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Interactive digital media and youth mental health

Knowledge Institute
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About this resource

Digital media is playing a growing role in shaping the well-being of young people. Access to mental health apps and supports, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven platforms, self-guided tools, and online communities, offer promising new ways to support young people's mental health and substance use health. However, the digital environment can also pose challenges for young people, as some interactive platforms and apps are designed to maximize user engagement without considering users' needs or wellness (Jackson, 2025). As concerns remain about the mental health of children and young people (Boak & Hamilton, 2026), it is important to understand how interactive digital media can both support and undermine well-being. This resource offers a balanced review of the dual impacts of interactive digital media, helping readers navigate the complex and rapidly evolving landscape.

This information is intended for leaders and service providers in the child and youth mental health, substance use health, and addictions sector (the sector). It provides practical insights into the supports and challenges of digital media to inform decision-making and safer engagement. It also provides strategies, solutions, and tools for reflection, as well as suggested actions for service providers and system leaders. Young people, families, and caregivers may also find this resource useful in understanding how digital media can influence mental health, and how to critically assess the platforms and apps they use.

Useful terms

Digital media refers to content that is created, shared, and used through digital technologies. This includes text, audio, video, and interactive formats that are stored and spread through the internet on computers, smartphones, and tablets (Canadian Pediatric Society, Digital Health Task Force [Canadian Pediatric Society], 2019; Stasberger, 2023).

Interactive digital media includes any digital media application or platform that relies on user input to shape the experience (Griffey, 2020). Some common examples relevant to this resource include social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and X); AI chatbots; digital mental health tools; educational games; and video games (Griffey, 2020; Yuan & Luo, 2025).

E-mental health is an evidence-based type of interactive digital media that includes mental health services and information that is delivered or enhanced through the internet and related technologies (Christensen et al., 2002; McGrath et al., 2018). It includes assessment tools for screening and monitoring, intervention, and social support through mobile and web-based apps; digitally delivered interactions with service users via video calls and chats; chatbots; and devices for assessing and monitoring health (Mental Health Commission of Canada [MHCC], 2024).

Gamification is the use of game-like elements (rules, interactions, and rewards) to help learn new skills, knowledge, or experiences that are not necessarily achieved within a digital game, but instead used for contexts outside games to increase engagement and motivation through points, timed performance, badges, and other rewards (Fitzgerald & Ratcliffe, 2019).

Serious games are games made to help educate people or change behaviours, not just for entertainment or fun. In mental health contexts, these games are usually played on a computer or online and use gaming features to keep people interested while supporting their well-being or mental health goals (Dewhirst et al., 2022; Lau et al., 2017).

Attention economy is an approach to business management that views consumer attention as a limited resource that can be harnessed for financial success (Davenport & Beck, 2001; United Nations Economist Network, 2023). This business model has become successful through the abundant and previously unregulated collection of personal data and information, allowing for the strategic capture of consumer attention (United Nations Economist Network, 2023). The term was first coined in the 1960s by Herbert Simon and then defined by Davenport and Beck (2001).

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is a type of AI that can create new content or information based on patterns it has "learned" within data and make new and unique outputs, like text, images, music, or videos that mirror human-like activity (Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions [Knowledge Institute], 2026). Common examples include ChatGPT (OpenAI), Gemini (Google), Claude (Anthropic), and Copilot (Microsoft).

Predictive AI uses machine learning, statistics, and algorithms to categorize user activity to improve the speed, prediction, and accuracy of suggested content (Knowledge Institute, 2026; Marshall et al., 2025). These algorithms analyze past behaviour, such as likes, shares, and watch time, to predict what content will most likely keep a user engaged.

Echo chambers are created through curated algorithmic content based on predictive AI and machine- learning data that is presented to a user. This can lead users to experience a skewed version of reality by seeing only the content that aligns or reinforces their existing opinions (Jackson, 2025).

See AI for youth mental health and substance use health: A primer and The role of virtual services and AI in mental health care across Canada for more information about AI.

Understanding the digital dilemma for youth mental health

Young people are navigating an ever-changing interactive digital environment that encompasses a range of platforms, applications (apps), and other content, with varying impacts on their mental health. This inconsistency of impact causes a dilemma for system leaders and service providers, as well as young people, families, and caregivers, as they navigate balancing the supportive functions of interactive digital media with mitigating harms that may occur — even on the same platform.

