Knowledge Institute
on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions

Mental Health
Commission
of Canada

Digital Media and Youth Mental Health

Report Highlights

Authors

The report, a partnership between the Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions and the Mental Health Commission of Canada, explores practical strategies and policy considerations at the individual, family/caregiver, service provider, and policy levels to support balanced digital engagement among children and young people. It offers guidance on the benefits and challenges of interactive digital media and their impacts on mental health to support informed decision making around safe use. This report is intended for service providers, health leaders, researchers, policy makers, young people, families and caregivers.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada

Maureen Abbott, Katerina Kalenteridis, Zakariya Thraya, Anique Turgeon, and Jacqueline Fortier

The Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions

Danielle Impey, Lilli Green, Laura Ziebell, Alexandra Tucci, Poppy Desclouds, and Amy Porath Eves

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Background

In our increasingly digital world, children and young people are navigating a complex online environment where a wide range of online tools impact their mental health and well-being.[1, 2] A rapidly expanding range of interactive digital media platforms offer accessible, personalized, and scalable mental health support. However, these platforms are not always designed with the mental health of children and young people as a priority. They may expose young users to harms and negatively impact their mental health through engagement features, such as algorithm-driven feeds, autoplay, and characteristics that encourage endless scrolling, which are increasingly optimized by artificial intelligence (AI).[3] Platforms and apps that offer both support and persuasive design features can make it difficult for children and young people to distinguish between helpful or harmful use of interactive digital media.[4] This duality underscores the need for urgent, balanced, and evidence-informed approaches to help children and young people to critically engage with interactive digital media in ways that foster their well-being.

As part of its commitment to supporting best practices for safe, quality, and equitable digital mental health services, the Mental Health Commission of Canada offers a growing range of evidence-informed resources. With support from collaborators across Canada and around the world, the Commission developed an E-Mental Health Strategy for Canada, a guiding star document outlining priorities and recommendations for the future direction and development of digital mental health.

In partnership with the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, the Commission is developing Canada's first AI guidance for mental health and substance use health. The Commission also collaborated to build a national Mental Health App Assessment Framework and E-Modules for E-Mental Health Implementation.

The Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions (the Knowledge Institute) is dedicated to strengthening Ontario's mental health, substance use health, and addictions (MHSUHA) services for young people and their families. The Knowledge Institute accelerates system change, mobilizes evidence, and strengthens knowledge and skills by working alongside agencies. As part of this work, it supports the sector's ongoing adoption of technology use and artificial intelligence with evidence-based tools and resources. The Knowledge Institute is working to build capacity and address the sector's knowledge needs to enable collaborative, comprehensive MHSUHA care. As an emerging priority, it also recently released the first resource of a three-part series on AI entitled AI for youth mental health and substance use health: A primer, as well as practical resources that summarize best practices and recommendations to support safer, more responsible **AI use in collaboration with Mental Health Research Canada**. This resource explores new concepts related to the use of AI and offers an overview of opportunities, considerations, and practical suggestions for the MHSUHA sector.

"I have experienced how social media can create constant pressure to compare ourselves to curated versions of other people's lives and bodies. For many young people, especially those already vulnerable to body image concerns or eating disorders, these platforms can quietly shape self-worth around appearance, productivity, and external validation in ways that are deeply harmful to mental health."

~Victoria Gracie, Youth Council member, Mental Health Commission of Canada

Impacts on Children and Young People

Children and young people use a variety of interactive digital media tools, for entertainment, social connection, learning, and self-expression, as well as mental health support.[5] These tools can play a meaningful role in supporting the mental health of children and young people by offering accessible, engaging, and varied forms of support.[6,7] When thoughtfully designed and used with best practices in mind, they can complement in-person care, enhance well-being, and empower children and young people through education, connection, and self-guided strategies in diverse contexts to address diverse needs. Key benefits include:

Improved access and reduced stigma for equity-deserving and rural and remote communities[8]

Mental health information and promotion, such as relatable content that builds awareness, resilience, and help-seeking[9, 10, 11]

Tailored, evidence-based, and self-guided support through mindfulness apps, mood trackers, educational games, and virtual reality simulations that improve coping skills[12]

Peer support and social connection, which help children and young people build relationships, find belonging, and receive validation, especially when in-person support is limited[4, 9, 13]

Self-expression and identity exploration through safer online spaces for creativity and community building[14, 15]

Features that provide entertainment and support relaxation, enjoyment, learning, and mood improvement.[16, 17]

"For me, social media was most meaningful when it was curated and co-created with peers. It gave African, Caribbean, and Black youth space to name mental health experiences we were not seeing reflected elsewhere, build pride in our diverse identities, validate our lived experiences, use live conversations and creative storytelling in ways that felt healing, and form relationships across geography, culture, and community. It helped challenge stereotypes, misinformation, support self image, and turn social media into a space for collective care."

