

How Short-Form Video Addiction Takes a Toll on Teens' Health

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Short-form videos (like TikTok and YouTube Shorts) are increasingly popular, but research shows they negatively impact teenagers' sleep quality and increase social anxiety
- › Research indicates students compensate for phone restrictions during school hours by watching excessive short-form videos before bedtime, compromising their sleep patterns
- › Social anxiety among teenagers worsens through short-form video addiction, as it creates a cycle of avoidance and increased reliance on digital content for social connection
- › Smartphone use exposes teenagers to harmful electromagnetic fields (EMFs), which disrupts cellular energy and impact health, including reproductive function in later life
- › Effective digital detox include establishing phone-free zones, encouraging alternative activities like sports or creative hobbies and gradually setting realistic usage limits

Social media companies are constantly figuring out ways to stand out from the competition. The latest trend, which looks like will be here to stay, is short-form videos. These are now found all over popular platforms, like YouTube Shorts, Facebook Reels and TikTok videos. A report from Forbes explains its rise:¹

"With attention spans shorter than ever, content that is quick to engage and easy to digest is more likely to capture and retain viewer interest. Short-form

videos cater to this by delivering content in bite-sized pieces, making it easier for users to consume, enjoy and share."

While short-form content is easier to consume and engage with, there's one downside to this that hasn't been fully explored yet – its effects on the mental health on teenagers. A group of researchers wanted to understand its effects, which was published in BMC Psychology.²

How Short-Form Videos Affect Sleep Quality Among Teens

The study,³ which was conducted in China, aims to find out how short-form video addiction among adolescents affect sleep quality, as well as its effects on social anxiety. To start, the researchers selected 1,629 adolescents from three high schools in Shandong Province between June and July 2023.

The teenagers were provided a questionnaire that uses a revised form of the Social Media Dependence Scale originally made by Jasna Milošević-Đorđević, Ph.D. Answers were rated from lowest to highest, with a higher score suggesting a higher degree of addiction. The questionnaire also contained other items relating to social anxiety and sleep quality, which were adapted from previous testing scales as well.⁴

After analysis, the researchers quantified the interplay between sleep quality, social anxiety and short-form video content consumption among teenagers. In particular, they noted that since teenagers are generally prohibited to use phones during school hours, they make up for lost time by watching these videos before going to bed, thus affecting sleep quality.⁵

The researchers also highlighted an important effect of using devices at night – blue light emitted from screens affects melatonin production, which is crucial for sleep.⁶

"The radio frequency electromagnetic fields generated by electronic mobile devices can also disrupt normal blood flow and metabolic functions in the brain, thereby negatively affecting adolescents' sleep quality," they said.

As noted in my article "[Five Habits That Ruin Your Sleep](#)," scrolling through your smartphone during bedtime will eventually make it harder for you to fall asleep. That's because when your eyes receive light, they send a signal to your brain's suprachiasmatic nucleus (SCN), which is the group of cells in your hypothalamus controlling the biological clock. These signals create a cascade of events that affect body temperature, sleep desire and appetite, lengthening the time it takes to fall asleep.⁷

Inadequate sleep will ultimately take a toll on a teenager's mind and body. According to Oliver Drakeford Therapy, poor sleep leads to issues such as:⁸

- **Reduced cognitive function** — Sleep deprivation negatively affects a teenager's memory, attention span and decision-making skills. Eventually, they'll have trouble keeping up in class and get poor grades.
- **Mental health issues** — Teenagers have an increased risk of mood disorders such as depression and anxiety, and these impact their mental health because of the already ongoing problems of being an adolescent.
- **Physical health problems** — Poor sleep weakens their immune system and leads to weight gain. They're more likely to get sick, increasing the risk of facing other health issues as they grow older.

The Effect of Short-Form Videos in the Mental State of Teenagers

The researchers defined social anxiety as "a phenomenon individuals experience in multiple situations caused by fear that their words and actions may be negatively evaluated by others." Building on this, the study theorized at how watching short-form videos lead to worsening mental health among adolescents. According to the researchers:⁹

"Adolescents who rely on short-form video consume plenty of time to watch short-form video. The resulting difficulty in focusing their mind on learning or daily interpersonal communication likely leads to setbacks such as decreased

academic performance and hindered interpersonal communication, thus giving rise to social anxiety among adolescents."

Aside from being a time-consuming activity that leads to increased isolation, the type of content consumed is just as significant. For example, negative content, such as those with a materialistic bias, triggers upward social comparison.

