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Generation of Anxiety: How Social Networks and Performance Pressure Are Changing Czech Children

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Summary

The mental health of children and adolescents is no longer just a marginal issue; it has become a major topic of society-wide discussion. Anxiety, depression, self-harm, or sleep problems are appearing more and more often in both schools and families. Yet there is no single cause behind this worsening psychological well-being. Today's adolescence is shaped by a confluence of the digital environment, social comparison, performance pressure, and changing relationships. Their interaction is the key to understanding the whole problem.

Highlights

- Social networks are not in themselves the cause of psychological problems. The risk increases when its use grows into a loss of control, social comparison, or disrupted sleep.
- Alongside digital pressure, school pressure is also increasing. It is felt most by older pupils and girls; the problem arises especially when high demands are not accompanied by sufficient support.
- School cannot replace psychological care, but it can significantly influence the environment in which children cope with strain. The key is to pair demands with support and to catch problems early.

According to the World Health Organization, approximately one in seven children and adolescents under the age of 19 in Europe lives with some form of mental disorder, and data show that the need for mental health support among young people has been growing in the long term (World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2025). However, explaining this change is not nearly as simple as it might seem at first glance. Today's children grow up in an environment that differs from the experience of previous generations in virtually every way. Social relationships continue long after the end of school, much of communication has moved to the digital space, and comparing oneself with peers is no longer limited to the classroom or the immediate environment. Social networks allow for continuous contact, but at the same time create space for permanent evaluation, self-presentation and monitoring the lives of others.

It would be short-sighted to say that social networks are the only cause of psychological difficulties of the young generation. It is a much more complex relationship, in which digital technologies are intertwined with individual vulnerability, school, family and peer environments, and other sources of stress.

It is more accurate to understand the situation as a confluence of several changes. Adolescents are increasingly exposed to the digital environment, social comparisons and performance expectations, while the space in which they can actually step away from assessment and communication is shrinking. The question is not just whether to limit children's social networks or mobile phones. What is more important is how to create an environment in which young people can cope with the natural demands of adolescence, school, and the digital world, without turning the normal burden into a long-term psychological problem.

What's changed: A life that never ends offline

Adolescence has always been a period in which relationships with peers, the need for acceptance and the search for one's own identity gain extraordinary importance. This is not changing. However, the environment in which these processes take place has fundamentally changed. For today's children, the social world does not end with the school bell, the end of training, or saying goodbye to friends. A significant part of communication continues through social networks, chat applications, and other digital platforms.

This change cannot automatically be evaluated negatively. The digital environment allows young people to maintain relationships, create new communities, or seek support that they do not have in their immediate surroundings. At the same time, however, online communication has become a common part of everyday life to an extent that previous generations did not experience. In the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, a total of 36% of adolescents aged 11 to 15 reported being in virtually continuous online contact with their friends in 2022 (World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2024).

Czech data also confirm that social networks are not just a marginal leisure activity. According to the Czech part of HBSC, in 2022, approximately half of children aged 11 to 15 were regular users of social networks, 23% were intensive users, and approximately 8% showed signs of problematic use (HBSC Czech Republic, 2023).

It is the difference between intensive and problematic use that is crucial for further debate. In ordinary public spaces, it is often assumed that the more time a child spends on social networks, the greater the problem is poses. However, intensive use in itself does not mean a loss of control or a negative impact on everyday functioning. Behavioral patterns such as repeatedly failing to limit use, neglecting other activities, or experiencing mental and physical difficulties are considered problematic.

The proportion of Czech children with problematic use of social networks increased from approximately 5% to 8% between 2018 and 2022. The differences are evident according to age and gender. In 2022, approximately 10% of girls compared to 6% of boys reported problematic use. However, this does not mean that the digital environment is predominantly a "girls' problem." Rather, the type of risky digital behaviour differs. While problematic use of social networks is more common among girls, problematic gaming is more pronounced among boys, the signs of which were shown by approximately 13% of boys compared to 5% of girls (HBSC Czech Republic, 2023).

