

‘Why social media should be banned for under-16s’

Usually, I am a vocal critic of telling young people what their problems are.

It happens more than you’d imagine. A steering group somewhere sits and imagines what it might be like to be a young person today and makes proposals based on how difficult they’d find it, rather than doing something truly innovative and pioneering like, erm, actually asking an actual young person.

That’s why charity Young Minds’ 2014 survey was so ground-breaking - it simply asked 4,000 young people what they found most challenging in their lives, without agenda or suggestion. (FYI: the four most common answers were bullying, exam stress, sexual pressures arising chiefly from online pornography and body image concerns).

However, last week I found myself making an exception to my default stance on the “imposing problems on children and teenagers” issue. The European Union proposed, then ultimately rejected, a ban on under-16s using social media. I ask all my Self-Esteem Team students to raise their hand if they are on any type of social networking site. Having now personally delivered workshops to more than 45,000 of them, I can say with some authority that the average age for a young person to join Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter or Instagram is in Year 8 (12 years).

Although more unusual, I have also met a substantial amount of 10- and 11-year-olds who use social media, so they are clearly finding a way to circumnavigate the age restrictions on these sites.

Clearly, such a ban would be difficult to enforce. Despite this, I was broadly in favour of it.

Most of the teenagers I follow on Twitter loudly derided the notion of a ban, declaring it patronising and unnecessary. Indeed, a recent study at the Grange School in Cheshire found their pupils do not consider social media to have as much of a detrimental effect on their wellbeing as the people who teach them do.

But then a generation born into a world of broadband, smart phones and widespread social media usage *would* think that, wouldn’t they?

I hesitate to type what I’m about to, lest I sound like a philistine, or one of those people who were convinced the invention of the wireless was going to rot children’s brains. However, the evidence from psychologists and neuroscientists, combined with what I see and hear in UK schools every week, does paint a worrying picture.

Professor Rachel Thompson published a paper in 2013 in which she theorised that whilst adults “dip in” to social media as and when their days allow, today’s teenagers see activities like school and family time as “pauses” in their online, social existences. If she is right, this means the entire

purpose of social media has been inverted, in that it appears more “real” to many of its young users than whatever is happening in the world of three dimensions.

My sense is that we won’t know the true extent of the impact of social media on brain development for at least another decade or two, since the technology tends to develop faster than neuroscientists are able to reliably analyse it. However, we do know, for example, that regular social media users have a “Pavlovian” response to receiving a notification (even if it’s simply their “friend” inviting them to play Candy Crush), leading not only to a rush of pleasure-giving endorphins, but also the desire to respond immediately.

All this goes some way to explaining why a survey by the BBC earlier this year found that a third of children feel actively guilty if they don’t respond to text messages and other notifications immediately. We also know that in prolific social media users certain parts of the brain are enlarged - the parts which analyse social standing and how we compare with others, which of course has a catastrophic effect on self-esteem.

More anecdotally, the modern trend of using tablets and smart phones as “babysitters” has, I have observed, meant that many children are not developing crucial social and conversational skills and, unlike the ability to swipe, these are skills which are difficult to pick up in later life.

While one of [our Self-Esteem Team](#) students is unlikely to put their hand up in an assembly-style situation and state some of the ways they wrestle with internet culture, a high proportion of the problems they quietly confess to me afterwards centre around cyber bullying, filtered and photoshopped selfies, FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out - a phenomenon created largely by seeing everyone else having a great time on social networking sites) and online pornography.

Of course, it would be remiss of me to suggest that online social networking doesn’t have its positives. For young people who feel isolated because of their tastes, sexuality, race or religion, an online community can help them to feel accepted and valued. I should also point out at this stage that there is, in my experience, a gender divide on this issue: where girls are more likely to say something along the lines of “I really hate social media but feel like it’s compulsory”, boys tend to shrug and state that if something is happening online that they don’t like they’ll simply put their phone down and do something else without giving it much further thought. As ever, however, this could simply be bravado speaking.

I’ve concluded that in order to enjoy all the best aspects of social media, to be able to navigate the online world successfully, on our own terms, without subconsciously drinking in all the more harmful and toxic aspects, we have to be able to imagine life without it. Which is why (sorry, teens) I think the European Union was absolutely right to propose a ban as it did.

Oh, and Merry Christmas!