

Expert warns of critical moment in adolescent mental health

Specialist asks if the UK is doing enough to protect children from online harm

One of Scotland's leading child psychotherapists is calling for increased public debate around social media use by children following Australia's decision to ban under 16 year-olds from social media platforms.

After being passed by the Australian senate, Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist Paul Bell said the news of the ban brought important questions to the UK around whether enough is being done to protect young people from harms associated with social media use.

As Clinical Director of [The Anchor Practice](#), an Edinburgh-based psychotherapy practice treating over 700 patients every year, Paul noted an increasing number of patients of the practice and their parents citing social media as a key reason for their mental health struggles.

The Anchor Practice, a multi-disciplinary mental health clinic in Edinburgh, offers a range of evidence-based treatments, but also specialises in Psychodynamic Psychotherapy – a well-researched treatment for a variety of common mental disorders in children and adults.

With more than 15 years of experience, Paul has held senior positions in NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) including working as Clinical Lead for secondary school-based CAMHS clinics where social media regularly featured as a concern for young people, their teachers and parents.

Commenting on the social media ban, he said: "Our children are navigating a digital landscape designed to capture and

manipulate their most fundamental psychological vulnerabilities.

"We are witnessing a critical moment in understanding digital well-being. Social media platforms are not neutral communication tools, but sophisticated psychological environments capable of affecting a developing sense of identity during this crucial developmental stage."

A growing body of research into the effects of social media use in adolescence indicates that this age group may be at larger risk of anxiety and depression symptoms with increased social media usage.

Paul added: "During adolescence, the human brain undergoes significant restructuring, and young people are particularly sensitive to social feedback during this time. This can in turn make disengaging from social media particularly difficult for this age group.

It has long been established that adolescents have a particularly heightened sensitivity to perceived social rejection which represents a normal phase of social development. However, the design of social media platforms, including the use of 'likes' and 'streaks' can manipulate these developmental processes in order to keep young people engaged, often to the detriment of their mental health.

The continued engagement of young people with these platforms is integral to revenue generation for many social media platforms, creating a clear conflict of interest in their considerations for the wellbeing of young people."

A rise in problems associated with social media use is being seen across many sectors supporting adolescent mental health. Paul adds: "My colleagues and I are witnessing a generation struggling with rising levels of social anxiety, body image concerns, sleep disruption, and emotional trauma.

"Many of those seeking help directly cite social media as a key contributor to their difficulties. With these concerns in mind, it is understandable that the Australian government has opted to take this action and it will be interesting to see how the ban will be implemented and how it may affect young people and their families."

In terms of how the UK may tackle this global issue, Paul added a note of caution: "While it is clear that as a society we need to make discussion about social media a priority,

legislation must take into account young people's autonomy. Their natural drive in this phase of life is to seek out social groups – whether online or in person – so it is imperative that social media companies are held accountable for business practices that include promoting harmful content and extensive engagement.”

Paul also drew attention to the importance of education for both young people and their parents in navigating the digital environment, particularly supporting parents to feel confident in setting boundaries within their own families.

“Families have different rules for all kinds of things – how much pocket money children get, how much homework they are expected to do. Parents are familiar with navigating these often tricky conversations around why their family has the rules it does and rules around social media are increasingly becoming part of these conversations.

“But because technologies are developing so rapidly, parents can feel at a loss as to how to keep up and regulate their child's usage of social media. I think we need to be looking at how to support parents to feel confident and informed enough to implement boundaries and how best to discuss social media with their children.

“In fact, helping young people and their parents improve their communication around social media is increasingly a large and helpful part of our work here in the clinic. “

Social media usage and its effects on adolescent development is a key area of interest within the team at The Anchor Practice. “We are keen to keep as informed as possible in this rapidly developing area as it feels crucial to understanding the struggles families are presenting with. We'll be following how the legislation plays out in Australia – particularly any independent research into the impact of such an age-restriction.”

Meanwhile, Paul hopes that here in the UK any legislation “will be guided by high quality research, the views of young people and parents, and a commitment to ensuring that digital experiences serve our young people's well-being and support their natural developmental trajectory rather than disrupting it.”



Paul Bell