~Don Mahleka, Hallway Group member, Mental Health Commission of Canada

Challenges associated with interactive digital media

In some forms of interactive digital media, attention is treated as a valuable commodity, and developers may harness AI to maximize engagement and prioritize profit above users' well-being.[18, 19, 20] While these platforms support connection, creativity, learning, and entertainment for children and young people, their persuasive, engagement-based design features can also shape behaviour, identity development, and well being in ways that increase young users' vulnerability to negative mental health outcomes.[21] Key potential harms for children and young people include the following:

- **Increased screen time,** particularly passive use of interactive digital media, has been linked to a range of impacts on well-being including attention exhaustion and reduced empathy, as well as difficulties with communication, concentration, self-regulation, and reflective thinking.[22, 23] It can also negatively impact mental health, through increasing symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, low self-esteem, envy, loneliness, sleep disruption, and suicidal thoughts.[24, 25, 26]
- **Exposure to harmful content, misinformation and echo-chambers** can reduce trust in reliable sources of support, discourage help-seeking, shape inaccurate beliefs, and increase vulnerability, negatively impacting well-being and daily life.[27, 28, 29]
- **Social comparison and validation pressure** from platform features such as likes, followers, continuous updates, and influencer marketing can lower self-esteem, worsen body image, and increase anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms.[30, 31]
- **Cyberbullying and online harassment** can impact peer relationships, well-being, and daily life. In 2023, Public Safety Canada found that a quarter of young people in Canada age 12–27 reported experiencing it over the past year.[32]
- **Family relationship strain** can result from competing demands for attention, reducing relationship quality and increasing conflict.[33]

Strategies and Solutions

Families and caregivers play a key role in supporting digital media literacy by helping children and young people develop the skills to engage with interactive digital media in balanced, informed, and developmentally appropriate ways.[34] Key strategies include:

- **Engaging in caregiver mediation,** including co watching, having open conversations, and coaching children and young people about digital media use
- **Promoting balanced use,** including encouraging active, purposeful, and context aware screen use[35, 36]
- **Supporting digital autonomy,** including building critical thinking, media literacy, and mindfulness skills so children and young people can recognize curated content, manage attention capture, and reflect on their online experiences[36, 37]
- **Tailoring use and mitigating risks,** by adjusting expectations and supports on the basis of developmental readiness and gradually increasing autonomy

"As a parent caregiver, I've seen digital media become both a lifeline and a challenge. It can create connection and belonging for young people, but without support and guidance it can also contribute to isolation, anxiety, and emotional overwhelm."

~ Family Advisory Council member, Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions

Service providers play a critical role in guiding families/caregivers, children, and young people as they navigate digital media through:

Leveraging existing digital mental health tools when delivering services.

Addressing underlying factors to help children and young people build self regulation, communication, empathy, and social skills.

Guiding evidence-based choices by helping children, young people, and their families/caregivers select safe, evidence-informed, and appropriate digital resources and decision-making tools.

Building digital resilience through collaboratively supporting children and young people to develop critical thinking skills, form positive social media habits, develop privacy awareness, and understand how personal information may be collected and used online, and helping families/caregivers to create shared family tech use plans with realistic values and boundaries.

Modelling safe use by demonstrating healthy boundaries with digital media, encouraging open reflection on digital experiences, and modelling positive habits.[38]

"I want service providers to understand that what happens online is not separate from real life. Digital spaces shape relationships, identity, self-esteem, and mental health in very real ways."

~ Family Advisory Council member, Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions

Health leaders and digital tool developers can shape healthier interactive digital environments through education, standards, and design approaches that improve the well-being of children and young people.[39, 40] Here are some actions they can take:

- **Increase transparency around algorithms, data use, content moderation, and AI** to help children and young people understand and critically engage with what they see online.
- **Actively involve children and young people in co-design and evaluation** of digital tools to ensure platforms reflect their needs, experiences, and perspectives.
- **Prioritize equitable access, as well as ethical and human-centered design** to incorporate features that enable balanced use and well-being.
- **Establish and adopt guidelines and success metrics** that measure positive user outcomes, quality, and safety, not just time spent or interaction levels.

International policy approaches to support the well-being of children and young people vary widely. Australia, the United Kingdom, and several European Union (EU) countries have nationwide age-based restrictions, while other EU countries have parental consent models.[41, 42, 43] In Canada, federal, provincial and territorial discussions have gained momentum around raising minimum age requirements and restricting platform access, as well as implementing cellphone bans in schools.

In June 2026, the Government of Canada introduced Bill C-34, the Safe Social Media Act, which, if passed into law, would raise the minimum age for social media use from 13 to 16 and require platforms and AI chatbot services to proactively mitigate harm, while allowing exemptions for those that demonstrate strong safety measures.[44] Early national and international reporting suggests that restrictions can yield some short term benefits for attention and in person social interaction, but they also raise challenges related to enforcement and equity.[45, 46, 47] Overall, emerging evidence underscores the need for a balanced approach that pairs restrictions with digital literacy education, mental health supports, and empowerment of children and young people to more effectively promote well being.[16, 45, 48, 49]

Conclusion

Digital media use continues to grow, making a balanced and evidence-informed approach essential for supporting the mental health of children and young people. As AI shapes the evolution of interactive digital media, intentional and reflective use is becoming more important than ever. Caregivers, service providers, policy makers, children, and young people all have a role to play in promoting digital well-being.

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