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A whole-school journey to digital well-being

Digital Well-being Starts with *U*s: A Consultation Report Guiding Schools from Awareness to Action

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Acknowledgement

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Our heartfelt thanks go first to the digi.well consortium partners, Foundacija Tempus (Serbia), Ministrstvo za Vzgojo in Izobrazevanje (Slovenia), Zavod Nora Center Sodobnihzasvojenosti (Slovenia), Ministerio da Educacao e Ciencia (Portugal), Associacao Portuguesa de Apoio a Vitima (Portugal), for their commitment and dedication in conducting a series of national focus group consultations with school pupils, teachers, school professionals, policymakers, victim support officers, volunteers and a wide range of other stakeholders. Their careful work and the thoughtful materials, suggestions, and feedback they provided were fundamental to shaping the content and direction of this report.

We are equally grateful to all the participants who took part in the focus group consultations both at national and European level. The insights, reflections, and experiences shared by school pupils, teachers, and other stakeholders have been invaluable. Their engagement and constructive contributions have played a key role in ensuring that this report captures a diversity of voices and perspectives.

We hope that the digi.well report and the selected resources included within will serve as a source of inspiration and guidance for readers.

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Educational professional, Serbia

[Digital well-being] It's not about technology, it's about pedagogy.

School pupil, EU

When I talk about digital well-being I think about balance.[...] I don't think it is about going of grid completely, because that would be unreasonable, because everything is online nowadays.

School pupil, Serbia

I lose track of time and place when scrolling through TikTok.

School pupil, Slovenia

[Spending time on social media] makes school feel really boring.

Educational professional, Portugal

There's a dangerous level of normalisation among educators [on harmful online behaviours]. We need training for professionals first.

School pupil, EU

...Internet really helped me to discover opportunities that I never even knew it was a thing. I've met so many nice people and discover so many new opportunities... The opportunities are sometimes incredible but we should also take the risks into consideration.

Educational professional, Portugal

Digital well-being in schools cannot be addressed in isolation from the work with families.

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School pupils' glossary

Aura/Aura Points: A person's energy; "points" are earned for cool or highly regarded behaviour.

Binge watch: When watching multiple episodes of a television show in a row within a short period of time.

Brainrot: A regression in cognitive abilities such as attention, memory and that happens when there is overconsumption of low-effort, unchallenging content, especially on social media.

Cooked: A state of mental or emotional exhaustion, often due to school, social media, or stress.

Cringe: Awkward or embarrassing behaviour or content (often online).

Doomscrolling: Compulsively and endlessly consuming online content that might cause anxiety or feelings of hopelessness.

Delulu (Short for: Delusional): Unrealistic beliefs, especially referring to individuals (online or offline) or fantasies.

E-Diot (Short for: Electronic idiot): Used humorously for someone inexperienced with digital tools

FOMO (Short for: Fear Of Missing Out): A feeling of worry that an interesting or exciting event is happening somewhere else (it can also be online) and the individual is missing the opportunity to live it.

Ghosted: When an individual suddenly does not receive a response without explanation and it can cause rejection or emotional hurt.

School pupils' glossary

Goblin Mode: Indulging in a lazy, messy, or anti-social behaviour online.

Menty B (Short for: Mental Breakdown): A humorous manner to describe emotional overwhelm, often linked to online stress, especially used in youth conversations about school, social media, or burnout.

Mid: Mediocre or unimpressive, and it is used to critique content, trends, or digital experiences.

NPC (Short for: Non-Playable Character): Mocking someone perceived as lacking individuality or blindly following trends.

Ratioed: When a post receives more negative replies than likes, causing public rejection or backlash.

Skibidi Brainrot: A specific type of brain rot caused by obsessive watching of surreal or absurd meme content.

Slay: To excel or look amazing, especially online, often used to compliment someone's digital persona or aesthetic.

Touch Grass: A reminder to disconnect from the digital devices and go out with friends.

Vlog / Vlogging (Short for: Video blogging): sharing personal stories or opinions via video.

Table of abbreviations

Acronym	Meaning
ANDI	Digital Education Action Plan
APAV	Associacao Portuguesa de Apoio a Vitima
BIK	Better Internet for Kids
FT	Foundacija Tempus
DGE	Ministerio da Educacao e Ciencia
DigComp	Digital Competence Framework for Citizens
DigCompEdu	Digital Competence Framework for Educators
DSA	Digital Services Act
EdTech	Educational Technology
ENGO	European Non-Governmental Organisation
ENED	National Strategy for Digital Education
EU	European Union
EUN	European Schoolnet
HBSC	Health Behaviour in School-aged Children
KiDiCoTi	Kids' Digital Lives in Covid-19 Times
Logout	Zavod Nora Center Sodobnihzasvojenosti
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
MVI	Ministrstvo za Vzgojo in Izobrazevanje
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PCOOP	Cooperation Partnerships
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

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General preface: the digi.well project and the research programme

Concerns about the impact of digital technology and social media on children and young people's mental health and well-being have been central to public, policy, and academic debates. The digi.well project (A whole-school approach to well-being in a digital world) is a twenty-four-month initiative funded by the European Union, which aims to explore, develop, and foster a whole-school approach to digital well-being. Coordinated by EUN, in partnership with FT (Serbia), MVI (Slovenia), Logout (Slovenia), DGE (Portugal) and APAV (Portugal), the project seeks to support schools in developing comprehensive strategies that address the needs of school pupils, teachers, and a wider range of school professionals.

Building on an evidence-based approach, the digi.well project provides practical tools and guidance to help schools evaluate and improve their approach to digital well-being. At its core are the Self-assessment tool and the Action plan, which allow schools to reflect on their current status, identify areas for improvement, and implement strategies that foster a safe, balanced, and supportive digital environment. These resources are complemented by capacity-building, outreach, and dissemination activities. These include the implementation of national trainings and the creation of a European Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), which together provide teachers and school professionals with the knowledge, skills, and support needed to strengthen digital well-being across school communities. In practice, the project engages school pupils, teachers, and other school's professionals, fostering a collaborative approach to digital well-being that involves the wider school community. By combining practical tools with training and outreach, digi.well helps schools implement a whole-school approach, promoting awareness, reflection, and the adoption of good practices, while supporting collaboration and knowledge exchange at both national and European levels.