Interactive digital media has become increasingly prominent in the lives of young people. Recent data shows that a quarter of Ontario students in grades 7 to 12 report spending five or more hours on social media daily (Boak & Hamilton, 2026). Some of this time can be attributed to young people's use of interactive digital media for mental health education and promotion, peer support, expression and identity exploration, entertainment, and access to resources for young people in rural and remote communities and other equity-deserving groups (Coyne, 2025; Ferreira et al., 2025). In particular, e-mental health platforms and apps, which are most commonly used by adolescents aged 13 to 18 years, can provide effective, evidence-based, and self-guided mental health support (Chen et al., 2024).

At the same time, interactive digital media is not always designed with youth mental health at the forefront. Unlike digital mental health technologies specifically designed and evaluated to support mental health outcomes, interactive digital media more broadly is often designed to maximize user engagement through features such as algorithm-driven feeds, autoplay, and endless scrolling, increasingly optimized by AI (Griffey, 2020; Jackson, 2025). These features can increase passive screen time and dependency while exposing young people to harmful content, such as misinformation and social comparison, and can result in negative impacts on mental health (Hollis et al., 2020; Jackson, 2025). These concurrent benefits and harms of interactive digital media pose a digital dilemma for young people and their well-being (Berger et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2024).

Through the rise of the **attention economy**, the **intentions** of interactive digital media have changed. While these platforms and apps provide sources of active entertainment like games, movies, and shows, newer features such as algorithm-driven feeds, autoplay, and endless scrolls have shifted the intentions of interactive digital media away from entertainment and connection, and toward attention commodification (Jackson, 2025).

A key factor in distinguishing supportive from harmful interactive digital media is the intention behind the app or platform and how it is used. Reflecting on how an app or platform is being used, and whether it contributes to positive mental health outcomes or mental health challenges for users, can support conversations about use. However, this interpretation can vary widely across individuals, making it difficult to classify any one app or platform as universally beneficial or harmful (Jackson, 2025; West et al., 2023). Given this complex environment, it is important to build the capacity of service providers to support young people, families, and caregivers to develop digital media literacy skills and gain education and guidance to promote safe, informed use. As well, recommendations for decision makers are included at the end of the resource.



For tools to develop digital resilience and recognize supportive mental health content, see our resource Young people in the digital era: Understanding risks and promoting well-being.

For a comprehensive review of the advantages and cautions of technology across the stages of child and youth development, see our Technology use: Early years to transition years resource.

Interactive digital media can support young people's well-being

In this section, we discuss how interactive digital media can play a supportive role in stigma reduction, mental health literacy, emotional coping, and health promotion among young people.

Evidence-based e-mental health technologies

Serious games, in this context, are games made to educate and support those playing in building skills or learning new things about well-being or mental health.

E-mental health technologies have been tested for their effectiveness in addressing mental health concerns in young people. These technologies include video games, virtual reality (VR), chatbots, and platforms (Chen et al., 2024; Ferreira et al., 2025). The most commonly used interactive digital media to address young people's mental health concerns are easy-to-use, interactive apps that allow remote communication (Chen et al., 2024). Other technologies, like serious games, remote health services, text messages, and VR interventions, tend to be used less often or in specific situations (Chen et al., 2024). Many e-mental health tools promote activities such as guided meditation and mood tracking that have shown long-term benefits for young people, helping them build coping and emotion regulation skills (Ferreira et al., 2025). A growing body of research also supports the effectiveness of these types of tools to reduce anxiety, depression, and stress, while enhancing overall mental health (Almuqrin et al., 2025; Arjona et al., 2023; Bear et al., 2022; Brinsley et al., 2025; Linardon et al., 2025).

Increase access and reduce stigma for rural and remote areas

Through platforms that offer peer support, mental health content, and self-guided tools, digital media can reduce barriers and empower young people living in rural and remote areas to manage their well-being independently, without concerns of community perception (Holly et al., 2023; MHCC, 2014). For those living in rural and remote areas where in-person services may be limited, interactive digital media can expand support to young people through stable internet access (MHCC, 2014). Platforms that offer scalable, accessible interventions and digital tools to underserved communities can help close gaps in staffing and treatment availability by providing mental health education and support (Coyne,

2025; Hollis et al., 2020). As well, in rural and remote areas where stigma may be a concern due to smaller communities of care, interactive digital media may ease some of these impacts through increased anonymity (Graham et al., 2021). However, disparities still exist in access to digital services in rural and remote areas due to pricing and inconsistent connectivity, which may exacerbate existing socioeconomic and geographic constraints (Holly et al., 2023).

