

The Kids (Who Use Tech) Seem to Be All Right

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Social media is linked to depression—or not. First-person shooter video games are good for cognition—or they encourage violence. Young people are either more connected—or more isolated than ever.

Such are the conflicting messages about the effects of technology on children's well-being. Negative findings receive far more attention and have fueled panic among parents and educators. This state of affairs reflects a heated debate among scientists. Studies showing statistically significant negative effects are followed by others revealing positive effects or none at all—sometimes using the same data set.

A new paper by scientists at the University of Oxford, [published this week](#) in *Nature Human Behaviour*, should help clear up the confusion. It reveals the pitfalls of the statistical methods scientists have employed and offers a more rigorous alternative. And, importantly, it uses data on more than 350,000 adolescents to show persuasively that, at a population level, technology use has a nearly negligible effect on adolescent psychological well-being, measured in a range of questions addressing depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, pro-social behavior, peer-relationship problems and the like. Technology use tilts the needle less than half a percent away from feeling emotionally sound. For context, eating potatoes is associated with nearly the same degree of effect and wearing glasses has a more negative impact on adolescent mental health.

“This is an incredibly important paper,” says Candice Odgers, a psychologist studying adolescent health and technology at the University of California, Irvine, who wasn't involved in the research. “It provides a sophisticated set of analyses and is one of the most comprehensive and careful accountings of the associations between digital technologies and well-being to date. And the message from the paper is painstakingly clear: The size of the association documented across these studies is not sufficient or measurable enough to warrant the current levels of panic and fear around this issue.”