The current scoping report has the objective to compile and to synthetise main research findings from the literature review and qualitative consultations with both school pupils and a wider range of education professionals and stakeholders. This consultation report, as a first milestone of the digi.well project, provides a theoretical and empirical backbone for education and awareness-raising activities carried out as part of the overall project, with tangible and qualitative outcomes directly from the school pupils and school professionals.

1. Introduction

1.1 Objective of the scoping report

The digi.well scoping report aims to provide a thorough and grounded understanding of digital well-being, following a dual approach, academic and explorative.

On the one hand, it synthesises the most relevant academic literature on the topic of well-being and its significance in the digital environment. This helped to identify trends, needs and issues related to digital well-being of school pupils, and more specifically digital well-being in the educational setting.

On the other hand, it develops a more concrete and practical understanding of digital well-being in educational settings through two distinct focus group consultations to support the literature review. The first round of consultations involved school pupils, exploring their perceptions and everyday digital practices, while the second engaged school professionals, education stakeholders, and victim support officers and volunteers to examine their observations and strategies for supporting school pupils' digital well-being. This helped to highlight complementary perspectives and provided insights from across the partners' countries (Portugal, Serbia, and Slovenia) and at the EU level, while further identifying the key challenges and strategies that both school pupils and education professionals need to address and promote digital well-being in their educational path.

1.2 Methodology

The methodological approach of the scoping report combined a targeted literature review with qualitative focus group consultations involving school pupils, teachers, school leaders, and other key stakeholders, both at the European and national level (Portugal, Serbia, and Slovenia). This design ensured that the analysis incorporated both existing evidence and the perspectives of the wider school community.

Focus group consultations with school pupils

During the focus group consultations with school pupils, discussions were organised to explore their understanding of digital well-being, their online practices, and the implications these have on their everyday lives. Across the partner countries (Portugal, Serbia, and Slovenia) and at the EU level, multiple sessions were conducted, both online and onsite, involving school pupils from different age groups. In total, 142 school pupils participated, including 36 children around 11-12 years old, 63 aged 13-15, and 43 aged

16 and above. Gender distribution across the groups reflected a balanced participation, with 65 girls and 77 boys, ensuring a wide range of perspectives. Group sizes varied between 6 and 10 participants, which allowed for meaningful interaction and reflection.

Gender distribution
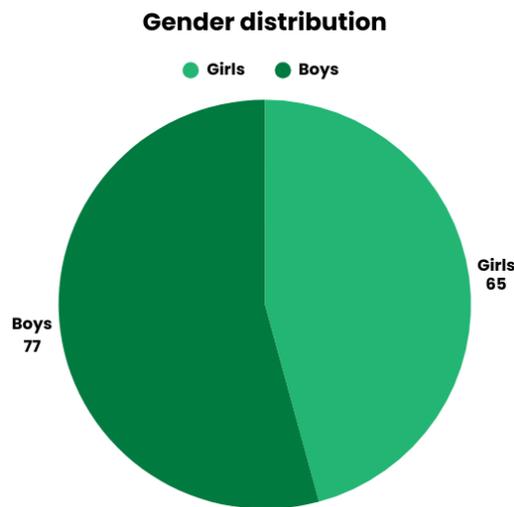
Figure 1 - Gender distribution in the school pupils consultation.
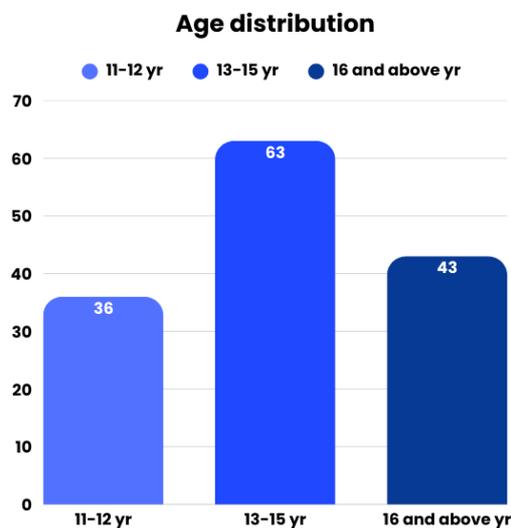
Age distribution

Figure 2 - Age distribution in the school pupils consultation.

The duration of the sessions ranged from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours, with formats adapted to the local context and school environment. All projects' partners followed a common framework but retained flexibility to design activities suited to their cultural and educational settings. Standard sessions began with an introduction to the project and a short ice-breaking activity, followed by guided discussions on predefined topics such as

healthy digital habits, online risks and opportunities, parental mediation, and the role of schools in fostering balance in digital life.

All activities were implemented in a child-friendly and interactive manner, including group discussions, question-and-answer exchanges, and reflective exercises. Child protection standards were strictly respected, ensuring voluntary participation and the possibility for withdrawal at any stage. The atmosphere was widely described by participants as positive and comfortable, enabling school pupils to express their views openly. Their contributions offered valuable insights into how digital well-being is perceived by school pupils, including their awareness of online challenges and their ideas for supportive measures at the school and family level.

Focus group consultations with school professionals and key stakeholders

The focus group consultations with school professionals and key stakeholders were designed to complement school pupils' perspectives by engaging professionals and other key stakeholders involved in education and the support system. Participants included teachers, school leaders, psychologists, social educators, victim support officers and volunteers, as well as representatives from EdTech companies, ministries of education, organisations promoting digital well-being, and academia. Across the partner countries (Portugal, Serbia, and Slovenia) and at the EU level, 201 participants took part in multiple focus group consultations, both online and onsite. In addition to ensuring a diverse professional background, partners also aimed to achieve balanced gender representation. While efforts were made to include participants of all genders, a higher proportion of women was observed (155 women compared to 46 men), reflecting the school and education contexts, where teaching staff and education professionals are typically predominantly female.

