

Overconnected Kids: Digital Stress, Addiction-Like Behaviors & AI's Powerful Grip

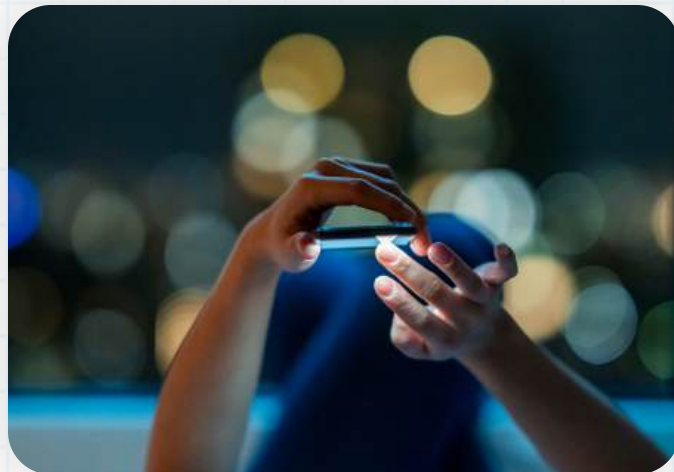
New proprietary research from family online safety company Aura shows kids' tech use is increasingly shaping their emotions, behavior and wellbeing. This report offers a snapshot of the pain points that overconnected kids face—and why addressing them is urgent.

Compulsive Phone Curls: Exercising Social Anxiety

The first thing many kids do after waking up isn't brush their teeth or eat breakfast—it's check their phones. And then again. And again.

Compulsive unlocking is a novel digital behavior identified by Aura, whereby kids unlock and lock their phones in quick succession.

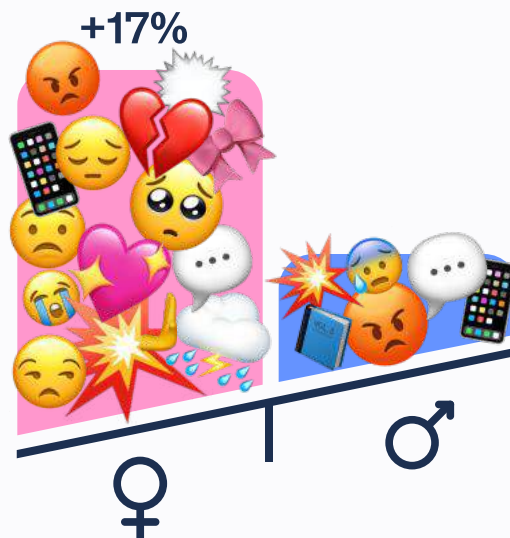
- This compulsion most frequently presents at 7 AM, mirroring behaviors of those with cigarette addictions.
- Compulsive unlocking is closely connected to increased emotional strain. Kids exhibiting this pattern report significantly higher "digital stress" levels—the emotional toll of constant connectivity.
- Digital stress is driven by five key pressures: Approval Anxiety, Availability Stress, Connection Overload, FOMO and Online Vigilance.¹



The Digital Pink Tax: Life Online Costs Girls More

Girls report 17% higher digital stress than boys, scoring higher in 4 of the 5 key pressure categories.

- They experience these pressures—approval, availability, connection and FOMO—more intensely than boys.
- And, digital stress extends far beyond screens, affecting kids' self-image, mood and social relationships in real life.
- Higher digital stress is strongly linked to increased psychological distress—anxiety, sadness or overwhelm—and lower overall emotional wellbeing.

