



YOUR INTERNET SAFETY GUIDE PART 2

By Dr. Maureen Griffin
Forensic Psychologist

in association with



Introduction

Dear Readers,

We are living in the age of information, the digital age, the internet age, a time when technology is available to a younger and younger audience. While this knowledge can empower us, many of you are worried about the impact this technology and knowledge is having on our children. Earlier this year we released a guide that was full of advice and resources on some of the most common topics I am asked in schools. You'll find this guide on the laya healthcare blog, thrive <https://www.layahealthcare.ie/thrive/family/saferinternetday2018/>

Now, we continue this advice with some new articles on the digital age of consent, social media anxiety and some advice on how technology impacts on sleep. As we navigate this age, we must teach our children the skills that they need so that they can reap the benefits of this technology without being exposed to the dangers that are prevalent.



Dr. Maureen Griffin is a forensic psychologist who specialised in the assessment of internet sex offenders. Maureen has visited over 700 schools across Ireland speaking with students, staff and parents regarding social media and online safety. Maureen has also worked with youth clubs, HSE, NEPS, NAPD, ILSA etc. Maureen lectures on Forensic Psychology and Criminal Behaviour courses in Universities across Ireland and has delivered lectures on Detective and Sergeant Training Courses in An Garda Síochána and on national and international Military Police Courses with the Irish Defence Forces. Maureen regularly contributes to local and national media and presents at child protection and mental health conferences across Ireland. For more information see www.mgmstraining.ie

1

**Social Media
Anxiety Disorder**

2

**What does the Digital Age
of Consent mean for parents?**

3

**How can we help
our children online?**

4

**Children, their
smartphones and sleep**

Social Media Anxiety Disorder

The term '**Social Media Anxiety Disorder (SMAD)**' has been popping up in discussions on the negative effects of social media for several years.

I often meet parents who tell me social media has made their child "less social" and "more anxious" about real-life events. So, is SMAD a real thing? And if so how can we cope with it?

Although '**Gaming Addiction**' has recently been recognised by the **World Health Organizations International Classification of Diseases Manual** (ICD-11), SMAD is not specifically listed as a clinical disorder. Nonetheless, social media can become an anxiety provoking factor for some. A survey of Irish students last year, reported that 43% viewed social media as a source of stress in their lives (N=2500).

What contributes to the Anxiety we feel when using Social Media?

'Compare and Despair'

How we use social media is important. It is human nature to make comparisons, we do it in real-life and we do it online. But online, we are often comparing our reality to an illusion, an image of a life, an image of perfection. Students across Ireland tell me, "we know the images are edited so it doesn't really affect us". Yet in the same breath they tell me they use filters on their pictures daily and take multiple pictures from different angles before deciding on the "best" picture to share - we are constantly striving for perfection.

We need to ask ourselves what do we hope to achieve by sharing this? What are we looking for in return? If we are sharing for approval or validation, if we want someone to 'like' our picture, 're-tweet' our tweet or give us a positive comment and we don't get that response, that can contribute to feelings of inadequacy; low self-esteem; body image dissatisfaction and self-consciousness. This



is exacerbated when we use multiple social media platforms, placing us at a greater risk for poor mental health outcomes including symptoms of distress, anxiety and depression. Research also shows that image focused sites such as Instagram and Snapchat, are the most detrimental to young people's mental health and well-being.

'Fear of Missing Out' (FoMO)

Fear of Missing Out, refers to anxiety or worry that activities/events/occasions are taking place without you. It is characterized by constantly checking what friends/followers are doing so as not to miss out. FoMO has been associated with lower mood and life satisfaction and higher levels of social media engagement which in turn results in increased experiences of FoMO. Young people increasingly report that FoMO is causing them distress leading to feelings of anxiety, loneliness and inadequacy. Examples commonly given by students include, seeing all your friends at a certain location (as they have location turned on) and you were not invited/included. They can also experience anxiety from not being able to access social media, sometimes termed '**nomophobia**' or '**Fear of Being Offline**' (FoBO).

'Notification Overwhelm'

"Beep", "Buzz", "Ding", our devices are constantly demanding and dividing our attention. When we don't or can't respond to

a notification, we can feel anxious, stressed and distracted. When we respond, our brain's reward system is triggered releasing dopamine, conditioning us for future notifications. I have spoken to young people who said they feel stressed, anxious or sick with the need to respond to everything – "why did you not like my picture?; why did you not comment?" Senior students often report even greater feelings of anxiety and depression when notifications are about a previous partner and their new love interest. Being constantly contactable, while offering great advantages, can be a source of stress and anxiety

How can we manage Social Media Anxiety?

Calls have been made for Government, Social Media companies and policy makers to start warning about the danger social media poses to mental health in much the same way we warn about risks to physical health. It has been recommended that social media platforms should alert users if an image has been digitally manipulated by any means; to the amount of time users spend online; and to the potential risk of damage to mental health.