Peer support and connection

Interactive digital media helps young people maintain relationships with family and friends, engage with peers who share similar interests, and strengthen social bonds through shared experiences (Canadian Pediatric Society, 2019; Chassiakos & Stager, 2020; Dienlin & Johannes, 2020; Haddock et al., 2022; Prinstein et al., 2020; Walker, 2022). In particular, it offers opportunities for young people from communities impacted by systemic inequities to build supportive relationships, receive emotional validation, and experience community and culture. This can be especially valuable for those who lack access to safe, affirming offline environments (Berger et al., 2022; Canadian Pediatric Society, 2019; Chassiakos & Stager, 2020; Prinstein et al., 2020). For young people experiencing social anxiety or isolation, interactive digital media spaces can provide a more comfortable alternative to connect with others instead of face-to-face interactions (Coyne, 2025; Flayelle et al., 2023). As well, access to online support groups can enhance young people's feelings of belonging and improve their ability to manage mental health challenges (Chhabra et al, 2025).

Self-expression and identity exploration

Digital media can offer young people an opportunity for self-expression that can feel safe and authentic, particularly for those who face stigma or find in-person communication challenging (Coyne, 2025; Flayelle et al., 2023). Digital media creates spaces where young people can explore and express their identities through creative outlets such as photography, video creation, music, and reading, while also engaging with aspects of their sexuality and personal values (Canadian Pediatric Society, 2019; Chassiakos & Stager, 2020; Coyne, 2025; Flayelle et al., 2023; Haddock et al., 2022; Prinstein et al., 2020; Walker, 2022). These platforms are especially important for groups who are impacted by oppression and

discrimination, including 2SLGBTQ+ young people, by providing spaces for identity exploration, community-building, and connection that may not exist for them elsewhere (Berger et al., 2022; Chhabra et al., 2025; Madden et al., 2024). Beyond personal expression, young people can also use social media to raise awareness and advocate for social change, helping them to connect with global movements and share their perspectives on issues that matter to them (Coyne, 2025; Oden & Porter, 2023).

> For me, social media was most meaningful when it was curated and co-created with peers. It gave African, Caribbean, and Black youth space to name mental health experiences we were not seeing reflected elsewhere, build pride in our diverse identities, validate our lived experiences, use live conversations and creative storytelling in ways that felt healing, and form relationships across geography, culture and community. It helped challenge stereotypes, misinformation, support self image, and turn social media into a space for collective care.

Don Mahleka,
Hallway Group Member, Mental Health Commission of Canada

Entertainment

Young people's mental health can be positively influenced by digital media through accessible, engaging forms of entertainment. Apps and platforms with motivational content can serve as outlets for relaxation, enjoyment, and learning, which can contribute to improved emotional and psychological well-being (Chhabra et al., 2025; Hall, 2024). Engaging with certain forms of digital content, such as streaming platforms that offer helpful distraction or humour, has been associated with improved mood among young people (Pieh et al., 2025; Rodman et al., 2024). Some research also suggests that in certain contexts, gaming can also offer protective effects against depression (Brodersen et al., 2022).

Mental health information and promotion

Interactive digital media can serve as a gateway to learning and personal growth for many young people, offering access to news, educational resources, and health information (Chassiakos & Stager, 2020; Dienlin & Johannes, 2020; Haddock et al., 2022). Young people are increasingly turning to apps and social media to look for mental health information, helping them build awareness and manage emotional challenges (Pieh et al., 2025). When used to share positive, evidence-based and informative content, digital media can offer coping strategies and psychological support that strengthen emotional resilience (Ferreira et al., 2025). For instance, by sharing relatable and educational mental health content, social media platforms have shown potential to increase emotional resilience related to depression and anxiety among adolescents (Csirmaz et al., 2024; Ferreira et al., 2025; Jackson, 2025; Punukollu & Marques, 2019).

