Early mobile phone ownership: influencing the wellbeing of girls and boys in Ireland?

Engl. transl.: Early mobile phone ownership: influencing the wellbeing of girls and boys in Ireland?

# Keywords

* mobile phone ownership
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* gender
* longitudinal data
* Piers Harris
* SDQ

# Details

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## Sample

Data from Growing Up in Ireland (GUI), a nationally representative longitudinal study of
one-in-eight children residing in Ireland, provides a valuable opportunity to assess the
relationship between early phone ownership and dimensions of child development. The study
comprised 8,568 nine-year-old children, born in 1997/1998, who were first interviewed
between August 2007 and May 2008. The second wave, taking place in 2011 and 2012,
comprised 7,525 children at 13 years of age (Quail, Williams, Thornton Murray, 2014).Reflecting the bioecological model underpinning the GUI study, data are collected from multiple informants, including children themselves, their parents, and teachers"

## Implications For Parents About

Parenting guidance / support

## Implications For Policy Makers About

Stepping up awareness and empowerment

# Abstract

"Children live in a technology-mediated world, and most young people use a variety of
technologies in their daily lives. However, despite intense public discourse, we have little
empirical evidence on how technology use impacts on children’s development across a
number of psycho-social domains. Research that has been conducted tends to be largely
small-scale or cross-sectional in nature and most often focused on (young) adults rather than
children. Using longitudinal data on one-in-eight Irish children, we use econometric methods
to test for associations between early mobile phone ownership and two measures of
children’s psycho-social development between 9 and 13 years of age. We examine the Piers
Harris Self-Concept Scale, reported by children, and the Strengths and Difficulties (SDQ)
score, completed by the primary caregiver. We find no generalised associations between
early mobile phone ownership and psycho-social outcomes. However, there is evidence that
associations differ by gender and across psycho-social sub-domains. We find no robust
associations affecting boys, but girls who receive phones earlier fare less well in terms of
their behavioural adjustment and academic self-concept scores at 13 years of age, all else
being equal. Further research is needed to identify causal mechanisms and explore possible
mediating effects of family/social context"

# Outcome

"There is no significant generalised association between early mobile phone ownership
and either measures of self-concept or psychological adjustment as children enter
adolescence. The lack of negative associations offers counter-evidence to concerns raised by
some theorists that these technologies might present significant new challenges for children
(e.g. Twenge, 2017; Lepp, Barkley Karpinski, 2014; McDaniel Radesky, 2018).
However, when we allow for differing associations in specific psycho-social domains and by
gender we do find some grounds for concern. The finding of lower intellectual self-concepscores among girls adopting mobile phones earlier complements previous research
(Dempsey, Lyons McCoy, 2018), which shows that early mobile phone ownership is
associated with lower academic scores in adolescence. While the directional nature of this
relationship has yet to be researched, one possibility is that reduced academic outcomes
resulting from early mobile phone ownership are feeding into girls’ beliefs around their
intellectual abilities. The results also show girls adopting mobile phones earlier fare less well
in terms of their self-assessed behavioural adjustment. The underlying processes through
which early mobile phone ownership may be linked to adolescent girls’ self-concept are less
clear. Our bioecological framework highlights the evolving influences on children’s
development as they move into adolescence, and the expansion of their interactions beyond
the family context. Boys and girls may be using mobile phones in different ways, and using
them to interact differently with these broader systems. Perhaps mobile phones are providing
girls with greater opportunities for such social comparison, opportunities which are impacting
negatively for them. Earlier research has suggested mobile phone owners may experience
greater anxiety as a consequence of a perceived obligation to remain constantly ”on”, always
connected to a diversity of social networks through their phones (Lepp, Barkley,
Karpinski, 2014). Again, perhaps girls are more vulnerable to these pressures. Finally, while
we find some associations between early phone ownership and girls’ self-concept, the impact
may be subtle, given that the results do not extend to how parents rate their children’s
psycho-social wellbeing"