As a result, this causes teenagers to develop negative emotions, such as depression and jealousy. Essentially, these videos show a world radically different from the ones teenagers live in right now, and the comparison is driving their social anxiety.¹⁰

The reliance on watching short-form videos hampers their social skills as well. According to the researchers, teenagers watching these videos often have trouble maintaining their social relationships, preferring to watch online content instead to meet their needs because they fear "pressure arising from unfavorable social environments." But the problem here is that it creates a vicious cycle that leads to further consumption of short-form videos:¹¹

"As suggested by social cognitive theory, individuals with social anxiety are prone to negative evaluations of their environment and other people. Those with poorer social support systems tend to have more severe social avoidance tendencies, are less able to integrate into the group, or are more likely to be excluded by the group.

Thus, they may seek social connections and a sense of belonging by watching short videos, ultimately leading to addiction."

Smartphones Exposes Children to EMFs

Aside from disrupting your child's sleep and worsening their social anxiety, excess smartphone usage exposes them to untold amounts of electromagnetic fields (EMFs), plain and simple. In my newest book "Your Guide to Cellular Health: Unlocking the Science of Longevity and Joy," I explain how EMFs, especially from manmade sources, is a major disruptor of cellular energy.

When EMFs penetrate your body, they interfere with mitochondrial function by boosting the influx of calcium ions into your cells. Once your cells have elevated intracellular calcium levels, harmful free radicals are produced, leading to increased oxidative stress. For a deeper dive into the mechanisms, I encourage you to read my book; the e-book version is now available, while the print edition will be out soon.

Cellular energy isn't the only aspect of your child's health affected by EMFs – their reproductive health is in danger as well. In a 2023 study,¹² researchers noted that men who used their cellphones more than 20 times per day showed significantly lower sperm counts compared to those who only used their phones once a week or less.

The list below shows some strategies that helps minimize your child to EMFs and help them sleep better at night:

- Shut off the electricity to your bedroom at night. This typically works to reduce electrical fields from the wires in your wall unless there is an adjoining room next to your bedroom. If that is the case, you will need to use a meter to determine if you also need to turn off power in the adjacent room
- Use a battery-powered alarm clock, ideally one without any light
- Replace compact fluorescent lamps with incandescent bulbs. Ideally remove all fluorescent lights from your house. Not only do they emit unhealthy light, but more importantly, they will actually transfer current to your body just being close to the bulbs
- If you must use Wi-Fi, shut it off when not in use, especially at night when you're sleeping. Ideally, work toward hardwiring your house so you can eliminate Wi-Fi altogether. If you have a notebook without any Ethernet ports, a USB Ethernet adapter will allow you to connect to the internet with a wired connection
- Avoid using your cellphone and other electronic devices at least an hour (preferably several) before bed

Establish a Digital Detox Program for Your Child

Do you think your child is spending too much time on their smartphone? If you notice them being more withdrawn and develop social anxiety, it would be wise to initiate a "digital detox." Jonathan Haidt, Ph.D., a social psychologist at New York University, recommends establishing these four tips as "norms" to help break smartphone addiction among your kids:¹³

1. No smartphones before high school (around age 14)
2. No social media accounts until age 16
3. Phone-free schools with restricted or zero use during the school day
4. Give kids far more independence, free play and responsibility in the real world

According to Haidt, "If we do those four things, we can actually fix this problem in the next year or two." Additionally, he says, "We're not going to burn the technology, [but] we need to delay it." Adults are also recommended to modify and incorporate these tips into their routine, as they're not immune to the effects of social media.

In a study published in *Worldviews on Evidence-Based Nursing*,¹⁴ social media among older age groups (particularly young adults) increase depression, anxiety and loneliness.

To help you start with your child's digital detox, begin the process gradually with realistic goals in mind. For example, ask your child how much time away from their phones they can spend with, then use that as a launching point. Another tip is identifying their current usage patterns and specific apps that consume most of their time, then set limits.¹⁵

It's also sensible to create "no-phone zones" in your home, such as the dinner table and their room (especially before sleeping and after waking up) to cultivate spaces that are completely free from digital distractions. No devices while working on personal projects or hobbies will also help them detach from their phones further.¹⁶

Encourage Your Child to Have Fun with Their Newfound Free Time

Inevitably, a digital detox creates a gap your child's routine. To fill in the empty time that was once occupied by social media, it would be wise to replace it with fulfilling activities. Here are some ideas to get you started:

Engage in physical activities — Join a sports team, go for bike rides or daily walks, or try yoga.

Explore creative hobbies — Learn to play an instrument, try painting or start writing.

Spend time in nature — Go for hikes, have a picnic in the park or start a vegetable garden.

Connect with friends in person — Organize game nights, study groups or just hang out.

Learn a new skill — Take up cooking, photography or a foreign language.

Practice mindfulness — Try meditation or journaling to reflect on their experiences.

Read books — Visit your local library with your child to discover new genres or authors.

Volunteer in your community — Find causes your child is passionate about. One study noted¹⁷ that volunteering is a powerful intervention for adolescents with depression.

Sources and References

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