



Liz Kendall

Member of Parliament for Leicester West

The views of young people about social media

Submission to the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee
inquiry into the impact of social media on young people's physical and mental health

Introduction

The House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee, which I am a member of, is conducting an inquiry into the impact of social media on young people's physical and mental health. I am keen to make sure that the views of young people in Leicester West are heard as part of this inquiry and help shape the recommendations in the Committee's final report.

This report summarises the discussions I have had with young people in three secondary schools and two primary schools in Leicester West. It covers a number of issues including how young people use social media, what they see as the benefits and downsides, how much time they spend on social media, their views about current age limits, whether young people have ever seen or reported any inappropriate content and how social media platforms respond, and who they talk to or get support from if they experience any problems.

About the schools

Mowmacre Primary School (visited 7th September 2018) - Mowmacre Primary is a mixed primary school for children aged 3 – 11. It currently has 384 students, of those 112 are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM).

The proportion of disadvantaged students is well above the average. Students who need special needs and/or have a disability is also above average.

Fullhurst Community College (visited 14th September 2018) - Fullhurst Community College is smaller than the average secondary school for students aged 11 – 16. It currently has 862 students, of those 263 are eligible for FSM.

The proportion of disabled students and those who have disabilities or special educational needs supported through school action is above average. Students who are supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is also above average.

Beaumont Leys School (visited 28th September 2018) – Beaumont Leys School is a larger-than-average secondary school for students aged 11 – 16. It currently has 1044 students, of those 199 students are eligible for FSM.

Students known to be eligible for support through the pupil premium is above average. The number of students supported through school action is well above the national average as is the proportion supported through school action plus or who have a statement of special educational needs.

Babington Academy (visited 2nd November 2018) – Babington Academy is a smaller than average-sized secondary school for students aged 11 – 16. It currently has 684 students, of those 292 are eligible for FSM.

The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs supported through school action is high, and the proportion supported at school action plus or with a

statement of special educational needs is above average. The proportion of students for whom the school receives the pupil premium, is well above the national average.

Fosse Primary School (visited 16th November 2018) – Fosse Primary School is a larger than average-sized primary school for students aged 3 – 11. It currently has 420 students, of those 119 are eligible for FSM.

The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is much higher than average. The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs or disabilities is much higher than average.

Use of social media

Primary Schools

Nearly all of the children at Fosse and Mowmacre primary schools owned a mobile phone or tablet and the majority were already using some form of social media, despite the fact that the minimum age is 13 years old. A small number said they were not allowed to use social media by their parents.

Instagram and Snapchat were the most popular forms of social media with fewer children using Facebook and Twitter. Many of the children were also on Youtube and had games like PlayStation.

Secondary Schools

All of the secondary school students I spoke to owned a mobile phone and all but one of the students said they used social media. The one student who did not said they had not thought of being on social media because they did not have anything they wanted to share.

Most of the students at the secondary schools were on Snapchat and Instagram. As with the younger students, Facebook and Twitter were less popular.

Benefits

Pupils at Mowmacre and Fosse Primary told me the main thing they like about social media is being able to talk to their friends and family, with many children saying social media was good for staying in contact with family who live in other countries.

Social media enables children to share what has happened in their day, including by posting pictures and videos about what they have been doing. They also use social media to learn about new things and to play games.

In addition to these benefits, which the secondary school students at Beaumont Leys, Babington and Fullhurst all agreed with, is the fact that social media can help alleviate shyness because it is easier to express yourself online. Older students say social media can help you to explore your passions and hobbies, to find people with similar interests, as well as 'get noticed' and find out what their favourite celebrities are doing.

More and more of the conversations young people are having are based on things they have seen on social media. Some of the secondary school students said social media has made them aware of bigger issues around the world; and a small number said it was a welcome distraction from the difficult things going on in their own lives.

Negatives

Fake Identify

Students at both primary schools were very aware of the risks of meeting people online who may not be who they say they are. They told me that adults can go online and pretend to be younger than they are, so they can befriend a child. One young person told me that their parents had told them that there 'are a lot of creepy people on there.'

The vast majority of primary school children with social media accounts said they only allow people who they know to follow or "friend" them and have private settings on their social media accounts, although a very small number did not.

Worries about people pretending to be someone they are not aren't confined to primary school children: most of the students at the secondary schools also said that this was something that worried them and that they were careful about who they allowed to follow them or accept as a "friend". However, a larger proportion of secondary school children (around a third) had 'open' rather than 'private' settings on their social media accounts.

Bullying

'Cyber bullying' is a real worry for young people of all ages. Whilst the primary school children I spoke to said it was a problem, few had so far had direct personal experience of it. Online bullying was more common amongst secondary school children.

Some of the young people describe social media as more toxic than real life. People are more likely to post nasty and hurtful comments online than they are to say them in real life, yet the reality is online bullying is just damaging.