Gender distribution

● Women ● Men

Men
46

Women
155
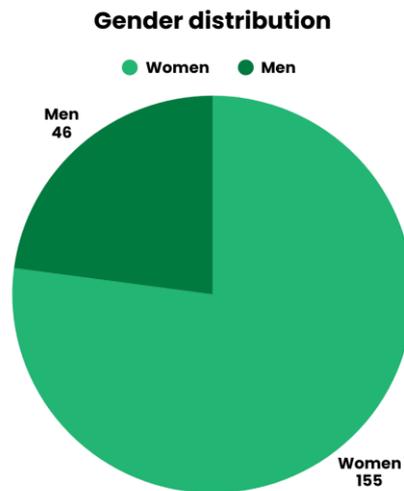
Figure 3 - Gender distribution in school professionals consultation.

The session lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours, following a semi-structured format with a moderator and notetaker. Each discussion began with a short introduction to the project and clarification of consent and data use. The thematic framework covered professionals' understanding of digital well-being, challenges observed among school pupils, supporting strategies, teachers' own digital practices, and boundaries, as well as systematic and policy-level needs. In the groups with victim support officers and volunteers, particular attention was given to the intersections between digital well-being, online risks, and psychosocial interventions with school pupils and families.

The decentralised approach allowed partners to draw upon their own experiences and adapt the methodology to national contexts, while maintaining coherence with the overall objectives. Participants actively exchanged experiences and views, reflecting on both individual practices and systemic aspects. The atmosphere was constructive and collegial, fostering mutual learning across professions. The session highlighted the importance of addressing digital well-being as a shared responsibility between schools, families, and wider support systems, and generated recommendations for strengthening policies and practices at multiple levels.

2. Digital well-being: a topic on the rise

What does well-being mean?
What criteria must be fulfilled to achieve a satisfying state of well-being?

2.1 Understanding well-being

Well-being is a complex and multi-dimensional concept that touches upon a series of aspects in human life. It is affected by the intimate and personal nature of an individual. To describe well-being, it is important to consider three key dimensions: cognitive, psychological, and physical. For each of these spheres, individuals develop a diverse set of skills that support their capacity to pursue a fulfilling level of well-being throughout their whole life.
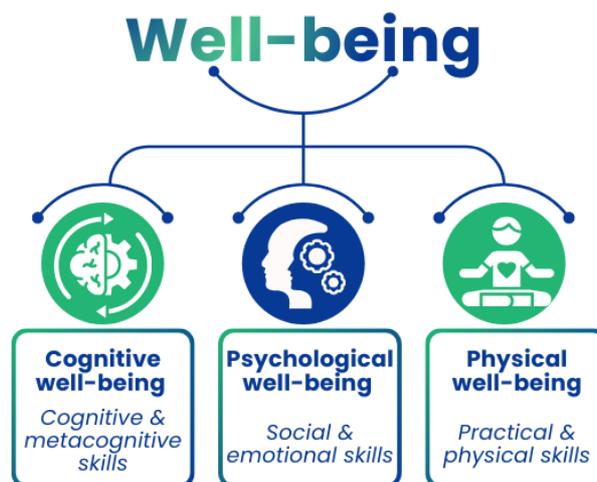
Figure 4 - Well-being explanation.

Individuals usually begin developing different skills during their childhood and adolescence, when foundational abilities are needed. Cognitive skills provide young people with the tools to ensure positive outcomes in school-related subjects, while translating into professional achievement later on. Psychological skills are crucial for developing meaningful connections with family and peers from an early stage, understanding and nurturing relationships, and fostering existing ones in adulthood as well. Lastly, physical skills provide the strength and practical abilities needed to engage with daily life.

A combination of these skills allows individuals to grow in the adult life and live a happy, fulfilling, and healthy life[1].

"[Young people] need to be able to know themselves and their strengths, to regulate their emotions, to deal with loss, change and adversity, to solve problems effectively and to make responsible decisions. They need to believe they can bring about change in their own lives, and remain determined and focused in the face of challenges, as well as being able to build and maintain healthy relationships, be understanding and empathic, and work collaboratively with others. They need to solve conflicts constructively, appreciate and respect differences and diversity, and take care of themselves, others and their environment."

(Cefai et al., 2018)

2.2 Understanding *digital* well-being

Digital technologies and the rise of social media are shaping the lives of children and adolescents, especially over the past decade. Connectivity influences how they learn, interact, and experience the world, adding a new dimension to the skills required for a fulfilling life. For this reason, the concept of well-being in the digital realm is gaining attention, with experts exploring and analysing the characteristics and features of well-being in the digital environment. As this discussion evolves, researchers and policymakers are increasingly debating what digital well-being actually means and how it should be defined in educational and social contexts.

Scholars and practitioners acknowledge that digital well-being is a multi-dimensional and evolving concept, defined in various ways across disciplines. Some definitions emphasise the ethical and societal implications of technology, such as "the impact of digital technologies on what it means to live a life that is good for a human being in an information

Figure 5 - Digital well-being word cloud.

society"[2]. Others focus on the subjective experience of the balance between benefits and drawbacks that arise from digital engagement[3]. Within the digi.well project, a working definition is adopted that builds on this notion of balance: digital well-being is understood as "**children's and young people's individual experience of optional balance between the opportunities and risks of digital technology**"[4]. This approach acknowledges that digital interactions can support learning, creativity, and social connection, while also posing potential challenges such as stress, distraction, social comparison, and also greater risks, such as cyberbullying. From this perspective, digital well-being is not solely about reducing screen time or avoiding risks, but also about **cultivating the skills, awareness, and resilience** needed to navigate digital environments in a healthy and meaningful way. Moreover, it connects to broader education goals: developing cognitive, psychological, and social competencies that allow children and young people to participate confidently and responsibly in a world where offline and online realities increasingly intertwine[5].

Digital well-being: the view of school pupils

Starting from this understanding, the outcomes of the digi.well focus group consultations – carried out to explore school pupils' perspectives on digital well-being – reflect the key themes identified in academic research. Most school pupils consulted had never come across the term "digital well-being", but once they started talking about it, they were able to make connections to their experiences with phones, apps, and online life. For the youngest group, around **11-12 years old**, digital well-being was strongly linked to **safety**: not being bullied, avoiding harmful or upsetting content, and feeling secure online. For them, well-being online simply meant having a good and safe experience. **By ages 13-14**, school pupils were more aware of the issue of screen time and **described digital well-being mostly as limiting their time online so their brains could "rest".**

> [Digital well-being is] knowing how to live without constantly feeling the need to check the phone, get a message, play a game... having a healthy relationship with both.

