

Smartphones are bad for some teens, not all

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Is the next generation better or worse off because of smartphones? The answer is complex and research shows it largely depends on their lives offline.

In a commentary published today in *Nature's* special issue on the science

of adolescence, Candice Odgers argues that smartphones should not be seen as universally bad. Her piece highlights research on how teens use [online tools](#) to build up relationships and arrange activities in real life. However, she also examines evidence that vulnerable teens are experiencing greater negative effects of life online.

"What we're seeing now may be the emergence of a new kind of digital divide, in which differences in online experiences are amplifying risks among already vulnerable adolescents," writes Odgers, a fellow in CIFAR's Child & Brain Development program and professor of psychology and social behaviour at the University of California, Irvine.

For the last 10 years, Odgers has been tracking adolescents' [mental health](#) and their use of smartphones. In her survey of North Carolina schoolchildren, 48 per cent of 11-year-olds said they owned a mobile phone. Eighty-five per cent of 14-year-olds said they owned a cellphone (go.nature.com/2eeffku). Despite digital technology's widespread usage, she notes that research has not found a negative association between mental well-being and "moderate" usage.

The negative impacts of technology show up when researchers take a closer look at demographics. Teens from families with a household income of less than \$35,000 per year spent three more hours a day on screen media watching TV and online videos than teens in families with an annual income of more than USD\$100,000, according to a large-scale [study](#) in the U.S.

The increased screen time may also convert to more problems offline. Odgers' survey results showed teens from [low-income families](#) reported more physical fights, face-to-face arguments and trouble at school that spilled over from social media.

"In the past 25 years, income inequality and the opportunity gap between

children from low-income families and their more affluent peers has been growing. They have increasingly less access to resources, and lower levels of adult investment," says Odgers. "It would be disastrous for many children to see this gap replicated in the online world."

More research is needed to understand whether and how online experiences are worsening these inequalities, Odgers writes. She called for an interdisciplinary effort that brings together child and brain researchers with those working on human-computer interactions.

As a parent, Odgers understands the concerns mothers and fathers may have for their children online. She cautions that giving into fear could prevent researchers and policymakers from identifying the real determinants of mental health.

"Instead, we must use the data to understand the very different experiences that young people from diverse backgrounds are having online," she writes.

More information: *Nature* (2018).

www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-02109-8

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