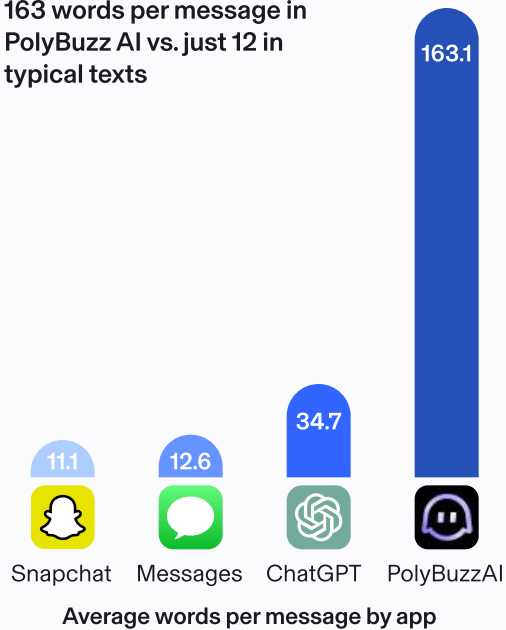


Dialogue Disconnect: Mom Gets “IDK,” AI Gets the Essay

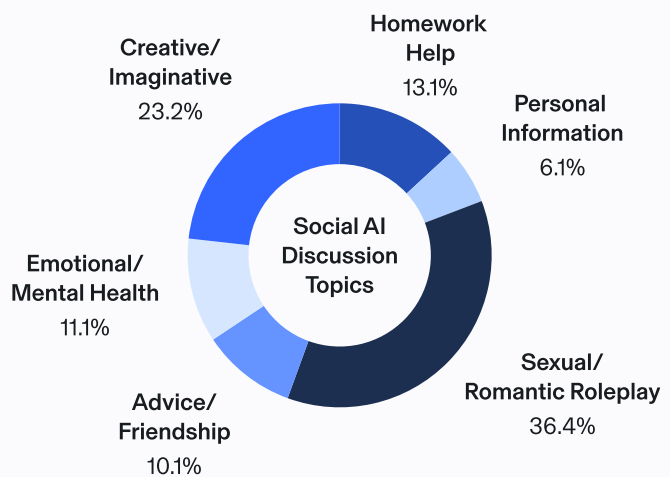
While most kids won’t talk to mom, they seem perfectly comfortable confiding in code as AI use reshapes digital dialogue. In GenAI companion apps, **messages are 10x longer than texts to friends**—averaging 163 words per message vs. just 12 in typical texts.

- It’s not just how much they say. Kids’ tone, depth and behavior shift when chatting with AI vs. real people, suggesting these tools may be filling a different kind of need.
- Analysis of the most-used GenAI apps by teens shows six recurring conversation themes.

163 words per message in PolyBuzz AI vs. just 12 in typical texts

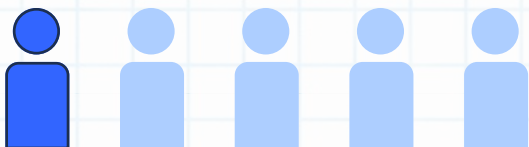


Most companion AI interactions are imaginative or social: 36% are sexual or romantic scenarios, 23% are creative make-believe—each well above homework use (13%)

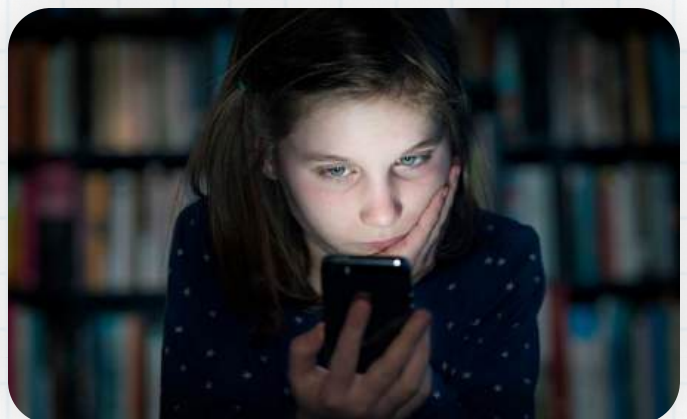


Social Media Age Verification: A Screen Door on a Submarine

Social media age verification and parental consent aren’t stopping early overuse. **Nearly 1 in 5 kids under 13 report spending 4+ hours a day on social media.**



- The CDC links excessive screen time (4+ hours/day) to increased anxiety and depression symptoms in children, highlighting **serious risks to their mental health**.



Many kids either bypass age verification measures or spend excessive time on social media once given parental consent, **triggering addictive algorithm-driven content** during a critical developmental period.

Making Sense of Digital Childhood

These findings paint a clear picture: From early-morning compulsive scrolling to in-depth chats with AI-maginary friends, these shifts are reshaping childhood. Addressing them will require continued understanding of the emotional, behavioral and technological forces driving a new kind of always-on generation.

Partner With Us

Existing research often relies on self-reports, leaving gaps in objective data on how kids spend their time online. Aura's TECHWISE study is addressing this by continuously enrolling families to track device use, social media habits and outcomes like mental health. We are still uncovering how digital use shapes youth development and invite academic and non-profit researchers to use this dataset to advance understanding. As of August 13, 2025, nearly 300 children and caregivers are enrolled, contributing ~58,000 user hours of device data and over 190,000 cross-platform messages. Monthly self-reports capture psychiatric and social functioning, loneliness and attitudes toward social media, while daily reports track mood, stress, physical activity and sleep. This dataset offers an unprecedented opportunity to address key scientific questions and inform policy.

To partner with Aura's research team, contact our Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Scott Kollins (scott@aura.com). Together, we can drive meaningful, data-driven research that protects families and informs the future.

Aura Methodology

Data for this report derives from two primary sources involving children ages 8–17. The first is Aura's ongoing TECHWISE study, in which more than 300 children and their parents across the U.S. have enrolled. Participants provide regular survey responses alongside device usage data captured through the Aura app. The second source is Aura's commercial data, representing more than 10,000 users over the past six months.

About Aura

Aura is one of the fastest-growing online safety solutions for individuals and families. Whether you're protecting yourself, your kids or your aging loved ones, Aura meets your needs at every stage of life. From real-time threat detection and scam alerts to tools that help parents protect their kids from predators, cyberbullying and tech-driven mental health risks — Aura empowers families to thrive in the digital world. Learn more at [Aura.com](https://aura.com).