School pupil, Portugal

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[2] https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30930542/.
[3] https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaa024.
[4] *Ibid*.
[5] https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/projects-and-activities/education-and-training/well-being-education_en.

At the same time, school pupils described that parental control tools cause frustration, with some feeling that these apps invade their privacy and reflect parents/guardians' need for control rather than genuine concern.

Between 14 and 16, school pupils gave a broader perspective. They recognised that phones and digital devices can affect sleep, concentration and daily routines, and described digital well-being as finding a **balance between online and offline life**. For them, it was not just about limiting screen time, but also about developing a healthy relationship with technology, being respectful to others online, protecting their privacy and avoiding dependency. Some confusion around the term itself showed that the topic is rarely addressed at school or at home. **By 16 and older**, school pupils associated digital well-being with both positive and negative experiences: on the one hand, fun, relaxation, and the chance to follow personal interests; on the other, stress, boredom, anxiety, and disrupted sleep. They tended to define it in terms of **how technology makes them feel** – mentally, emotionally, and physically – and stressed the importance of being able to **enjoy technology without losing control**.

Across all ages, even when **school pupils** were not familiar with the term digital well-being, they **showed some awareness of key issues such as screen time, mental health, online safety, and respectful communication.** At the same time, **they often lack concrete resources and personal strategies** to regulate their use and to address challenges effectively.

More broadly, it was clear from the consultations that the way school pupils experience digital devices and the online world is personal and constantly changing. This highlights the importance of understanding both the benefits and challenges of technology use and learning how to manage them. Based on this understanding, it is possible to develop a model of digital well-being that considers individual and social differences in how people balance these trade-offs. Rather than seeing it as a simple cause-and-effect issue, **digital well-being should be understood as a dynamic process shaped by personal habits, device features, and the context in which technology is used.**

Understanding digital well-being from the perspective of teachers and education professionals

When brainstorming about meaning and features of digital well-being, teachers and education professionals provided a series of interpretations.

Teachers involved in the focus group consultations were not fully aware of what digital well-being was; however, they all agreed that digital well-being is closely related to **online safety**. They described it as making informed choices about how to act and behave in the digital world, while being aware of risks, using technology appropriately, and leveraging digital tools in a positive way.

Digital well-being was often understood as the ability to maintain a **healthy balance** between online and offline experiences, ensuring that both contribute meaningfully to an individuals overall quality of life. A balanced use of digital technologies supports, rather than undermines, mental and physical health. It fosters enjoyment while mitigating stress and potential negative consequences. It also involves the integration of technology in a conscious way, respecting individual learning paces and prioritising safety, mental health, and the development of responsible digital skills.

> "
> [Digital well-being] it's about being able to do things online safely, with awareness - knowing how to use tools and understanding the risks.
> "
>
> **Education professional, Portugal**

A number of teachers and education professionals also connected digital well-being in schools with the **need to create a structured and supportive environment** where all participants - school pupils and staff - feel comfortable and engaged, while being able to express themselves and form meaningful and safe connections and relationships.
Furthermore, according to the participants, digital well-being in schools is also associated with achieving learning outcomes and **increasing the quality of learning activities**, both online and offline, by appropriately using digital tools.

Participants agreed that the terminology linked to digital well-being mostly revolves around safety, responsibility and balance but also awareness of the risks and opportunities.
Regardless of the lack of a common definition of digital well-being, overall, they grasped the essential ingredients needed to understand its meaning.

2.3 How does digital technology impact well-being: online opportunities and risks

Recent academic literature highlights the positive potential of digital technologies for young people's learning, socialisation, and psychological development. Papacharissi argues that networked environments can serve as "affective publics", enabling emotional expression, civic participation, and a sense of belonging among young users[6]. Pérez Rastrilla, Sapag, and Recio García similarly note that social media platforms in general foster new forms of creativity and community-building that can empower young people to engage with culture and identity on their own terms[7]. Meanwhile, Livingstone, Stoilova, and Hopwood emphasise that online opportunities play a crucial role in shaping digital well-being[8]. Finally, Hans et al. suggest that when used consciously, digital tools can enhance self-efficacy and autonomy, supporting the development of healthy digital habits[9].

At the same time, scholars have also drawn attention to the complex risks that accompany young people's increasing engagement with digital technologies. While digital environments can foster connection and self-expression, they also expose children and adolescents to a range of psychological, social, and physical challenges. Livingstone, Stoilova, and Hopwood underline the importance of distinguishing between "risk" and "harm", noting that not all risky encounters online lead to negative outcomes but can still create stress and emotional discomfort for young users[10]. Marwick and Lewis further discuss how online platforms amplify pressures linked to visibility, social comparison, and reputation management, often heightening vulnerability among adolescents[11]. Moreover, Hans et al. identify how design features of digital applications (notifications, endless scrolling, and variable rewards) are intentionally built to sustain engagement, contributing to addictive and compulsive use[12].

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[6] https://academic.oup.com/book/26400.
[7] https://www.springerprofessional.de/en/fast-politics/26193032.
[8] https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/71817.
[9] https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/10486603.
[10] https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/71817.
[11] https://datasociety.net/library/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/.
[12] https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/10486603.

The impact of digital technology on well-being: the view of school pupils

The focus group consultations with young people largely confirmed that online opportunities often contribute positively to their well-being, influencing not only their digital lives but also their emotional and physical health.

As school pupils themselves explained, the **digital world is not experienced as something separate from their daily life.** For them, it is part of how they socialise, learn, and explore their identities. When asked about how they spend their time on digital devices, school pupils in the consultations confirmed that they use a combination of platforms, including TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Discord. For these pupils, the main reason to use digital devices and social platforms is to **socialise with peers and friends**, while also making new connections with others through the same hobbies and platforms. The potential of the Internet to connect individuals through the same passions and hobbies was seen by participants as a key aspect of their overall well-being. The possibility to stay connected with friends was a great advantage for all pupils, regardless of their age.

