International Coalition of Girls' Schools

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eBRIEF

RESEARCH SUMMARY FOR PRINCIPALS

Supporting adolescents to safely navigate AI, harness its benefits, and reduce harm

As public concern surrounding mental health and the impacts of technology increase, numerous governments have issued guidelines on the use of technologies such as social media, including the impact of these platforms on adolescent health. This is not the first time there have been prominent concerns in media, policy and research about new technologies, ranging from television to social media and smartphones. The presence of AI is another new development bringing both benefits and risks. This presents a unique opportunity to support young people as this technology rapidly moves from being a new development to an everyday part of life.

Children and adolescents are increasingly exposed to AI and understanding the effects of this is critical to supporting young people. Researchers from the UK and the Netherlands have suggested effective ways to approach this challenge and are considering how research can better address the negative mental health consequences of internet and related technologies on young people. Their work provides relevant insights for educators and families who are guiding adolescents.

The adoption of AI by children and adolescents has already surpassed the rate at which young people adopted social media. There must be awareness of the range of harms that AI poses to adolescents – from the most serious, including sexual offences and risks of self-harm, through to seemingly minor concerns. Yet we must also be cautious not to blame all negative health effects on the development of a new technology. Other factors and context must be taken into account.

The challenge lies in how we teach responsible, positive use of AI and other technologies. Technology is certainly not a replacement for human interaction, but blanket approaches and exclusions in all circumstances may risk missing the benefits that can be gained from that technology. Indeed, this is the core of the AI challenge. While we must help adolescents learn to navigate wellbeing risks associated with these technologies, we must also remember the potential benefits. For some minority groups, such as girls from culturally diverse backgrounds, technology can in fact be a significant benefit for various aspects of identity and health.

Research suggests that we need to approach the question of AI and its impact on adolescents as a challenge, not a problem, and keep asking questions as we progress on this path. How can we make children and adolescents aware of both the capabilities and risks of AI? How can we do this while teaching adolescents positive ways to navigate existing and new technological challenges? Bans on social media may be part of the solution, but we also need to address the issue of harmful content that can still be accessed at other times. This means we need to rethink how we address technologies and their impact on adolescents.

We need to understand how adolescents use AI. This can be achieved by talking to young people themselves, but also by engaging with the technology sector, youth advisory groups and other organisations. Educators and families can assist in this area by identifying the types of AI adolescents are using, as this will impact

management. It is also essential to be aware of contextual factors that can impact the use of AI. This includes economic and social circumstances, local and national events, conflict, and even major global events.

More structured, focussed research based on clear evidence is necessary to support policy makers, practitioners, and those working directly with adolescents. For schools and educators, this means relying on the most accurate and newly released findings, including those based on collaborations between researchers, organisations and those working with adolescents themselves. Teachers, policy makers, health professionals, families, and even adolescents themselves require a clear understanding of the evidence surrounding AI, potential harm, and its risks and benefits. This can be supported through the use of online resources that are kept up to date as developments in AI continue to progress.

It is important to holistically view the challenges represented by AI. Taking into account other factors such as privacy, consent and body image is essential, because all of these can also impact young people's health and wellbeing. AI is only one part of this scenario, and it must be considered in context. Families and educators can also assist children and adolescents by being aware of direct harm associated with AI and technology, such as the perpetration of abuse. But equally important is awareness of indirect harm caused by factors such as misinformation, or the effects of algorithms on content. While indirect harms can be much harder to identify and manage, they form an essential part of this holistic approach to supporting young people as they navigate AI.

So much attention is focussed on the negative effects of social media. But AI is advancing, and young people are already engaging in many new ways of using AI well beyond social media alone. It is essential that we keep up with the advances in this technology in order to harness the benefits of AI. This will require schools to develop systems, structures and policies that take account of emerging research and technological advancements, consider the pros and cons of emerging technologies and the development of AI and its uses, develop partnerships with organizations and academic institutions that develop technologies and research their impact, work with charities and not for profits in the same space when addressing challenges and opportunities and crucially involve the young people themselves. In this way schools and educators can fully explore the opportunities this technology presents.

References

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