At the same time, the digital environment is transforming the very nature of social bonds. In 2022, approximately one-fifth of Czech children aged 11 to 15 were in daily contact with friends they originally met online. In addition, some adolescents report that they prefer online communication to face-to-face conversation when sharing their inner feelings, and this proportion increases with age (HBSC Czech Republic, 2023). Thus, the online space is not only a place where content is consumed, but an environment in which relationships are formed, social life takes place, and personal and emotional issues are addressed. This is one of the most significant changes in contemporary adolescence. The digital world cannot simply be separated from the "real" one, because for young people, both spaces form a single whole. Therefore, it is not only the question of how much time the child spends on social networks that is important, but above all what happens during this time, whether they maintain control over their behavior and how the digital environment interferes with relationships, sleep, duties, or psychological well-being.

From likes to anxiety: What the digital environment is really changing

The presence or simple use of social networks does not by itself explain why they can be psychologically burdensome for some adolescents. More important are the mechanisms that the digital environment amplifies. Adolescence is a time when the importance of relationships with peers, social acceptance, and feedback from those around them grows. This is natural. Social networks did not create these needs, but they allow them to be experienced in an environment where the evaluation of others is practically continuous, publicly visible, and often measurable. A study published in *Nature Reviews Psychology* draws attention to social comparison, self-presentation, sensitivity to social feedback and the experience of exclusion as mechanisms whose importance digital platforms can amplify during adolescence (Orben et al., 2024).

Social comparison is one of the most striking examples. Adolescents do not compare their own appearance, success or social life with only a few classmates or friends. Social networks offer a virtually unlimited number of images of other people, usually in a selectively presented form. Appearance is a particularly sensitive area. The data confirm a stronger link between higher levels of online social comparison and greater dissatisfaction with one's own body and symptoms of eating disorders. The strength of this relationship is influenced by a number of factors, including the type of content, the platform or the representation of women in the monitored groups (Bonfanti et al., 2025). Of course, this does not mean that social networks themselves cause eating disorders, but it does show one of the specific mechanisms by which the digital environment can amplify existing insecurities or vulnerabilities.

Another important element is feedback. Likes, comments, the number of views or followers translate part of social acceptance into visible indicators. For an adolescent who is more sensitive to acceptance and rejection by peers during this developmental period, this creates an environment that allows for very frequent evaluation of their own social position.

A less conspicuous but important link is sleep, or the time that adolescents spend in front of a lit screen. Sleep problems or lack of rest can be directly linked to depressive and anxiety symptoms and lower well-being. At the same time, it is one of the ways in which digital habits spill over into the child's normal functioning – into the ability to concentrate, regulate emotions or manage everyday stress.

Not just social networks: Growing up under pressure to perform

Social networks are only one part of the environment in which today's children grow up. The second area that is at least as important is the pressure associated with school performance, expectations of success and fear of failure. The ability to cope with the load, work on long-term goals, and cope with failure are important components of adolescence. The risk arises when an adolescent is exposed to disproportionate performance-related pressure and at the same time does not feel enough support. Such feelings increase with age, especially among girls. According to WHO data, in 2022, 63% of fifteen-year-old girls reported pressure from school duties, compared to 43% of boys. At the same time, this was a significant increase for girls compared to 2018, when 54% of fifteen-year-olds reported problems. At the same time, support from family, peers, and teachers, are factors that can have a protective effect when young people are coping with the burden (World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2024).

The pressure to perform is not the same as motivation or high ambition. There is a difference between striving to achieve a high standard and a state where self-worth is closely linked to the fear of making mistakes, doubts about one's own performance and the fear of not meeting expectations. This more problematic side of perfectionism is associated with symptoms of anxiety, depression and obsessive-compulsive difficulties.

However, the solution is not to lower educational demands or create an environment free of evaluation and failure. Rather, the ratio between demands and support is crucial. When high expectations are combined with a safe school climate, confidence, and the ability to make mistakes, they can be part of healthy development. However, if performance is seen as the main measure of self-worth and mistakes as failure, the normal school load can turn into chronic stress.