Interactive digital media can create challenges for young people's well-being

In this section, we explore some of the ways digital media can create challenges for young people's well-being.

Impacts of commodifying attention

Some forms of interactive digital media are part of the wider attention economy, in which a person's time is commodified through ads or the collection of user data, allowing platforms to profit by capturing and sustaining user attention (Goldhaber, 1997; Jackson, 2025; Thiele, 2025; United Nations Economist Network, 2023). Some interactive digital media platforms use features such as likes, shares, comments, and notifications, integrated with predictive AI, to show users endless feeds of content they are likely to interact with (Drody et al., 2025; Gagrčin et al., 2024). This is particularly evident in some platforms and apps with autoplay and endless-scroll features that can bypass critical thinking and create echo chambers (Jackson, 2025). Attention-driven digital media that create echo chambers may result in non-consensual attention capture, prolonged platform or app use, and increased exposure to harmful, misinformed or viral content (Chen et al., 2025; Chhabra et al., 2025; Farthing, 2022; Jackson, 2025; Vosoughi et al., 2018).



The attention economy is an approach to business that views consumer attention as a limited resource that can be harnessed for profit.

Predictive AI uses machine learning, statistics, and algorithms to analyze user data and recognize patterns, anticipate behaviours, and forecast outcomes.

Echo chambers are content loops that are created through predictive-AI and machine learning data that is presented to a user and may lead them to experience a version of reality that only aligns or reinforces their existing beliefs.

Generative AI (GenAI) uses machine learning and natural language processing to create new content or information based on patterns it has "learned" in training and through interactions with humans to create text, images, music, videos, or other forms of content that mirror human-like activity.

> Social media deeply impacted my formative teenage years in a negative way; I was overwhelmed by attention-driven and engagement-oriented social media where I felt a constant urge to compare myself to those online, often leaving me feeling less-than and severely impacting my self-image and mental health. The single best thing I did for my own mental health was remove myself [from] the online world and shift my focus to forming genuine connections [...].
>
> **Youth Council Member,**
> Mental Health Commission of Canada

Young people are increasingly using AI chatbots, a type of interactive digital media that uses generative AI to offer companionship and mental well-being. Research is emerging on the risks of AI chatbots, which tend to validate users' perspectives to keep them engaged, leading to disordered thinking and prolonged chatbot use (SickKids, 2026; Young, 2026). Researchers who have tested publicly available AI chatbots found that the chatbots can miss critical mental health warning signs, and that in longer conversations, safeguards weaken over time (SickKids, 2026; Young, 2026).

To learn more about the opportunities and considerations of AI, see our webpage on technology use and AI.

Social comparison



Social comparison: Social media is driven by idealized images and social comparison. Unsurprisingly, young people's comparison of themselves to idealized images can negatively impact self-esteem and mental health (Saletti & Van Den Broucke, 2024). As a result, social media use has been linked to lower overall well-being and a higher risk of depression, particularly among women (Santos et al., 2023). Comparisons focused on physical appearance, along with concern over one's photos and feedback, are also associated with poor body image, disordered eating, and depressive symptoms (Pieh et al., 2025).

Social comparison is amplified through influencer marketing, as society embraces self-advertisers, with adults, young people, — and increasingly, children — engaged in digital self-promotion (Liu, 2025; Thiele, 2025). Influencer marketing and curated content normalize appearance-focused consumerism, encouraging young users to, for example, equate beauty products with social acceptance and self-worth (Liu, 2025). The curated and highly marketed influencer version of reality diverges from most people's real experiences (Saletti & Van Den Broucke, 2024). Influencers and consumers are exposed to beauty-related perfectionism, which contributes to heightened stress and anxiety related to social comparison (Harren et al., 2021).

> I have experienced how social media can create constant pressure to compare ourselves to curated versions of other people's lives and bodies. For many young people, especially those already vulnerable to body image concerns or eating disorders, these platforms can quietly shape self-worth around appearance, productivity, and external validation in ways that are deeply harmful to mental health.

