

Social media, young people and mental health

An Irishman, a Barbadian and a Kiwi...

Sorry, there's no punchline – I just wanted to talk about our England cricket team, who I met on the way over here at Downing Street.

And our brilliant England captain, star bowler and star batsman, and this entire generation of England cricketers, who come from so many different backgrounds to play for our country.

Because these guys – like the England Women's World Cup team – are role models to so many boys and girls in this country.

And it's a sign of how far we've come since Norman Tebbit's infamous 'cricket test' that nobody cares where you come from, only where you want to call home. And I hope that we call it a new cricket test that we are a meritocracy as a country wherever you come from.

I thought it was worth starting with the England cricket team, not only to cheer everybody up but also because we have to make sure that we remember what the recent past was like when we decide on the future.

Our sporting role models now reflect what our country looks like – and this itself is a huge sign of progress. I think we can take that analysis into the space we're talking about tonight.

Because things weren't always better for children and teenagers before smartphones and social media. We often discuss the impact of social media and the challenges it brings but as mentioned in the introduction we must also remember the great advances it brings.

By most metrics it's never been better: smoking is down, alcohol misuse is down, drug abuse is down. More young people are staying in school and going to university than ever before.

You see the thing is, no matter how much we care about improving our country, we've always got to base those improvements on an honest assessment of where we are. An honest assessment means also reflecting that each age brings new challenges and our task is to rise to those new challenges and harness those for the benefit of our society.

This afternoon some of the biggest social media companies in the world – Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Google, YouTube, Tumblr and Snapchat – all came together at the Department for Health and Social Care...

...the Matt Hancock app was also represented.

And what we discussed is exactly what we're talking about tonight – young

people, social media and the impact on mental health. And the word that kept coming up in the meeting – and not just from me – was responsibility.

It was clear: the penny has now dropped – social media companies get that they have a social responsibility, and that we all have a shared responsibility for the health and wellbeing of our children.

This was the third social media summit I've called this year, and so far we've managed to get the big tech firms – which includes Twitter – to agree to remove suicide and self-harm content, and start addressing the spread of anti-vax misinformation, Instagram have introduced a new anti-bullying tool, and they've all repeated to me that they recognise they have a duty of care to their users, particularly children and young people.

The next step from the work we've been doing is research. Today, we agreed that we must build a scientifically-rigorous evidence base so we can better understand the health impact of social media, and so we can better identify what more we need to do to keep our children safe online.

We will use the data that social media companies hold for social good. Because, while we've made significant progress in these past few months, there is still much more to do.

And ultimately we need to ensure we allow those who express themselves on social media as a cry for help to make that cry while not subjecting others to the damaging impact of viewing material that promotes self-harm or suicide.

And I have made it crystal-clear that if they don't collaborate, we will legislate.

So today, we agreed to start a new strategic partnership between the Samaritans and 'the big 6': Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Google, YouTube and Twitter.

We want the social media companies to contribute at least £1 million to get this partnership off the ground. The government is playing a leading role in bringing this partnership together, and has also contributing funding.

Our mission will be to follow the evidence: develop a scientifically based understanding of what the challenge is, and what resources, support and guidelines we need to establish and better protect children and young people online.

And the key will be to ensure we have a clinically credible analysis of what should and shouldn't be online and ensure when social media companies want to take down content that is harmful, or are required to take down content that is harmful, the boundary of what should and shouldn't be online is defined by clinical standards. There's a clear need for a partnership here to make sure we get that line right.

Ultimately technology isn't the problem: cars don't kill people because of a design flaw. People die in car crashes, most of the time, due to human error.

The challenge with social media is also a human challenge.

I'm well known for caring about driving technological upgrades through the NHS and before that across the economy as culture secretary. The reason I care about technology is because I care about people.

Ultimately, harnessing people to harness technology – that is the challenge that we face. The challenge we face online is to ask the question: are humans going to do the right thing?

Are social media companies going to play their part by making their services safer?

Are governments going to hold these companies to account?

And how are we going to support parents and carers to keep their children safe and healthy online?

Essentially, how are we all going to live up to our responsibilities?

And I believe we will. For 2 reasons.

First: history shows us that new technologies sometimes develop faster than our ability to fully understand their impact, but when we do catch up, we act successfully.