Some of the students at Beaumont Leys School said they thought girls were more likely to be victims of online bullying because they can come across as more vulnerable than boys, and are more likely to be open about and express their feelings. This view was shared by students at Babington Academy but less so at Fullhurst.

Body image

Many of the secondary school students talked about the pressure on young people, especially girls, to look a certain way and that being on social media can increase any anxiety problems or lack of confidence and self-esteem that the young person already has.

There was a concern that social media increases the tendency to compare yourself with others, and that although young people say they know it is unrealistic to think you can look like or have the same life as a celebrity it is hard not to make comparisons when so much time of their time is now spent online.

Some of the older students expressed concern that constantly looking at "celebrities" or famous people online could lead to young people losing their identity and not deal with other things that are going on in their lives.

Reporting inappropriate content

Children of all ages talk about the "bad things" they have seen online including "rude videos" and nasty, bullying and even racist comments.

A small minority of students – in both the primary and secondary schools – say they have reported inappropriate comments, or know of someone who has. However, most of these children said they had never heard anything back about what action was taken as a result, if any.

Most young people don't know the guidelines about what should be reported or how they would go about it (unless they had been told this by their parents).

A small number said they didn't see the point in reporting as nothing would be done. Several young people said social media platforms should do more to give young people the confidence to report inappropriate content, by spelling out what action will be taken as a result.

Other negatives

Some primary school students talked about the risk of sharing personal information online and how this could be used for “scamming” or “hacking” your accounts.

Secondary students raised the fact that people can steal the pictures you post online, which could then be used on other platforms or by people pretending to be someone else.

A small number of students at Fullhurst College said that the way they use social media now could affect them in future years, for example when they have finished education and are looking for work. They understood that prospective employers can go through your social media and this means being careful about what you are posting now.

Another issue raised by students at Fullhurst was the pressure of ‘sexting,’ which is seen as becoming a bigger problem as you get older. Although teachers discuss the importance of being safe online, not all issues such as ‘sexting’ are being covered.

Screen time

Even at primary school, children spend a lot of time on social media or in front of their computer or tablet. For example the majority of children at Fosse primary said they spent more than 5 hours a day in front of a screen.

A minority of young people – of all ages – said their parents placed limits on how much they can use their social media.

Between a third to a half of the secondary school children I spoke to said they think they spend too much time on social media, but only a few of them said they would actually reduce their screen time in future.

Some of the secondary school students said they feel they are missing out on other things due to the amount of time they spend on social media like being outside, talking to their family or friends in person, or studying.

Who do young people talk to about any problems with social media?

The students I spoke to told me they speak to a range of people if they have concerns about what is happening online, including their parents, siblings and less commonly, teachers.

For example, around half of the young people I spoke to at Fullhurst Community College said their parents had sat them down and talked through the risks and dangers of social media. The students were very clear that they have been told not to give out personal information, to be careful about they post online and that they shouldn’t speak to people online who they don’t know.

However, some children – even at primary school - say they are too embarrassed or too scared to talk to their parents if they’ve been bullied, or seen “something bad” online, because they fear they will be stopped from using social media altogether.

It was less common for young people to talk to their teachers about problems with social media. For example at Fosse primary, the pupils said they should tell a teacher if they were bullied at school but they were not so clear about what to do if this happened online.

One of the issues here is that young people believe they know more about social media than their parents or other responsible adults, including teachers. A number of young people told me they are

worried that some of their friends don't have anyone to turn to when they are being bullied. Others said they think that adults (both teachers and parents) need to be much stronger and clearer about what was unacceptable and wrong to say online.

What needs to change?

Age limits

Despite the fact that most of the young people I spoke to had been on social media before the age of 13, the vast majority thought that the age limit of social media accounts should not be lowered. Some secondary school students said they thought that the age limit should actually be increased to 15 years old, as many 13 year olds are not aware of the issues around privacy.

A small minority of secondary school students said the age limits on social media should vary depending the maturity of the person using social media.

The overall view expressed by most of the young people I spoke to is that changing the age limits for social media will not have any impact on when young people open an account. They felt it was more important to teach young people about how to be safe and resilient online.

Education

All of the schools I visited teach their students about the risks and benefits of social media to a greater or lesser extent – whether through e-safety lessons, PHSE and ICT lessons, regular assemblies, or visits to local educational charities, such as Leicester's "Warning Zone".

However, it is clear that many of the students feel that they are more experienced and knowledgeable about social media than their teachers. Some of the teachers I spoke to agreed that they didn't know as much as their pupils, that this is a fast changing environment, and that it is hard to keep up – especially with all the other responsibilities and pressures that teachers face.

Reporting inappropriate content

There is a clear need to ensure that young people feel able and confident to report anything that worries them online and that when they do, they are taken seriously and told when action is taken to remove any content.

Social media platforms urgently need to review their reporting procedures, ensure up to date information is available on how to report something inappropriate and that when something is reported that the appropriate action is taken and when necessary, feedback given.