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## Screen time, reduced sleep and depression in adolescent girls: Targeting risk factors for girls' mental health

Much research in recent years has focussed on connections between sleep, academic performance and other areas of adolescent health. With rising rates of anxiety and other mental health concerns among adolescent girls, the impact of screen time and sleep on girls' symptoms is becoming increasingly relevant. This is the very subject that researchers from Sweden have addressed in a new article released this April. The research was led by the Karolinska Institutet in Sweden and focussed on Swedish students aged 12 to 16 years, tracking students at key points across a twelve-month period. The study recognised the well-known association between adolescent screen time and disruptions to sleep and identified that excessive screen time negatively impacts multiple aspects of sleep for both male and female adolescents. The concerning item of note was that this increases the risk of depressive systems – especially among girls, who on average experienced more than twice the rates of depression-related symptoms as boys.

The research that led to this finding was detailed and extensive. The project considered adolescent sleep on both school days and non-school days and incorporated both sleep quantity and quality. Depressive symptoms included both behavioural and cognitive indicators such as tiredness, sleep loss, lack of appetite and reduced self-image. Screen time was considered to not only include use of devices, television/video streaming and gaming, but also explicitly internet use.

An increase in screen time led to a deterioration in girls' sleep duration and quality within three months. Depressive symptoms in girls were most strongly affected by these sleep disturbances. Even when boys experienced sleep disturbance, they did not exhibit the same increases in depression as seen in girls. There was a clear link between girls' reduction in sleep quality, duration and sleep patterns (especially delays in reaching the "midpoint" of the sleep cycle) and the presentation of depression-related symptoms. Depression is also more likely to occur when other negative screen-related factors are present. This particularly includes reduced resilience and impacts on social relationships due to screen time.

Depression was the main focus of this study due to the high risk of its negative consequences, particularly amongst girls, who are more likely to internalise depressive symptoms. However, this still raises questions about the potential impacts of screen time and sleep disturbances on other aspects of girls' mental health and wellbeing. It also leads us to ask what more we can do to help support girls on this journey. The authors suggest that "structural school interventions and societal shifts" are needed to help address this challenge.

The International Coalition of Girls' School's recent research, "Raising Her Voice: Strengthening Student Well-being and Engagement through Connection in Girls' Schools," offers some further insights into sleep and anxiety.

Drawing on data from more than 30,000 students, ICGS's Raising Her Voice research reveals that when girls have access to strong relationships, trusted adults, and a deep sense of belonging, their wellbeing and

engagement flourish.

Among the key takeaways for ICGS's research are:

- Students with a trusted adult at school report significantly lower levels of stress and stronger emotional coping skills.
- Belonging within the girls' school community acts as a powerful buffer against the pressures of adolescence.
- Schools that value student voice and agency create a reinforcing cycle, where belonging fuels engagement and engagement strengthens connection.

These results affirm what girls' schools do best: create intentional, relationship-rich environments where connection and community are not just valued, but a daily practice, enabling girls' schools to support their students on issues such as sleep disruption and anxiety.

ICGS's research highlights that relationships with teachers, parents and other adults in girls' lives are incredibly important influences in this space. It also suggests schools can help by fostering and encouraging digital literacy and prosocial behaviour that is focussed on the wellbeing of others and can bring positive benefits to all parties involved. Digital literacy education can include important knowledge around managing the use of digital devices, especially at night, and understanding of the need to consider reducing daily leisure screen time hours. Together, as communities, schools and families, we can educate girls on the important benefits of sleep, the development of healthier sleep habits, and connect with girls to support their holistic wellbeing journey.

## References

Hökby, S., Alvarsson, J., Westerlund, J., Carli, V., Hadlaczky, G. (2025). Adolescents' screen time displaces multiple sleep pathways and elevates depressive symptoms over twelve months. *PLOS Global Public Health*, 5(4), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0004262>.

International Coalition of Girls' Schools. (2025). *Executive research summary: Raising her voice: Strengthening student well-being and engagement through connection in girls' schools*.