ySKILLS

YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING INTERNET-RELATED MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES: THE BENEFITS AND RISKS OF DIGITAL SKILLS

RESEARCH QUESTIONS ❓

1. **What is the relevance of different dimensions of digital skills in the lives of young people experiencing mental health difficulties?**

2. **How do young people experience the role of digital skills in aiding or worsening their mental health difficulties, including their capacity to cope?**

3. **What recommendations can be drawn from young people's experiences that may inform mental health professionals, schools, companies, regulators and the public to support young people's digital lives?**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Digital technologies are not all good or all bad – they can have both positive and negative effects on young people's mental health.

Positively, the internet and social media **can help young people** meet and talk to others. They can also offer information and support and help people to cope with difficult situations.

But they can also be **upsetting and trigger mental health setbacks**. For example, young people may be shown unwanted harmful content or find themselves in extreme spaces.

Vulnerable young people are often on the lookout for online threats. They try to develop the skills and knowledge to prevent online problems or to deal with them better.

Young people with lived experience of mental health difficulties have lots of digital skills. Some are helpful for their mental health - such as learning about algorithms that promote negative content or finding 'safe' spaces or trusted people to support you online.

Young people with lived experience of mental health difficulties **do not always manage to gain the specific skills they need.** Or they have the skills but **can't always use them effectively** when they need to. So, things can still go wrong online. And sometimes this makes mental health difficulties worse.

Young people often feel it's down to them to manage their digital lives. So, they may feel proud of what they can cope with. But they can also feel alone when coping with difficult situations.

Young people rarely seek help or advice when they are in trouble online. They are afraid of being misunderstood or punished or blamed for things going wrong. So, they may find ways to keep their digital experiences secret from parents, teachers, therapists and even peers.

They would like the internet and social media to be made into **more friendly and supportive places.** And they would like their therapists and other trusted adults to **understand their digital lives better.**

"My whole feed was just full of 'what I eat in a day'. But these people ... they were eating such tiny amounts. I'm like 12, thinking about it. I eat three meals and then these people are having a strawberry for brunch."
(girl aged 14, UK)

"How can I develop without making mistakes? I have to learn it myself because there's not always going to be that person to tell me not to do this and not to do that."
(boy aged 17, UK)

"On Twitter sometimes there are feeds trending or threads trending on my feed where it's like ways to cope. And I have got a bunch of those added to my bookmarks so that I can go to them quickly."
(girl aged 17, UK)

"I can't talk to mom about these deep things. She doesn't know I am on these sites and I don't want her to worry. I don't feel so comfortable talking to her when it is so bad. I want to protect her."
(girl aged 19, Norway)

"It is more helpful to support and just listen instead of explaining again and again ... how you have been involved in this situation ... because I know that I was stupid."
(girl aged 16, Norway)

www.yskills.eu

CALL TO ACTION

ySKILLS

CLINICIANS, SAFEGUARDING AND MENTAL HEALTH PRACTITIONERS

- **Young people have diverse digital lives.** Practitioners should get to know about them.

- **Encourage young people to share about difficult online experiences.** Showing empathy, understanding and genuine interest can reduce shame and help disclosure.

- **Telling them to stop going online is impractical, even counterproductive.** Instead, try to understand young people's motivations, even for doing risky things online.

- **Practitioners need training and digital skills.** Youth services must address young people's digital experiences and offer therapeutic strategies when their experiences are problematic.

EDUCATORS

- **Support for students should be meaningful and relatable.** It should address all online activities they engage in and recognise what is vital for young people's wellbeing and safety.

- **Teaching should cover different types of digital skills, not just technical training or e-safety messages**. For example, education on algorithm literacy is now essential.

- **Educators need a trauma-informed approach to understand the specific needs of at-risk and vulnerable young people.** This includes ways to cope with online challenging behaviours from peers and risks that arise from the design of the digital environment.

- **Education should promote resilience and help-seeking** and work to overcome digital and social exclusion.

INDUSTRY AND TECH COMPANIES

- **Providers should recognise the diversity of their users and design with young people in mind.** Particular efforts should be made for those who are vulnerable or at risk.

- **Companies should reduce risk features in their designs, and develop effective policies to deal with emerging risks.** When young users contribute to risk, the response should be supportive, not punitive.

- **Digital literacy resources should include mental health literacy** and help young people to recognise and respond constructively to likely harms.

- **The operation of algorithms that promote or amplify upsetting or extreme content should be prevented.**

- **Specific recommendations include: make privacy settings easier, simplify reporting and take-down of problematic content and provide in-time support and safe spaces**

GOVERNMENT

- **Children and young people should be able to receive timely and appropriate therapy and support as needed for any and all mental health difficulties they may encounter.** Government should ensure services are sufficiently funded, with access to expertise about the digital environment.

- **Government should ensure that educators, law enforcement and other relevant professionals can support vulnerable and at-risk young people's wellbeing in relation to their digital lives.**

- **They should consider regulation to limit the excessive risks posed to young people's safety by the actions of commercial providers of digital products and services, especially the large platforms.**

Watch the webinar launching the findings
https://youtu.be/IzYgHxnfBJw
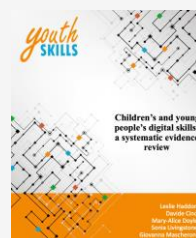
For an overview of available evidence, see our systematic review
https://zenodo.org/record/4160176