It took a century of speed limits, vehicle inspections, traffic lights, drink-driving laws, seatbelt legislation, to make driving as safe as it is now. And now, per mile driven, cars have never been safer.

And we're still not done, because driver-less cars will be the next step – proof that progress is driven both by advances in understanding and improvements in the technology itself.

And of course that progress, itself, is never complete.

I take inspiration from the first modern labour law in this country, introduced by a Conservative: Robert Peel, father to Sir Robert Peel, one of our greatest prime ministers.

The 1802 Health and Morals of Apprentices Act recognised that cotton mill owners needed to better protect the children working with this new-fangled machinery.

Now, it took a few more decades, and a few more factory acts, before child labour was outlawed altogether, but that first Factory Act, introduced by a Conservative mill owner, started the course of gradual improvements to make the world of work safer for children, women and men.

This task of harnessing new technology for the benefit of society does not take one act of parliament – it is a constant effort to make sure our rulebook is up to date, to allow for the great innovations of our age but to also ensure the benefit of that innovation is brought to the whole of

society.

The history of technology, the history of humanity itself, is one of constant and gradual improvements. Now, gradual does not mean slow – that's not to say we need to wait decades for change to happen.

The pace of technological transformation is faster now than at any point in history so we must pick up the pace of progress to make this technology safer, sooner.

Look at it this way: Facebook is 15 years old now, which in tech years is about... 46. They've even appointed Nick Clegg – and you don't get more of a grown-up than Sir Nick.

So this technology is maturing, there's more middle-aged people now using Facebook than teenagers, and through improving our understanding and improving the technology, we can make it safer for everyone. That's the first reason I have confidence that we will get this right, but it requires constant effort to upgrade the laws by which we live.

Second: Mental health, thanks to the actions of this Prime Minister, and her predecessor, is finally being talked about, and taken as seriously as physical health.

[Political content withdrawn]

We've started a fundamental shift in how we think about mental health in this country, and the approach the NHS is taking to preventing, treating and supporting good mental health in the future.

This fundamental shift is important but it is by no means complete. We've put a record amount of funding into mental health services but there is so much more to do.

And I think it's very important that we talk about the impact of social media, and the wellbeing of young people, in this wider context of good mental health: how do we promote and encourage good mental health?

So the third, and final thing, I'd like to touch on tonight is resilience, which is really another way of saying prevention: the guiding principle of the NHS over the next decade.

How can we help people, particularly children and young people, to become more resilient in the first place?

This isn't about telling people to toughen up – it's about teaching people the cognitive and emotional skills they need to deal with adversity.

It's about promoting positive mental health and preventing problems from causing illness.

Because life will throw at you challenges, times of stress and adversity – losing a job, divorce, bereavement. It's how we respond, how resilient we

are, that ultimately determines the impact on our mental health.

The child development expert, Professor Ann Masten, puts it brilliantly:

Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children.

Everyday magic, but it is not automatic. Resilience isn't a fixed attribute. It's something we can teach. It's something that can be learned, it's something that must be nurtured.

It's an essential life skill that we should equip every child and young person with, so they can meet challenges head-on, face adversity, learn and grow, and improve as a person.

I'm delighted we're working with our colleagues at the Department for Education to equip and empower children, from a young age, with this essential life skill.

Teaching resilience, along with self-respect and self-worth, learning about the importance of honesty, courage, kindness, generosity, trustworthiness and justice.

Values to live by, and vital to our mental health.

We're also teaching children about the dangers of fake news and why truth matters – whether it's falsehoods about vaccines or falsehoods about people.

As a parent, I want to protect my children from the dangers in this world, but I know I can't be with them every minute of the day – I don't think they'd like it very much if I tried.

But I hope that what I've taught them will help prepare them for the challenges they will face in the future.

As parents, as a society, we can't remove every challenge, but we can teach young people how to overcome them, how to cope with adversity, and how to become more resilient.

So it comes down to this:

Responsibility: everybody playing their part – social media companies, government, parents and carers.

Research: building the evidence base to improve our understanding, and improve the new technology.

Resilience: teaching the right way to respond to challenges.

That's how we protect our children. And that's how we build a safer, healthier world for them to grow up in.

And it is an area in which we can succeed – we are leading the world and we must not fail if we're going to ensure the next generation grows up to live the happy and fulfilling lives that we all want to see.