Many people who use social media, make comparisons and experience some level of FoMO but are not experiencing social media anxiety. However, if you find your relationship with social media is becoming more stressful,

here are some practical tips that may help:

- 1 Be conscious of how you use social media and its impact on your mood and well-being; How is your mood after using social media? Are you depressed or anxious?
- 2 Limit your time on social media and the number of platforms you use, particularly if you find you spend most of your time creeping on other peoples' accounts, comparing and despairing;
- 3 Choose friends/followers wisely, so as not to expose yourself to content that will only upset you and/or make you feel bad about yourself. Remember that what you see online is not always a true version of reality;
- 4 Turn off push notifications for social media, or if you are reluctant to turn off all notifications, enable 'priority mode' (android) or 'do not disturb' (iOS) so you will only receive notifications during a set time frame. Ironically, apps can also help you monitor and limit your social media use, such as In the Moment; Freedom or Space.
- 5 Like anything that can affect your mental health, if you are concerned about your social media usage, talk to friends, parents, teachers and/or access help. The following links may serve useful for those looking for more information on anxiety Reach Out Ireland; Spunout and Jigsaw.

What does the Digital Age of Consent mean for parents?

The new EU-Wide General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) came into effect on 25th May 2018.

A part of the new GDPR is the establishment of a 'digital age of consent' - an age at which children can 'sign up to/join' an online service (e.g. social networking site) which collects, uses and processes their personal data, without the need of parental consent. Under GDPR the age limit is set at 16 years, with EU countries able to pass national legislation specifying a lower age limit, but no less than 13 years. In line with countries such as France, Germany and the Netherlands, under the Data Protection Act 2018, the digital age of consent in Ireland has been set at 16 years.

Despite the amount of media attention this issue has received in recent months, I often meet children and parents who are

unsure of what it all really means. Children have told me "it's not fair we have to be 16 to go online". The digital age of consent, is not about removing our children's rights to participation online, or their right to a voice or their right to help and information. It is about making sure that the companies that supply online services do not do so at the cost of our children's personal data. Under the Data Protection Act 2018 online services that offer counselling or preventative services to children have an exception from the requirement of parental consent, as such services are provided in the best interest of the child.

To echo the words of Professor Barry O'Sullivan, the digital age of consent is "not about when our children can use the internet, it is about when the internet can use our children". By adopting the age of 16 years, we allow parents to maintain their role as





“the digital age of consent is not about when our children can use the internet, it is about when the internet can use our children”

parent in their child’s online life and place the responsibility firmly back on companies to ensure that their users are of age/or parental consent has been obtained. It is not going to remove all the risks and dangers our children face online, but it will allow parents to remain involved.

In my work with students across Ireland, I have met children as young as 7 and 8 years of age, who are using apps such as Snapchat. Despite WhatsApp’s recent age restriction for EU countries, requiring users to be 16+, I meet children at National School level, who are using this app. Students admit that they just tick the box to say they are old enough or lie about their age to set up the account. While robust age verification measures will be a key concern for companies to be GDPR compliant, it also highlights our need to educate our children and young people, to better equip them for their online lives.

“So what if they have our data? Why is this a big deal?” students often question me. It’s a big deal because of advertisements.

If something is free online, then we are typically the product, or more specifically our information is. As online advertisements can be targeted at specific groups and demographics, there has been increased investment in advertising through online platforms. Personal information our children share, the videos they watch, music they listen to, their location etc. is often collected to target our children with specific ads relevant to their interests.

GDPR seeks to ensure our rights and the rights of our children to privacy and protection online.

Under GDPR, our children will now have the right to access the personal information an online service/company has about them and the right to correct or delete information. Companies will also have to explain clearly what information they collect, why they collect it, how it is used and stored. Those found to be in breach of GDRP can now face penalties.

How can we help our children online?

Although social media services have introduced new age restrictions, updated privacy statements etc. to ensure GDPR compliance, this does not abdicate our parental responsibility.

GDPR will serve to increase our rights and protections, but parental involvement is still central to protecting our children online. Here are some things we can do to help our children in their online lives:

1. Before agreeing to a service/downloading an app, read the terms and conditions (at least the main points) so you know what information is being collected and how it is being used/stored.
A recent study showed that the vast majority of college aged students who joined a fictitious social networking site (98%, N=543) failed to read the terms of service, which indicated that their data would be shared with the NHS and they agree to providing their first born child as payment for using the site. Thankfully this was a study, but daily, we 'click to agree' online, often unsure what we are agreeing to.

2. When setting up accounts with/for your child, supply as little information as possible, only completing mandatory fields. Think critically "why do they want to know this? Is it crucial to the service they are providing or are they just interested in collecting my data for marketing/commercial gain/profiling etc.?"
3. Discuss with your child what 'personal information' is and explain what is okay/not okay to share online (e.g. home address, school details, pictures, DOB);
4. Turn off 'location sharing' for social networking sites/chatting apps;
5. Go through privacy settings for all apps/sites your child uses and limit ads, third party sharing and data collection where possible;
6. Talk to your child about online advertisements and help them to critically view and understand content they see online. For more information on how to discuss advertisements/marketing with children see Common Sense Media;
7. Model good practices when it comes to your own sharing online.