Digital platforms and social media are not used with the sole purpose of chatting with friends, but also to **explore identity, deal with boredom, and find entertainment, listen to music and gather information**. A number of school pupils mentioned that platforms like YouTube and music streaming apps were used for relaxation. Digital platforms give them the possibility to expand their knowledge, **discover new hobbies**, and **foster their soft and hard skills**. School-related uses were also common, especially in the 13–15 group, who mentioned tools such as ChatGPT or homework group chats. Digital tools play a key role in activities like **researching**, submitting assignments, and coordinating with classmates, especially when catching up on missed work or sharing notes.

With this being said, just as digital technologies can offer valuable opportunities, the school pupils consulted acknowledged the challenges presented by the digital world, and how this can affect their well-being. Understanding these challenges from the young people's perspective helps to appreciate the full spectrum of digital experiences and to inform strategies that promote a balanced and healthy engagement with technology. In particular, school pupils identified four risks they constantly face in the digital environment, potentially undermining their well-being.

A. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying emerged as the most emotionally significant. Many school pupils described experiences or concerns related to **being mocked, excluded or targeted**

online, particularly through social media platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram and class group chats on messaging apps. The expectation of constant availability and instant replies contributed to a sense of pressure and hypervigilance. Participants reported that delayed responses could lead to misunderstandings, conflict or even social sanctions. For some, the fear of being left out or the experience of being gossiped about in group messages had a direct negative impact on their self-esteem and mental health. Girls in particular voiced concerns about **social surveillance**, the **spread of rumours**, **emotional harm** from harsh or insincere comments and even the **sharing of fake images generated by artificial intelligence**. These risks were not limited to explicit bullying but extended to the emotional consequences of constantly successfully performing in the digital environment, such as the pressure to monitor likes or views and compare oneself to idealised portrayals of peers. The possibility of anonymity and temporary message tools makes it difficult to track the aggressions, rendering school pupils powerless to the attacks.

B. Excessive screen time

An important theme discussed in the focus group consultations with the school pupils, especially with older pupils, was their growing awareness of how digital habits impact well-being. Many described **feeling tired, distracted, or emotionally drained** after long periods online. They connected feelings of anxiety, sadness, loneliness, or low self-esteem to very specific digital practices: **comparing themselves** with idealised images, worrying about missing out on group chats, or feeling the **pressure** to be constantly available.

Intensive use of digital devices was also linked to **physical consequences** such as fatigue, sleep disturbances (difficulty falling asleep, shorter or poor-quality sleep, etc.), headaches, limited concentration and lower energy levels throughout the day. Eye strain, poor posture, and even "smartphone pinky"[13] were also mentioned. Moreover, school pupils shared that excessive screen time often reduced opportunities for physical activities and time spent outdoors, negatively affecting their overall sense of well-being.

C. Addictive features on social media platform

School pupils described the design of digital platforms in ways that encourage compulsive and prolonged use as a major risk. Features such as **infinite scroll, autoplay, constant notifications and algorithm-driven content loops** are deliberately engineered to capture and sustain attention. Many school pupils, particularly those aged 14-18, described experiencing "**addiction**" to certain apps, especially TikTok and Instagram, often using expressions like "**doomscrolling**" or

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[13] A discomfort or pain in the pinky finger caused by supporting the weight of a device or overusing it during texting.

"**brainrot**" to refer to emotionally numbing digital consumption. While some pupils had adopted strategies such as turning off notifications or deleting apps, others continue to face challenges, highlighting a lack of personal tools, skills and strategies to manage their own digital behaviours.

These platforms were recognised not just as time-fillers, but as actively disruptive to sleep, concentration and real-life interactions. What is also notable is the level of self-awareness, as several school pupils acknowledged checking their phones automatically, without intention or purpose, and later realised that hours had passed. Compulsive usage was rarely about accessing meaningful content, but rather about repetitive, passive scrolling driven by platform mechanics. This highlights a structural risk embedded in platform design, alongside the general algorithm-based content structure, which may be especially detrimental to pupils whose self-regulation is still developing.

Understanding screen time: quality vs quantity

Physical and mental well-being of school pupils can be influenced by their interactions with digital technologies and online content. The average time children and young people spend online has nearly doubled over the past decade; during lockdown periods, teenagers reported spending around 6.5 to 7 hours per weekday online, with approximately half of that time related to school activities.

However, researchers caution against interpreting screen time as a simple predictor of mental health outcomes. Scholars such as Livingstone, Stoilova, and Hopwood argue that **screentime in itself is not inherently harmful and that its impact on well-being depends on a range of contextual factors, including content type, purpose, and social context**[14]. Similarly, Hans et al. note that excessive or unregulated digital engagement, particularly when driven by addictive design features, can disrupt sleep patterns, concentration, and emotional balance[15]. Nevertheless, moderate and purposeful use of screens can facilitate learning, creativity, and social connection, particularly when guided by supportive adults[16].

Importantly, the academic literature distinguishes between "general screen time" (the total duration of device use) and "social media use" (a specific subset often involving interpersonal and algorithmic interaction). While both can affect mental well-being, their mechanisms differ: the former relates to exposure and time management, whereas the latter involves social comparison, feedback loops, and identity performance[17].

Recent research, therefore, suggests that **rather than focusing on how much time young people spend online, it is more meaningful to examine how and why they engage with digital media**. Terms like "screen time" or "time spent on social media", when used uncritically, risk oversimplifying this complexity. As Livingstone and colleagues highlight, such measures can blur the line between positive, neutral, and risky online experiences, overlooking critical factors such as digital literacy, emotional regulation, and the quality of interactions[18]. A more balanced approach recognises that online engagement exists along a spectrum, from enriching educational and social experiences to patterns of overuse that may compromise well-being. The challenge for educators, policymakers, and parents/guardians lies not in reducing all screen time but in helping school pupils cultivate meaningful, balanced, and reflective digital habits[19].