Victoria Gracie
Youth Council Member. Mental Health Commission of Canada

Social validation

Social validation mechanisms embedded in digital media platforms, through features such as posts, stories, reels, and continuous platform updates, are deliberately designed to be time-limited, endless, and socially oriented to provoke feelings of missing out (Bucyte, 2023; Saletti & Van Den Broucke, 2024). Feelings of missing out can cue social invalidation, resulting in behaviours like compulsive checking and difficulty disengaging from digital media (Dadiotis & Roussos, 2023; Davis & Goldfield, 2025; Gupta & Sekhar, 2024; Gupta & Sharma, 2021). Social validation cues, such as likes, followers, comments, shares, and other notifications function as unpredictable rewards and promote behavioural addiction patterns, including compulsive checking and difficulty disengaging (Flayelle et al., 2023). Together, these social validation mechanisms and cues promote heightened self-presentation, reliance on external feedback for self-worth, and sustained engagement, which can increase vulnerability to anxiety, insecurity, and stress (Bucyte, 2023; Saletti & Van Den Broucke, 2024).

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying and online victimization are also harms associated with interactive digital media (Hango, 2023). Cyberbullying uses interactive digital media to intentionally harass, threaten, embarrass, or target another person, and has been found to cause more distress than traditional bullying by (Hango, 2023; Mishna, et al., 2020). In 2019, Statistics Canada found that one in four teens aged 12 to 17 reported experiencing cyberbullying in the previous year (Hango, 2023). Research reveals that there is a disproportionate impact of cyberbullying on individuals who experience marginalization, including young people who identify as racialized, Indigenous, or 2SLGBTQ+ and non-binary, or who experience stigma related to body size and socioeconomic status (Hango, 2023; Mishna, et al., 2020). Cyberbullying and online victimization are frequently stigmatized, normalized, minimized, or viewed as inevitable. This can lead to negative mental health outcomes, including depression, higher rates of anxiety, low self-esteem, emotional distress, and increased risk of self-harm and suicidal ideation (Faye et al., 2020; Hango, 2023; Mishna et al., 2020).

Increased passive screen time and mental health concerns

High use of smartphones and social media has been linked to a range of mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, stress, low self-esteem, envy, loneliness, sleep disruption, suicidal thoughts, and poor self-rated mental health (Brodersen et al., 2022; Coyne, 2025; Hollis et al., 2020; MacKinnon & Shade, 2020; Pieh et al., 2025; Saletti & Van Den Broucke, 2024; Santos et al., 2023). Growing evidence is now suggesting that daily use of screens beyond the recommended two hours per day for ages 5 to 17 is associated with poor mental health outcomes (Brunton et al., 2026; Pieh et al., 2025). However, the ways screens are used have an impact on health and well-being. Passive viewing of screen-based content (known as doomscrolling) is more detrimental than active screen use, which is characterized by mental, physical, or social engagement through activities such as playing games, chatting with peers, or using a computer for schoolwork (Kim et al., 2020; Sanders et al., 2019).



See Mental health impacts of screen use for children and young people to learn more.

Attention capturing, behaviours, and social skills

Digital media use can be linked to a range of behavioural challenges, especially for young people. Emotional feedback loops created by algorithms can affect mood, identity, and perceptions of time (Jackson, 2025). Maximizing someone's attention can also exhaust the focus of the person using the platform or app, reducing their active attention capacity (Jackson, 2025). Active attention exhaustion can result in procrastination, reduced productivity, and interference with important daily activities (Jackson, 2025).



Autoplay and endless-scrolling features that enable engagement without conscious intent can also exhaust user's attention and reinforce compulsive behaviours (Saletti & Van Den Broucke, 2024). As a result, the most common problematic social media use (PSMU) feature in grade 7 to 12 students is repeated unsuccessful attempts to spend less time on social media (Boak & Hamilton, 2026).

Predictive AI-enabled attention capture on digital media also impacts the development of diverse cognitive and social skills (Thiele, 2025). Thiele (2025) calls this **social de-skilling**: the reduction in communication, empathy, perception of body language, self-regulation, and other social skills due to digital distraction and dependence. This may result in reduced capacity for young people to engage in reflective self-direction about their behaviour and future goals (Thiele, 2025).

Problematic social media use (PSMU) can involve reward pathways in the brain similar to those activated by gambling and substance use disorders, potentially leading to compulsive usage patterns and heightened anxiety levels (Fineberg et al., 2022). This is particularly concerning for adolescents, as their developing brain may make them more vulnerable to the persuasive design features of digital platforms and to developing problematic usage patterns (Fineberg et al., 2022). Recent research found that about one in ten Ontario students in grades 7 to 12 meet criteria for PSMU (Boak & Hamilton, 2026).