For more information on the digital age of consent in Ireland see Webwise and Data Protection Act 2018



Children, their Smartphones and sleep

There has been huge media interest on the use of smartphones by children in recent months.

The issue of whether or not children should be allowed phones in schools has been hotly debated. Pending the enactment of the **Education (Parent and Student Charter) Bill 2016**, the Education Minister has asked schools to engage with parents on smartphones and other internet enabled devices.

From my experience in visiting schools across Ireland, the age of smartphone ownership is getting younger, with approx. 40-50% of children in 3rd and 4th classes and the majority of children in 5th and 6th classes now owning a smartphone. Huge pressure is placed on children and thus their parents, to have a smartphone. They can be excluded, as they genuinely are “the only one” or

one of the only ones who do not have a smartphone “we couldn’t invite her cos she’s not on **Snapchat**”. In an effort to remove the pressure, there has been a call to set a minimum age for smartphone ownership in Ireland at 14 years.

Appreciating the amazing benefits a phone can offer a child and a family, especially in terms of contact and safety, I do not believe that children at National School level should have sole ownership and unsupervised/unmonitored access to internet enabled devices. Parents should be responsible for the device, the parental controls, the anti-virus protections, the app downloads etc. In real-life, we do not start our child off with a 26 inch, 21 speed, high tech mountain bike. We spend time researching: what is safe?, what is recommended as age appropriate?, before we spend money. We get them an age appropriate bike, matched to their height, with stabilizers to protect them until they

“In real-life, we do not start our child off with a 26 inch, 21 speed, high tech mountain bike.”

learn to balance. We spend time with them, teaching them how to cycle, pointing out the dangers and instilling safety advice. The same needs to be done when it comes to technology. We need to start our children off on devices that limit the risks, devices that have parental controls and restrictions in place. We need to spend time with them, talking about the amazing benefits of technology but also the pitfalls and prepare them for situations they could be faced with. As they get older, we can begin to remove the stabilizers, helping them along the way to balance their technology use. I believe this should apply to all internet enabled devices and not just smartphones.

Smartphone usage in Bedrooms

Aside from debates around smartphone usage in schools and age of ownership, a key cause of concern for our children and young people is smartphone usage in bedrooms. Some of the most serious cases of cyber-bullying I have been made aware of have happened in the small hours, when children are on their own, unsupervised, ‘sleeping’. **The National Sleep Foundation** has

consistently demonstrated that having technology in your bedroom and/or using technology as a sleep aid, can interfere with the quality of sleep, the duration of sleep and daytime alertness. Yet I met children at National and Secondary school level who have bedrooms full of devices. Children commonly report using devices right up to bedtime and beyond, checking devices if they wake up during the night, and feeling sleepy during the school day.

Sleep is crucially important, not only for us as adults but also for our children and young people who are at crucial stages of development.

With increased research focus on ‘sleep’ and ‘sleep deprivation’ we now know that if we do not get enough sleep it can affect mental health, weight, mood, memory, attention, empathy, the list goes on.

Findings from the **National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics** have also demonstrated that high users of technology (based on the amount of time spent on the internet/playing computer games) had significantly lower mean scores than

moderate users and those who don’t use the internet. Having a television in the bedroom and smartphone ownership were also strongly associated with achievement.

Regarding social media use (which is a main source of online activity for our children), research has demonstrated the following noteworthy findings:

- Adolescents who use social media more and at night, and those who were more emotionally invested in social media, experience poorer sleep quality, lower self-esteem and higher levels of anxiety and depression.
- Increased dependence on social media is associated with decreased sleep quality and cognitive functioning.
- 1 in 5 young people admit checking social media when they wake up during the night, resulting in feelings of increased tiredness and stress during the school day.

How can we ensure smartphones are not eating into our children's sleep time?

1

Have a bedtime routine, that does not involve interactive screen media (e.g. social media, gaming);

2

Stop screen use for a least an hour, ideally 2 hours before bedtime. Set a time at which devices are turned in/turned off, so it is a 'wind down' before bed instead of a 'wind up';

3

Keep bedrooms' screen free;

4

Purchase an alarm clock. Children tell me they need their phone in their room to check the time/set an alarm, but admit while checking the time, they also respond to notifications/messages/check social media etc.;

5

If your child is having difficulty getting to sleep, look at what may be affecting this. The Sleep Programme, an educational and preventative tool for addressing the issue of sleep deprivation in young people (12-14 years but relevant to all) teaches young people about sleep hygiene and provides support in addressing sleep difficulties;

6

Model good practices when it comes to your own smartphone usage at nighttime.

For more information on the importance of sleep and the effect it can have on our day to day functioning, check out RTE's documentary 'Awake: The Science of Sleep'





We hope you've found this booklet useful.
You can watch the accompanying videos
on layahealthcare.ie/thrive/family or
on the laya healthcare Youtube channel.