From the perspective of the school pupils in the consultations, the youngest participants (ages 11–12) generally described more structured and limited use of screens, shaped by parental rules or limitations. Older adolescents (13–15 and 16-18 in different ways) reported a more autonomous relationship with digital media, often spending several hours daily online for communication, entertainment, and exploration. Many school pupils also admitted that they frequently switch between tasks or are distracted by notifications, which makes it hard to stay focused. For them, the line between productive and passive use is often unclear. However, it was evident that, for them, screen time should not be judged only by its quantity, but rather by its quality – by considering what activities they engage in on social media or while using the Internet.

14 https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/71817.
15 https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/10486603.
16 https://www.springerprofessional.de/en/fast-politics/26193032.
17 https://datasociety.net/library/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/.
18 https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/71817.
19 https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC124034.

It's not through screen-time limits that we're going to change habits.

School pupil, Portugal

D. Exposure to harmful or inappropriate content (including violent, disturbing or sexual material)

Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Twitter and anonymous video chat apps (such as OmeTV) were mentioned as common sources of **violent content**, **often encountered unintentionally**. School pupils referenced videos of physical aggression, accidents or suggestive content, some of which provoked **fear** or **anxiety**. This exposure was especially impactful when it occurred without warning or during late-night use.

> "On a specific day in April, a platform threw out a lot of violent and upsetting content [graphic content of flights and car crashes] for one whole day to me and everyone I know."
>
> **School pupil, Serbia**

Though not always labelled explicitly as trauma, many school pupils described these encounters as emotionally unsettling or intrusive. According to several pupils, these risks are closely connected to how social media platforms work and their algorithms.

In conclusion, the risks that school pupils face online do not stem from a single source, and the benefits they gain are equally multifaceted, reflecting a complex, interconnected ecosystem of emotional, social and behavioural pressures. **While digital technology can expose school pupils to pressure and stress, it also offers connection, information, emotional support, and opportunities to develop hard and soft skills**. Consultations indicate that many school pupils are increasingly aware of the challenges linked to their digital habits, and while some are already experimenting with self-regulation strategies, they often do so without structured support or practical tools to manage these challenges effectively.

Young participants also expressed frustration with oversimplified narratives about digital use, such as "phones are bad" or "phones are everything". For many, **maintaining a balanced relationship with technology is what matters most** – not just the time spent online, but the quality of that time. They pointed out that digital engagement is a complex, context-dependent experience: it is not completely harmful or completely beneficial, and its impact on their digital well-being depends on what they do, how they feel while doing it, and the context around it.

Understanding how digital technology impact school pupils' digital well-being from the perspective of teachers and education professionals

The findings from focus groups conducted with school teachers, education professionals, and key stakeholders revealed a deep alignment with the concerns expressed by the school pupils, particularly in relation to cyberbullying.

This convergence is both encouraging and concerning. On the one hand, it shows that **teachers and education professionals highlighted the potential of digital technologies** to enhance learning, foster creativity, and support personalised educational experiences, enabling school pupils to develop skills such as collaboration, problem-solving, and self-directed learning. On the other hand, **participants are increasingly aware of the digital risks that school pupils face, which reflects a growing sensitivity to the challenges of the online environment.**

While school pupils focused on the immediate risks of digital life (such as cyberbullying or social media conflicts), they did not always articulate the deeper psychological consequences. In contrast, teachers – who witness these impacts first-hand – were able to delve more deeply into the emotional and developmental toll of digital engagement. They reported a range of concerning effects, including digital dependency, anxiety, sleep disturbances, low self-esteem, and body image concerns. Additional issues such as difficulty concentrating, reduced face-to-face interaction, addiction, and overexposure were also noted. A particularly troubling trend is the growing sense of impunity among school pupils online, especially on social media platforms, where harmful or hurtful comments are made with little regard for consequences. This is often accompanied by a lack of empathy and an inability to recognise the impact of one's digital behaviour on others.

> *They feel immune to risks, especially if they're the ones harming someone else. They say 'If I do this, nothing's going to happen. No one will know'.*
>
> **Education professional, Portugal**

Moreover, teachers highlighted the influence of socio-economic factors on school pupils' digital experiences. Family instability, low self-esteem, and the need for validation online were identified as common challenges, particularly among school pupils with limited access to enriching offline alternatives. These factors compound the risks and make it more difficult for some school pupils to disengage from harmful digital patterns.

Another critical insight from the focus groups was the seemingly superficial nature of school pupils' digital proficiency. While many **school pupils** are adept at navigating digital tools and platforms, their skills often lack depth. They **may be technically competent but frequently lack the critical thinking needed to understand the ethical, legal, and emotional implications of their online behaviour.** Rather than engaging actively and creatively, school pupils tend to consume content passively, with limited reflection or awareness. This gap between technical ability and responsible digital citizenship underscores the urgent need for educational interventions that foster deeper digital literacy, critical engagement, and emotional intelligence. At the same time, participants noted that pupils' adaptability to digital tools presents unique opportunities for peer-led learning, collaborative projects, and student mentorship programmes, where pupils can share expertise and develop creative solutions under teacher guidance. Positive examples shared included student-led WhatsApp communities used to circulate relevant information and online workshops that promote ethical digital behaviour, demonstrating that guided digital engagement can enhance responsibility, leadership, and practical skills.

3. Digital well-being in the school context

Well-being is widely understood as a dynamic and multi-dimensional process, shaped by the interplay of individual, relational, and contextual factors. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental well-being involves the ability to realise one's potential, cope effectively with life's challenges, and contribute to one's community.

Within the school setting, well-being includes active participation, a sense of belonging, emotional regulation, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and autonomy, all of which are central to school pupils' engagement and learning outcomes[20].

"Well-being in digital environment in school concerns the well-being of students and teachers in school within their broader digital lives. It includes wider issues such as excessive screen time, cyberbullying, digital distractions, data privacy and the psychological impact of digital interactions. It covers both educational activities (e.g., using learning platforms, working on subject-specific and personalised learning applications) and non-educational activities (e.g., social media use, games, digital communication)." [21]

A growing body of evidence highlights the **key role of school climate in promoting well-being among both school pupils and teachers**. Schools are not only places of academic instruction but also crucial environments for developing social and emotional skills such as empathy, resilience, and cooperation. Studies show that a positive and inclusive school atmosphere is strongly associated with higher motivation, lower stress levels, and greater life satisfaction[22]. At the same time, a negative climate, marked by exclusion or weak teacher-student relationships, can increase anxiety and diminish school pupils' academic performance[23].

