

# Social media does not cause depression in children and young people, according to study

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Many children and young adults spend a lot of time on social media, much to the concern of their parents and guardians. Researchers at

NTNU have now taken a closer look at the impact of using social media such as Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok on young people's mental health.

"The prevalence of anxiety and depression has increased in young people, as has the use of [social media](#). Many people consequently believe there has to be a correlation," says Silje Steinsbekk, a professor in NTNU's Department of Psychology.

But Steinsbekk's recent article, "Social media behaviours and symptoms of anxiety and depression. A four-wave cohort study from age 10–16 years" published in *Computers in Human Behavior* suggests otherwise.

## **Trondheim Early Secure Study**

Researchers with the [Trondheim Early Secure Study](#) project followed 800 [children](#) in Trondheim over six years to look for correlations between the use of social media and the development of symptoms of mental illness.

"We have collected data every other year, from the year in which the children were ten years old until they turned 16. This enabled us to follow the children during the transition from childhood to adolescence. Symptoms of anxiety and depression were identified through diagnostic interviews with both the children and their parents," Steinsbekk explains.

The outcome of the study was the same for both boys and girls. And the results were the same regardless of whether the children published posts and pictures via their own social media pages or whether they liked and commented on posts published by others.

Increased use of social media did not lead to more symptoms of anxiety and depression. Nor was it the case that those who developed more

symptoms of anxiety and depression over time changed their social media habits.

## **Norwegian researchers find weak correlations**

A number of studies have been conducted in recent years looking at the correlation between the use of social media on the part of children and young people and their mental health.

Some studies have found that the use of social media promotes mental health, while others find that it has a negative impact. But the majority of the correlations are weak, Steinsbekk said.

"Mental health is often broadly defined in the studies and covers everything from self-esteem to depression. Data is often collected using questionnaires. It is unclear what has actually been measured and the focus has often been on frequency, meaning how much time young people have spent on social media."

"By following the same individuals over a number of years, recording symptoms of mental illness through in-depth interviews and examining various types of social media use, our study has enabled us to take a more detailed look and provide a more nuanced picture of the correlations," Steinsbekk said.

Previous studies conducted by the same research group show that around five percent of young people in Norway experience depression. The prevalence is lower in children.

One in ten children meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder at least once during the period between the ages of four and 14 years.

"Young people's use of social media is a topic that often creates strong

emotions in people. There is a lot of concern among both parents and professionals," Steinsbekk said."

"We are hoping to contribute more knowledge about how social media affects young people's development and ability to function in society. Who is particularly vulnerable? Who benefits from social media? Does the way in which social media is used matter?" she said.

## **Social support and less loneliness**

Steinsbekk and her colleagues previously found that girls who like and comment on other people's posts on social media develop a poorer body image over time, but this was not the case for boys. Posting to their own social media accounts had no impact on self-esteem, regardless of the child's gender.

Over the coming years, researchers will also examine how different experiences on social media, such as cyberbullying and posting nude pictures, affect young people's development and ability to function in society.

"Our study finds that if Kari or Knut increasingly like and post on Instagram or Snapchat, they are no more likely to develop symptoms of anxiety and depression. But that doesn't mean that they are not having negative experiences on social media, or feeling addicted or excluded. Some youths may be particularly vulnerable, and those are the individuals we need to identify," Steinsbekk says.

At the same time, Steinsbekk also notes that social media has positive aspects, too.

"Social media provides a venue for community and belonging, making it easy to stay in touch with friends and family. Social media can be a

platform for social support and help protect against loneliness for young people with few friends," she said.

## Trondheim Early Secure Study

The project investigates the psychological and social development of children and young people. The aim of the study is to be able to answer questions such as:

- What causes some young people to have [mental health problems](#)?
- Why do children do well at school, while others fall behind?
- How does the use of social [media](#) affect the lives of children and young people and does it matter how much they play games?
- What is it like for individuals who are bullied, lonely or have psychological problems?
- What role do friends and parents play in the development and [mental health](#) of children and young people?
- What contributes to helping [young people](#) develop good lifestyle habits (sleep, physical activity and eating behavior)?

The Trondheim Early Secure Study has collected data from thousands of children and their parents every year since the subjects were four years of age. The study participants are now 20 years old and the ninth data collection round will take place this autumn.

**More information:** Silje Steinsbekk et al, Social media behaviors and symptoms of anxiety and depression. A four-wave cohort study from age 10–16 years, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2023.107859](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2023.107859)

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