

Social Media Is Absolutely Nuking Children's Brains, New Research Finds

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By [Victor Tangermann](#)

A barrage of [AI-generated brain rot](#) is haunting children across numerous screens, from personal smartphones to school-issued laptops to televisions.

Social media is adding significantly to that cacophony, making it harder than ever for kids to concentrate. Now, new research from the Karolinska Institute in Sweden and Oregon Health & Science University has found a significant link between screen time and diagnoses of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), suggesting that exposing young brains to social media could have major mental health implications.

As detailed in a [new paper](#) published in the journal *Pediatrics Open Science*, the researchers followed 8,324 children aged nine to ten years old in the US for four years. The children self-reported how much time they spent on social media, watching TV, or playing video games. Their parents also assessed their ability to pay attention and any signs of hyperactivity.

There was a clear link between social media use and an attention deficit, raising the possibility that the constant sensory assault by online services like TikTok and Snapchat could be robbing kids of the ability to focus. That's in contrast to TV or video game use, which showed no clear association with symptoms of ADHD.

"Our study suggests that it is specifically social media that affects children's ability to concentrate," said coauthor and Karolinska Institutet professor of cognitive neuroscience Torkel Klingberg in a [statement](#).

The researchers found that over the four years, children went from spending an average of 30 minutes a day to 2.5 hours a day on social media. Meanwhile, inattention symptoms also increased.

"Social media entails constant distractions in the form of messages and notifications, and the mere thought of whether a message has arrived can act as a mental distraction," Klingberg added. "This affects the ability to stay focused and could explain the association."

While it's always hard to figure out causation in research like this, one clue is that children who were already struggling with symptoms of ADHD at the outset of the study didn't start using social media more, suggesting that its use leads to inattentiveness, not the other way around.

"Importantly, there was no evidence of reverse association, as average inattention symptoms did not predict increased social media use," the paper reads.

Interestingly, an increase in social media use was shown to have no effect on hyperactivity, which is also a symptom associated with ADHD.

“Although the effect size is small at the individual level, it could have significant consequences if behavior changes across population level,” the researchers wrote in their paper.

As such, the number of ADHD diagnoses in the US is [rising](#). According to a [2024 study](#), one in nine US kids is now living with the disorder, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention categorizing it as an “[expanding public health concern](#).”

As of 2022, there were over seven million kids and adolescents in the US with a diagnosis of the condition, up from just over six million in 2016, a significant rise in only a matter of six years.

According to Klingberg, social media may have contributed to the trend over time.

“Greater consumption of social media might explain part of the increase we’re seeing in ADHD diagnoses, even if ADHD is also associated with hyperactivity, which didn’t increase in our study,” he said.

The researchers stressed that their findings didn’t establish explicit, causative links and that social media use doesn’t necessarily imply a child will develop ADHD symptoms. However, they suggest parents should discuss limiting the time children spend on social media each day.

“We hope that our findings will help parents and policymakers make well-informed decisions on healthy digital consumption that support children’s cognitive development,” said first author and Karolinska Institutet postdoctoral researcher Samson Nivins, in the statement.

More on social media: [*Scientists Created an Entire Social Network Where Every User Is a Bot, and Something Wild Happened*](#)