

# Research highlights trend of sleep-deprived, cyberbullied teenagers addicted to smartphones

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Australian researchers have polled more than 50,000 primary and secondary school students aged 7–19 years about the link between their

sleep and nighttime phone habits, experience of cyberbullying and stress levels.

Researchers from the Behavior-Brain-Body Research Center at the University of South Australia found that across all genders and age groups, phone use overnight not only robbed [children](#) of [sleep](#), but it also had a negative impact on their mental health, especially among those who had been cyberbullied.

Whether one habit causes or stems from another is not crystal clear, but the study findings should send a clear signal to parents about the need to manage digital device use at home. The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Adolescents*.

Approximately 66% of teenage girls and 58% of [teenage boys](#) (aged 12–19 years) reported being cyberbullied at least once in the preceding school term. Among the girls, 17% said they slept less than eight hours a night and the corresponding figure for the teenage boys was 13%.

Stress levels in the moderate-to-severe range were reported by 38% of [teenage girls](#) and 23% of teenage boys.

While cyberbullying and lack of sleep were not as common in primary aged children (7–11 years), one in five reported moderate-to-severe stress.

For the purposes of the study, "nighttime" refers to phone use when children are supposed to be sleeping, not prior to bed.

UniSA researcher and co-author Dr. Stephanie Centofanti says that girls are particularly vulnerable because their smartphone use at night is higher than other age groups and they start using [social media](#) at a younger age.

"We found that frequency of nighttime phone use and getting less than eight hours' sleep a night not only peaked in [early adolescence](#) but was also more evident in [young girls](#)," Dr. Centofanti says.

"Pre-teens are at higher risk for socio-emotional disorders because they are at a developmental stage where they are less prepared cognitively, behaviorally and neurobiologically."

The researchers say that outside of the digital environment, boys are more likely to be physically bullied, while girls normally resort to psychological or relational bullying, which is more easily enabled online.

Approximately 15% of children in the study reported being cyberbullied, with a higher frequency of boys in primary school and girls in secondary school.

More than one third of primary school children and over 60% of teenagers in the study reported using their phone at night when they were supposed to be sleeping.

Of the children who experienced cyberbullying, almost 75% admitted they checked their phone throughout the night, compared to less than half for those who had never been cyberbullied.

"It is clear that parents need to pay closer attention to managing [smartphone use](#) at night, particularly if their children are more vulnerable to cyberbullying, and to ensure their children get enough sleep," Dr. Centofanti says.

**More information:** Stephanie Centofanti et al, Nighttime Phone Use and Past Exposure to Cyberbullying and Their Impact on Sleep and Psychological Wellbeing in Australian Children Aged 7 to 19 Years, *Adolescents* (2024). [DOI: 10.3390/adolescents4030025](https://doi.org/10.3390/adolescents4030025)

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