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**NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL AGE: THE NEED FOR AGE LIMITS ON SOCIAL MEDIA FOR CHILDREN**

The number of adolescents who use social media in Western countries has doubled from 34% in 2010 to 70% in 2020 (You et al. n.p.). Studies link problematic social media use to rising mental and physical health problems among this group. For young adolescents, social media often does more harm than good. Therefore, children should be at least 15 years old before they are allowed to use social media.

First, children under 15 are not emotionally and cognitively ready for social media. Adolescents under 15 are still developing critical thinking and emotional regulation skills, which mature between 14 and 18 years (El Damaty et al. n.p.). This makes them more susceptible to the interest-based algorithms social media uses to keep users hooked. Consequently, social media addiction negatively impacts mental health, presenting in younger children as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Younger children are also more vulnerable to peer pressure.

Furthermore, social media exposes younger children to significant risks, including cyberbullying, predators, and inappropriate content. Studies have found that both cyberbullying and online grooming are widespread among primary school students, with screen time being a major predictor of involvement (Tintori et al. 47). Predators often target younger users who are less aware of online dangers. Additionally, children under 15 may inadvertently share personal information, leading to privacy breaches.

On the other hand, critics argue that social media can provide benefits like improved communication skills and connectedness with peers. However, overreliance on social media can impair the development of face-to-face social skills in children under 15. Younger children may struggle to develop empathy and effective communication if they primarily interact online. Social media interactions often lack the nuances of in-person communication, which are critical for emotional and social development. The benefits mentioned by critics can be obtained through supervised and controlled online environments for younger children. There are other ways to develop digital literacy and social skills without exposing children to mainstream social media risks.

In conclusion, allowing children under 15 to use social media poses significant risks to their emotional, cognitive, and social development. The dangers of cyberbullying, exposure to predators, and potential addiction outweigh the benefits. Thus, children should be at least 15 years old before they are permitted to use social media to ensure they are better equipped to navigate its complexities and dangers.

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