When Pressure Turns into a Problem: Anxiety, Depression, and Self-Harm

Stress, uncertainty or periods of psychological discomfort are a natural part of adolescence. However, the boundary between a normal burden and a more serious problem is crossed when the difficulties persist, interfere with everyday functioning, or become something the child is no longer able to cope with on their own.

The 2023 National Monitoring of Mental Health of Ninth-Grade Pupils showed that more than half of the monitored pupils displayed signs of impaired well-being, approximately 30% showed signs of moderate to severe anxiety, and 40% exhibited signs of moderate to severe depression. Difficulties were more pronounced in girls (NIMH, 2023). These numbers are serious, but they are not a clinical diagnosis. The results should therefore be understood as a warning sign, rather than an accurate indication of the proportion of Czech children with depression or anxiety disorder.

Another insight is offered by the data of services that young people turn to on their own. In 2025, the Safety Line recorded more than 24,000 complaints related to psychological difficulties, which means a year-on-year increase of 19%. Within these contacts, more than 7,300 were related to suicide and over 5,100 to self-harm (Safety Line, 2026). Even these numbers cannot be used as an indication

of the occurrence of these problems in the entire population. One child can contact the service repeatedly, and the availability and familiarity of the service itself can also affect the number of contacts. However, the data show a high and growing demand for low-threshold psychological assistance.

The available data do not provide a simple picture of an "epidemic" caused by a single factor. However, they clearly show that a significant proportion of adolescents experience psychological stress, and that support services deal with a high number of cases associated with anxiety, self-harm or suicidal thoughts. The multifactorial nature of these problems is why it is not enough to look for a single culprit. The digital environment, school pressure, family relationships, individual vulnerability and wider social conditions can all influence each other. Therefore, the goal is not only to react when the problem develops, but to create an environment that allows difficulties to be caught early and to offer help before they grow into a serious crisis.

School as part of the solution

School cannot take responsibility for children's mental health or replace the work of psychologists, psychiatrists or families. At the same time, however, it is an environment in which children spend a significant part of the day and where relationships with peers, evaluations, expectations and experiences of success and failure meet. It can intensify psychological burden, but it can also act as one of the most important protective factors.

Promoting well-being does not mean turning a school into a demands-free institution or protecting children from any unpleasant experience. What is more important is the ability to combine demands with support. Pupils' resilience develops in an environment where they feel safe, can work with mistakes, and have confidence in their teachers. Well-being and resilience are therefore not opposites. Without a certain sense of security, in fact, it is more difficult to learn to cope with challenging situations and failure.

The availability of professional help directly in schools is also crucial. From 2026, or from the new school year 2026/2027, support positions are newly financed from the state budget, including psychologists, special educators and social educators. However, the mere presence of an expert is not enough; the school's ability to catch the problem in time and connect the child with follow-up counselling or health care where the school's options end is also important. Digital technologies need to be approached in a similar way. Limiting mobile phones during classes can help students focus or ensure part of the day without constant online contact.

The school's job is not to remove stress, technology, or the experience of failure from children's lives. It should help distinguish between a burden that promotes development and pressure that becomes unmanageable in the long term. In this space, prevention may prove more effective than addressing problems only after a child already needs crisis or clinical help.

Conclusion

The term "anxiety generation" describes the growing concern about the psychological condition of young people, but it should not become a diagnosis of an entire generation. The available data show real problems – from problematic use of social networks to school stress to high demand for psychological and crisis help. At the same time, however, they do not confirm the existence of a single cause that could be eliminated by a simple measure.

Social networks alone have not created a need for acceptance, fear of failure, or a tendency to compare oneself with others. But the digital environment can amplify and extend these natural mechanisms of adolescence into a part of the day that was previously reserved for the offline world. If high school or social pressure and lack of support are added to this, the individual sources of burden can multiply each other.

Therefore, the answer cannot be a world without phones or a school without demands. It makes more sense to create an environment in which children can use technology without losing control, manage demands without permanent fear of failure, and get help before the burden grows into a serious psychological problem.

Resources

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