With digital technologies now deeply incorporated in pupils' daily lives, **schools carry an increasing responsibility to address how online engagement affects overall well-being.** Experiences in digital spaces, whether social interaction, gaming, or exposure to online risks, often spill over into classroom behaviour, concentration, and emotional stability. Livingstone and Stoilova emphasise that such digital experiences are situated within broader social systems, meaning that digital well-being must be integrated into the wider educational and emotional context[24]. Schools, therefore, play a pivotal role in

[20] https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240049338.

[21] http://www.eun.org/resources/detail?publicationID=2741.

[22] https://dynamicsandlearning.com/en/.

[23] https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/educating-21st-century-children_b7f33425-en.html.

[24] https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/71817.

helping pupils interpret and manage their digital experiences. Promoting empathy, inclusion, and responsible digital citizenship enables school pupils to navigate online spaces with confidence.

In a digitally connected world, **schools must evolve into adaptive social ecosystems** that prepare school pupils for life both online and offline. By helping school pupils critically evaluate digital content, manage online pressures, and maintain emotional balance, schools can play a transformative role in fostering digital well-being and preparing them to thrive in a digital society.

3.1 Addressing digital well-being in schools: problems

Despite growing awareness of the importance of digital well-being, many teachers, education professionals and key stakeholders across the focus group consultations pointed to significant systemic barriers that hinder their ability to implement effective practices in the classroom:

- o **Lack of coordinated frameworks.** While some EU countries have developed national policies addressing digital well-being, their implementation is frequently inconsistent. **Responsibility is often delegated to individual schools without clear frameworks**, adequate funding, or robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. This system leaves many schools, and consequently teachers, without the tools or confidence to translate policy into practice. Moreover, the absence of systematic data collection and impact assessment makes it difficult to evaluate what works and where improvements are needed.

- o **Lack of structural support, infrastructure and equipment.** Participants highlighted **insufficient guidance, limited access to relevant resources and adequate equipment**, as well as a lack of dedicated time within their professional routines to address digital well-being meaningfully. A number of participants in the consultations also highlighted that older teachers are worried by the vast digital offer and feel hesitant to take the first step, especially without appropriate training on digital well-being. As a result, digital well-being often remains an aspirational goal rather than an integrated component of school life.

- o **Outdated nature of curriculum content.** Participants called for curricula that are quality-led, expert-informed, and value-conscious, reflecting the evolving digital landscape and the ethical, emotional, and social dimensions of digital life. **Current curricula often fail to address the complexities of school pupils' digital experiences**, leaving teachers to fill the gaps without adequate support.

o **Lack of consistent and up-to-date training for teachers**. Teacher training, where available, is often described as **inconsistent, overly theoretical, or disconnected from classroom realities**. Many teachers and education professionals reported that training lacked follow-up, was not adapted to their specific school contexts, or failed to provide actionable strategies. Teachers and educators **strive for quality content, training materials, and guidance on how to use them effectively**. Providing only hardware and software materials, without any guidance and support on how to effectively use them, is not successful and it will not provide teachers and educators with the appropriate tools to address digital education with the school pupils. In line with this problem, school pupils admitted they do not feel supported or understood by teachers in this area. Teachers are often seen as unfamiliar with the realities of school pupils' online lives, and relationships are described as too formal to allow meaningful conversations. Many school pupils also stressed that teachers should model healthy digital habits – for example, by limiting their own phone use in class – and listen without judgment.

o **Lack of time and overwhelming schedules**. Without dedicated space to process and discuss digital well-being challenges, teachers struggle to integrate new knowledge into their practice or to respond effectively to emerging issues among school pupils. A commonly expressed issue by teachers is the **overload of tasks and the risk of burnout due to digital demands**, including numerous internal messaging groups and high expectations with little support. While schools offer some digital training, it often focuses on technical use rather than addressing burnout, emotional regulation, or online risks. Teachers emphasised the pressure of being constantly available to school pupils and parents/guardians, highlighting the need for "organisational etiquette" to protect personal time.

> *[Sometimes I don't have] a moment of the day that's completely my own, where I can fully relax.*
>
> *Education professional, Serbia*

3.2 Addressing digital well-being in schools: strategies

Teachers and education professionals participating in the focus groups not only identified the problems in addressing digital well-being in schools but also discussed a number of strategies that could help to overcome existing barriers.

Overall, they highlighted the need for a more **comprehensive policy framework** addressing digital well-being within their schools and pointed to the importance of turning policies into concrete actions, across a number of dimensions:

o **Building common digital frameworks and guidelines**. School leadership and administration should take into consideration aspects of well-being when **investing in digital equipment and developing acceptable use policies**. This is not just about the need to reflect on the role of digital technology in the school infrastructure, but also about online safety and risk prevention policies that promote safe and responsible digital behaviours, while finding ways to be inclusive towards school pupils from disadvantaged or vulnerable backgrounds. Education is a key strategy to help develop healthy digital habits before negative behaviours are established. **Structured programmes in preschool and primary years could play a significant role in preventing unhealthy digital habits.** Core topics – such as psychology, ethics, boundaries, friendship, and privacy – should be introduced from early childhood onwards and embedded within a broader curriculum for digital citizenship. School pupils across age groups expressed a clear desire for digital well-being to be addressed more meaningfully within the school context. Rather than isolated lessons only on Internet safety or media literacy, they called for **integrated approaches that treat digital well-being as a central theme across subjects**, with real-life examples – such as scams, privacy risks, or online posts – helping make lessons relevant. Pupils also highlighted the importance of safe spaces for open dialogue through classroom discussions, school-wide projects, or anonymous question tools.
Alongside these educational strategies, the use of digital devices further supports pupil's development. Digital **personalised learning tools**, especially for different age groups, are particularly effective for helping pupils learn at their own pace. Participants also noted the potential for inclusion and diverse learning of digital tools like ChatGPT, videos and collaborative platforms. Engaging school pupils in projects that **use digital tools creatively** can enhance motivation, self-expression, and responsible use, while pupils asked for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms behind digital platforms, including persuasive design and algorithmic manipulation, alongside strategies to better manage their own use.