Problematic technology use (PTU) refers to using technology in a way that leads to negative consequences (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health [CAMH], n.d.; Domoff et al., 2020; Knowledge Institute, 2023; Mutschler & Aubrey, 2023). PTU encompasses a range of devices and digital content such as computers, tablets, smartphones, the internet, social media, gaming, and online gambling (CAMH, n.d.; Dienlin & Johannes, 2020; Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2022).

Digital media impacts on family dynamics

The commodification of attention and resulting changes to interpersonal dynamics can disrupt traditional family communication patterns and increase competition for attention within households (Baumgartner et al., 2024; Heitmayer, 2025). For example, caregivers' relationships with social media, including when parents use devices passively when interacting with their children, can reduce relationship quality and increase parent-child conflict (American Psychological Association [APA], 2023; Gu & Zhao, 2025). Media use in families and by caregivers further affects caregiver-child relationships and caregivers' own screen habits, as excessive use of devices by parents can impact verbal engagement and parenting style (Coyne et al., 2017). As well, some studies suggest that adverse family environments contribute to children turning to screens for temporary relief, which can increase vulnerability to screen dependency (Fang et al., 2019; Gu & Zhao, 2025). Among adolescents, social media use exceeding two hours per day has been associated with increased strain on parental-child relationships (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2019).

Strategies and solutions

To address the dichotomy between the supports and challenges of digital media, and to better recognize the intentions and mental health impacts of applications and platforms in the attention economy, interventions can happen at various levels.

- Individual and family or caregiver level, where service providers can support digital media literacy skill development and provide professional guidance.
- Policy level, by mitigating the harmful impacts of interactive digital media through regulation, education, and promotion of applications that support mental health and well-being.

Individuals, families, caregivers, and service providers can support digital media literacy skill development



Amplify caregiver support strategies

The increased availability and attention-capturing power of digital media impacts everyone, and not only young people. As discussed earlier, navigating this reality significantly impacts parent-child conflict (Baumgartner et al., 2024). Understandably, it is tempting to adopt strict rules and regulations for young people when concerns arise about tablet or smartphone use. Certain types of caregiver support strategies can be more effective than others; however, strategies should be tailored to a family's context and capacity. Some supportive strategies include co-watching, modelling, open adult-child discussions, and coaching on social media use (APA, 2023; Knowledge Institute, 2025; Zahid et al., 2025). These strategies are thought to promote a more collaborative exploration and mediation of digital media use, and can reduce parent-child conflict (Zahid et al., 2025).



Check out Helping your child manage digital technology and How much is too much social media use: A Q&A with Mitch Prinstein, PhD for more support.



Promote balanced digital media use

Not all screen use is the same. Passive smartphone use and recreational scrolling may be more harmful than active or educational use (Broderson et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2023). Some studies have shown that reducing smartphone use to under two hours a day can improve symptoms of depression, stress levels, sleep quality, and overall well-being (Toigo et al., 2025). However, blanket restrictions promote a one-size-fits-all approach that may not be appropriate or relevant for everyone (Pieh et al., 2025; Thiele, 2025). Adopting a harm reduction approach, rather than one that is abstinence-based, may be more successful in helping caregivers and young people manage their screen use (Pinder & Brown, 2021). When promoting balanced screen time, it may be helpful — in addition to monitoring the actual time spent on the device — to reflect on the type of content being consumed, like listening to a sports podcast, for example. Caregivers can also consider the context of screen time (while on the bus going to school, for example) and the purpose behind the consumption (for entertainment) (Huang et al., 2023; Santos et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2021).



Support digital autonomy through education and self-awareness

Curated online content can create a space where our self-image is constantly compared to a highly marketed and influenced version of reality (Liu, 2025; Thiele, 2025). It is crucial to support young people in reflecting on how curated content affects their autonomy by building critical reflection and self-awareness skills to combat negative experiences (see professional guidance section below for resources). Young people can be supported in their ability to gain autonomy from curated content by promoting and educating them on control, awareness, and reflection. This can include helping the young person to understand the intent of particular apps and platforms, how their attention is being captured to influence their behaviour, and how they spend their time (Jackson, 2025; Saletti & Van Den Broucke, 2024). This is particularly important, as understanding the intentions of these apps and platforms can potentially influence how young people perceive their own personal control (Jackson, 2025). Jackson (2025) found that those with greater awareness describe more intentional strategies for

maintaining autonomy, while those with limited awareness report more passive use. Schools, families, and caregivers can play a role in educating young people about social media safety techniques, recognizing harmful content, and understanding the effects of digital media use to support their digital autonomy (Balamurugan & Vijayarani, 2025; Coyne, 2025). It is also important for caregivers to model self-awareness of digital media habits.

