
Chief Executive Officer  
Psychological Society of Ireland

**Psychological Society of Ireland Submission to the  
Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs**

**20<sup>th</sup> February 2018**

The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs. It is not within the scope of this submission or the timeframe involved to convey all the research in the area. This submission is intended to stimulate further evidence-based discussion.

There is not, yet, carefully conducted research to definitively conclude that social media is having a *direct negative causal impact* on young people's mental health. We need also to be careful of only conducting research which would focus on the potential risks or negative impact. Online communications for young people brings both benefits and risks.

Much of the commentary in the media in recent weeks and months and offered as evidence to this committee has been largely anecdotal or based on single case reports, therefore we need to be careful about rushing to premature conclusions.

Research on the effects of social media use by young people has produced mixed findings, with some studies reporting negative impacts, other studies showing neutral effects and other studies finding positive benefits.

A recent study<sup>1</sup> which included issues such as general mental health symptoms, suicidal ideation, loneliness, social anxiety and decreased empathy found that social media use was not predictive of impaired mental health functioning. Therefore, concerns inferring a purely one directional negative causal relationship between social media use and mental health may be misplaced.

Much of the commentary which has occurred in relation to young people, their online behaviour and their wellbeing has focussed on correlational studies, which show a connection between one factor and another. The psychological wellbeing of our young people is complex and multi-factorial and it is unscientific to make claims of a causal relationship between two issues (e.g. social media use and mental health) in the absence of supporting evidence.

What evidence tells us is that there are multiple psychological, social, behavioural, and individual factors that contribute to our understanding of why and how people experience psychological distress.

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<sup>1</sup> Social Media Use and Mental Health among Young Adults, Berryman, C., Ferguson, C.J., Negy, C., *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 2017.

The impact of online social networking on wellbeing may be both positive and negative, highlighting the need for future research, especially of a longitudinal nature, to determine the exact contribution of social networking.

A 2017 study<sup>2</sup> from the University of Oxford with a representative sample of English adolescents ( $n = 120,115$ ) reported evidence that moderate use of digital technology was not intrinsically harmful and may be advantageous in a connected world.

As Psychologists, we would advocate that what is required is support to parents in having conversations with young people about how they achieve balance in the use of technology with exercise, homework, real-life socialisation and sleep. We also need to look at how do we positively involve technology in our own interactions with young people. Rather than blanket restriction and regulation of technology, guided and scaffolded exposure to technology is recommended if young people are to develop into experienced, skilled and safe users of technology. There are no doubts that there are risks involved in interactions in the online world. However, as in the offline real world, harm elimination is not a realistic goal, but harm reduction is. The potential for harm is reduced through the provision of evidence based, whole population education programmes designed to support both young people and adults in interacting with the online world in a safe and constructive manner.

Dramatic language is often used to generalise the online behaviour of young people which we believe risks creating a significant disconnect and making them less likely to communicate with trusted adults about what and with whom they engage online.

### **To conclude**

The Psychological Society of Ireland is supportive of the Digital Age of Consent being set at 13 years of age to achieve the correct balance between the protection of children (given the proviso outlined above re parental support) and the affording of the opportunity to develop and grow within the online and offline worlds.

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<sup>2</sup> **A Large-Scale Test of the Goldilocks Hypothesis, *Quantifying the Relations Between Digital-Screen Use and the Mental Well-Being of Adolescents*, Andrew K. Prybylski & Netta Weinstein, 2017**