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The Superior Health Council calls for better protection for young people when using screens and in particular social media

Screens and social media are now an integral part of children's and young people's lives. In certain cases, their use can be harmful to their physical and mental health. The Superior Health Council is therefore proposing new age sensitive recommendations to reduce the risks while retaining the potential benefits when growing up in a digital world.

## The effects of screen use, particularly social media

Overall, the observed effects are of low to moderate intensity and strongly context dependent.

The most firmly established physical impacts relate to sedentary behavior, eyesight and sleep. When used excessively by young children, screens have been linked to delays in motor, language, or cognitive development, but co-viewing certain educational content may have positive effects.

On the psychological level, the nature of content, platform design (in case of social media), and the context of use (e.g. co-viewing) play a far greater role than screen time. Some practices (e.g. interactions with content featuring inspiring activities, civic participatory content, educational content) encourage creativity, social interaction, entertainment and learning, while others - particularly prolonged or repeated exposure to harmful content (e.g. influencers giving beauty advice) can be associated with high mental pressure, body dissatisfaction, and depressive symptoms.

Other risks include unsafe online contacts and conducts (such as cyberbullying, sextortion, and grooming). Persuasive design mechanisms can contribute to addictive behaviors.

The SHC also underlines that the deterioration in young people's mental health results from multiple factors, including well-known factors such as academic pressure, poverty, and social inequality. Digital media can play a role in this deterioration too, but digital spaces can also promote social connection and provide confidential access to online mental health support, thereby lowering barriers to help-seeking (such digital mental health support also requires an appropriate framework – see [advisory report SHC 9745](#) (2024) for more details on this subject).

## A graduated approach rather than a blanket ban

The issue of setting a legal minimum age for smartphone and social media use remains controversial. A majority of SHC experts do not support a general ban on smartphones before age 13, citing insufficient scientific evidence and significant practical challenges. However, many advocate for limiting access to social media before that age, based on the precautionary principle, while acknowledging the limitations and potential unintended effects of such restrictions.

There is broad consensus on the need for a gradual approach:

- Limiting screen exposure before 24 months, and then introduce it gradually, with clear rules regarding content and duration, ideally through parent-child co-viewing.
- For children until the end of primary school: setting clear rules and creating structural habits for media use is beneficial (this includes active curation and supervision for younger children, evolving into open conversations as they grow).
- As a precaution, the SHC recommends not creating accounts on digital media platforms before 13 years old without parental consent, and no passive use without parental supervision.
- Other structural habits could be no smartphones during meals and no smartphones in bedrooms during sleep time.
- From 13 to 16, the emphasis should shift to a dialogue and media education, gradually guiding children toward responsible and autonomous screen use.

## An integrated approach is essential

Screen use should be understood as part of a broader societal challenge. Isolated measures will not suffice. Only a coordinated combination of educational, preventative, regulatory, and support actions can reduce risks while preserving the potential benefits of digital technologies for young people.

The SHC therefore calls for an integrated and multisectoral approach, including:

- Prevention and education: promoting access to offline activities; strengthening media literacy and socio-emotional skills both in and out of school; training and supporting parents as well as education and health professionals;
- Support and detection: reinforcing prevention and support services (including online); integrating screen exposure assessment into regular health check-ups;
- Regulation: requiring platforms to take responsibility by being transparent about how algorithms work, applying safety by design principles, and implementing stricter content control;
- Research and governance: establishing an independent audit center to monitor digital practices in real time and to anticipate the impacts of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

## Towards successful implementation

Implementing these policies will require the active involvement of all stakeholders - young people, parents, schools, media literacy, health and welfare professionals, community organisations, law enforcement, and public authorities. The SHC recommends compiling a comprehensive list of actors and continuing the



consultation process initiated as part of this report.

Policies must also account for cultural and socio-economic differences to ensure that recommendations are adapted to different contexts and levels of technological access, and combine these measures with others aimed at improving young people's (mental) health.

To the full advisory report

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