See Being a positive digital role model: Building healthy digital habits for more information.



Tailor use and mitigate risks

The process of building digital media skills should be age-appropriate and based on the young person's developmental readiness, including their self-regulation and understanding of risks. As children age and develop greater digital literacy, their autonomy can also gradually increase (APA, 2023). As explored in the strategies and solution section, a collaborative approach to balanced tech use and building digital autonomy is a best practice (Angus Reid, 2026; Chhabra et al., 2025; Hamilton et al., 2024; Sawyer & Lin, 2026). However, it is important to note that limiting exposure to harmful content (material promoting self-harm, disordered eating, discrimination, cyberbullying) and being attentive to signs that technology use is disrupting daily life (interference with sleep, physical activity, brain development) are interventions that may require additional support (APA, 2023). Service providers can support families and caregivers when they notice that a young person is experiencing disruption to daily life.

See Health advisory on social media use in adolescence and Youth, smartphones, and social media use for more information.

Service providers can offer professional guidance

There are a variety of ways service providers can prepare for, support, reflect, and offer services to support families, caregivers, and individuals navigating the dilemma of using interactive digital media.

> I want service providers to understand that what happens online is not separate from real life. Digital spaces shape relationships, identity, self-esteem, and mental health in very real ways.
>
> **Family Advisory Council Member,**
> Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions

To prepare:

- Leverage existing e-MH tools such as E-mental health e-modules and Mental health, technology and you.
- Become acquainted with the e-MH strategy for Canada by reviewing An e-mental health strategy for Canada.

To support:

- Support young people by addressing predisposing factors (a person-in-environment approach), shaping habits, enhancing self-regulation strategies, and building life skills (Saletti & Van Den Broucke, 2024).
- Focus on building skills with communication, empathy, perception of body language, self-regulation, and other social skills that may have been impacted due to digital distraction and dependence (Thiele, 2025).
- Use evidence-based tools to guide young people, families, and caregivers when choosing appropriate mental health apps and resources (MHCC, 2024).
  - Mental health apps: How to make an informed choice
  - Choosing the mental health resource that's right for you
  - Approved mental health apps
- Support young people in building digital resilience
  - Young people in the digital era: Understanding risks and promoting well-being

- Collaboratively guide young people to develop balanced interactive digital media habits and critical thinking skills. Review appropriate mental health apps and resources together during sessions, discuss privacy settings, and encourage critical evaluation of health information (Weinstein et al., 2023).
    - Feeling good on social media – Kids Help Phone
    - Youth, smartphones and social media use – CAMH
    - Social media and your kids – Media Smarts
    - Social media and student well-being: Supporting mental health in a digital world

- Support families and caregivers in starting conversations about interactive digital media use.
    - Developing your family's tech plan | Kelty Mental Health
    - Conversation starters for families around digital media - SAMHSA
    - Building health relationships with media parent guide - NAMLE
    - Social media conversation starters – Kids Mental Health Foundation
    - Talking to your teen about time on social media – The Mental Health Coalition
    - How to create an environment for kids to talk – Internet Matters
    - For educators: Social media conversation starters caregiver guidebook

- Demonstrate boundary setting-setting with tech and social media in session, promote open conversations related to digital media experiences, and reflect on emotional responses to digital interactions
    - Technology use: Early years to transition years

Policy considerations

The following section discusses provincial, national, and international policy trends surrounding interactive digital media, such as cellphone and social media bans, along with emerging governance. It is important to consider decision makers — as well as service providers — in supporting digital media literacy skill development, as the impacts of digital media on young people's mental health will be related to policy decisions in their environment.

