

Q Dear Counsellor, Is it dangerous to give children smartphones? Can't it affect their mental health and academic performance? My husband gave all our children smartphones. Now their behaviour has taken a turn for the worse. They seem to be addicted to their phones; their academic performance has dropped, they are moody and one of them even threatened to commit suicide when I confiscated her phone.

Fatima

A Dear Fatima, Thank you for being

Is it dangerous to give children smartphones?

concerned about your children's mental health and I encourage you to go a step further and get them treated for any mental illness or addiction that they may be suffering from. Children of any age can get addicted to their phones and this can impair their ability to function normally in many areas of their lives.

According to a study published this year, parents should avoid pre-teens' use of smartphones and social media because it can cause mental illness. The study, which was published in the *Journal of*

Human Development and Capabilities, argued that using smartphones before age 13 could damage kids' mental health.

It found that smartphone use by children younger

than 13 was associated with suicidal thoughts, worse emotional regulation, lower self-worth and detachment from reality, especially among girls. For every year before age 13 that a person

acquired a smartphone, their mental health and well-being were likely to be lower.

The researchers explained that that's likely because the kids who used smartphones before turning 13 accessed social media more and experienced sleep disruptions, cyberbullying and negative family relationships.

The results were so shocking that the researchers even called for global restrictions to prevent children younger than 13 from using smartphones and social

media.

Lead study author Tara Thiagarajan advised parents to seek schools for their children with stronger policies around smartphones on campus, or push for better policies in the schools.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt made a similar recommendation, suggesting parents wait until the age of 16 to let kids use social media in his book: *"The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness."*

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