Provincial

Ontario and British Columbia (B.C.) are considering restrictions for social media platforms, while Saskatchewan and Manitoba have initiated public consultations on potential bans for children younger than 16 (Jones, 2026; Previl, 2026). Across national polling in Canada, there is strong support for age-based restrictions, but researchers caution that restrictions need to be balanced with the positive benefits of digital media as well as encouraging education, support, and empowerment to promote the well-being of young people (Angus Reid, 2026; Chhabra et al., 2025; Hamilton et al., 2024; Sawyer & Lin, 2026). Quebec was the first province to ban cellphones in schools in 2025. Other provinces, including Manitoba, B.C., Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Ontario are considering similar action (Jones, 2026; Lepage, 2025). Media reports on the first year of cellphone bans in Quebec schools suggest mixed results, with some positive effects noticed on attention and social connections (The Canadian Press, 2025). While the full impact on mental health and well-being remains unclear, educators continue to flag challenges related to enforcement and consistency across school contexts (Edwards, 2025; Lepage, 2025). This underscores the importance of pairing restrictions with digital literacy education and supportive mental health strategies (Sawyer & Lin, 2026).

National

Momentum toward restricting young people's access to social media in Canada has accelerated since late 2025. In June 2026, the Government of Canada introduced legislation raising the minimum age for social media use from 13 years old to 16 years old (Government of Canada, 2026; The Canadian Press, 2026). Bill C-34, *The Safe Social Media Act,* proposes new safety requirements for social media services and AI chatbots, with the intent to hold platforms and apps responsible for addressing harm before it occurs (Government of Canada, 2026). Platforms that

demonstrate sufficient safeguards such as content moderation, privacy and security, parental controls, and transparency can receive exemptions to age-restrictions (Government of Canada, 2026). This approach recognizes the importance of the intention of interactive digital media apps and platforms, reminding us to reflect on whether usage is harmful or supportive to our digital life (Jackson, 2025). The proposed law also establishes an independent Digital Safety Commission to enforce regulations, ensure compliance, make online services safer for children, and support victims of online harms. Existing policy responses discussed in Canadian media include schoolbased cellphone restrictions, account safeguards, and youth-centred resources (Baig, 2025; Deschamps, 2026; Public Safety Canada, 2022).

International

Australia implemented a world-first nationwide ban on social media in December 2025, prohibiting children younger than 16 from holding accounts on major platforms (Wong, 2025). Early data indicates that millions of accounts have been deactivated and positive effects are being felt for younger youth (13 to 14 years old), such as more in-person social interactions and improved parent-child relationships (Mendes & Dietzel, 2025; Sawyer & Lin, 2026; Wong, 2026). On the other hand, older youth (15 to 16 years old) continue to bypass restrictions or move to less-regulated platforms, raising questions about long-term effectiveness of the ban (Mendes & Dietzel, 2025; Sawyer & Lin, 2026; Wong, 2026). Researchers suggest that more time is needed to fully assess the ban's impacts in practice, particularly on young people's behavior and mental health (Third, 2024).

In Europe, the EU Digital Services Act serves as a legal framework. It sets the minimum age for social media use at 13 and provides further protections, including enhanced content moderation, user protections against illegal content, and transparency in advertising (European Commission, 2026). Several countries, including the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Denmark, and Norway, are also restricting social media access for children under 15 or 16 years old. Other countries, such as Portugal, limit access through parental consent models (Cheng, 2026; Kleinman, 2026). The World Health Organization Europe outlines several policy priorities for young people's digital well-being. However, with varying models and limited data, it is still unclear what impact global approaches may have on young people's well-being (Sawyer & Lin, 2026).

Conclusion

The use of interactive digital media continues to grow. Considering the development of the attention economy to its integration with predictive AI, **a balanced and informed approach to understanding the intentions of interactive digital media is more important than ever.** These apps and platforms continue to provide necessary spaces for connection, mental health promotion, and entertainment. However, some of their intentions have shifted toward attention extraction, which promotes passive use that can pose challenges for youth mental health. More detailed studies on motivations, contexts, and environmental factors influencing interactive digital media use are needed (Santos et al., 2023).

There are existing strategies in the interim:

- Reclaiming decisions about attention capture can be understood as a form of empowerment.
- Shifting support strategies from blanket restrictions to informed and controlled use can help mitigate risks.
- Leaders, service providers, families, caregivers, and young people can all play an active role in supporting positive and supportive interactive digital media use.

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