o **Professional development and training opportunities**. Alongside infrastructure and policy, there is a strong need for more structured, quality-oriented professional development and training opportunities, aimed at identifying a series of possible strategies to face the lack of knowledge and understanding of digital well-being among teachers. Participants stressed that professional development must be aligned with both school pupils' needs and local school realities. **Trainings for teachers should be practical**, **continuous, age-specific and embedded within the school context**, with opportunities for hands-on experimentation, reflection, and teamwork. The training should focus in a clear and user-friendly manner on the topic of digital well-being and its features. There was a consensus **that a one-size-fits-all training would be ineffective**, particularly in schools that are diverse from a socio-economic or cultural point of view. Participants also emphasised that trainings should be provided with a pedagogical vision in applying digital well-being, to provide the school professionals with both clear operational guidance and the tools to address the topic with the school pupils, especially when working in a vulnerable context. Participants also highlighted that trainings are not the only source of knowledge to better understand the topic of digital well-being in the digital environment. To enhance understanding of digital well-being in the school environment, education professionals suggested the introduction of **mentoring programmes**. These could include both peer and cross-generational mentoring, such as teacher-to-teacher or student-to-student approaches, allowing participants to support one another and gain a well-rounded and inclusive perspective on the topic.

Education professionals also shared personal strategies to manage their digital habits and well-being, such as **turning off notifications**, **scheduling emails**, **creating tech-free zones**, and **removing work apps** from personal devices. However, these coping mechanisms were developed informally through peer exchange, not through structured training. Integrating these personal strategies with structured professional development and mentoring programmes can help teachers better support both their own and pupils' digital well-being.

o **Co-creating education practices with school pupils.** For what concerns cross-generational mentoring, education professionals also underlined the need for school pupils' involvement. Emotional and psychological dimensions must be strengthened, and school pupils should be actively engaged not just as beneficiaries but as co-creators of solutions. Participants therefore proposed **involving pupils in the co-creation of measures** through mechanisms such as focus groups, school parliaments, and student-led initiatives. Co-creating lessons with them can foster a sense of ownership and relevance. As part of these participatory approaches, participants also emphasised the importance of peer-

led initiatives such as youth ambassador programmes, volunteering opportunities, offline community-building activities, and the promotion of positive digital narratives. Creating safe spaces for dialogue, where pupils feel heard and respected, is essential.

> **It would be very interesting to have peer-sharing groups in schools, facilitated by teachers with specific skills and a talent for this type of dialogue [on digital well-being].**
>
> **Education professional, Portugal**

Promoting digital well-being requires continuous awareness and collaborative learning between adults and school pupils. There was strong interest in **peer-to-peer learning models**, which were seen as practical, scalable, and adaptable to different contexts. These models could involve school pupils mentoring each other, teachers learning from pupils, or families engaging in intergenerational digital education.

o **Involving parents and guardians**. Teachers and school pupils alike called for stronger family-school cooperation, including **positive parenting programmes** and **informal opportunities for parental engagement** beyond traditional meetings. Many teachers and education professionals raised concerns about the lack of parental knowledge and understanding of their children's digital lives. Many school pupils said they would turn to their parents/guardians for support but also acknowledged that they often lack the knowledge to guide them effectively. Parents/guardians seem overwhelmed by the digital landscape that children and young people nowadays navigate and are uncomfortable having an ongoing dialogue about their online experiences. While some parents/guardians seem genuinely concerned, many seem to rely on teachers and the school to foster the required knowledge, skills and attitudes to act safely and responsibly in a digital world. Meanwhile, it typically proves challenging to actively engage parents/guardians in school workshops or other activities on these topics. Against this background, teachers and education professionals provided some ideas to have parents/guardians more involved and engaged, such as a **role-playing workshop for parents/guardians and school pupils together**, allowing them distance where they do not have to be vulnerable and speak about personal experiences, but still allow them to experience and discuss these topics. **Intergenerational learning** was highlighted as a promising approach that could be applied not only in school environments but also within families. Such

initiatives not only bridge generational gaps but also reinforce pupils' sense of responsibility and competence. Moreover, according to the participants, an efficient strategy to have parents/guardians engaged in the conversation would be to provide concrete examples of incidents from the national context; otherwise, they feel as if these issues are something distant that would never happen to them. Pupils' digital habits are shaped by their home environment, parental presence, family structure, and mental health. Parents/guardians often range from being overly restrictive to unaware, with a limited understanding of digital platforms and online risks. This can lead to low sensitivity to online violence and a tendency to shift responsibility to schools or digital tools. School pupils also proposed involving families directly in digital well-being initiatives – through **awareness campaigns**, **social media content**, **posters**, and **joint school-family activities**. They emphasised that quality time, clear routines, and shared offline experiences at home can reinforce what is taught in school.

> *We rarely have time to stop and think about digital well-being together, and it's really necessary. It would be very positive to involve parents and students in these conversations too.*
>
> **Education professional, Portugal**

In conclusion, **strengthening digital well-being in schools requires whole-school engagement and coordinated efforts across sectors**, not only among teachers and school pupils. Leadership, teachers, counsellors, families, and local organisations all contribute to safe, inclusive, and supportive digital environments.

Professional development and mentoring can equip teachers with the knowledge, tools, and time to integrate digital well-being into practice, while personal strategies can be reinforced through training. Pupils should be involved as co-creators of lessons and peer-to-peer initiatives, fostering ownership and positive digital habits. Engaging parents through workshops, intergenerational learning, and awareness campaigns can reinforce pupils' competencies and align school and home practices.

By combining policy, training, and practical strategies for both teachers and pupils, schools can promote responsible, balanced, and resilient use of digital technologies, ensuring well-being for the entire school community.

digi.well

Connecting problems and strategies: a brief summary

Problems	Strategies
Lack of coordinated frameworks	Building common digital frameworks and guidelines that include online safety and risk prevention measures to promote responsible digital behaviour, while adopting a whole-school approach that engages leadership, teachers, pupils, and parents/guardians to establish a shared vision of using digital media in a balanced, reflective, and purposeful way in education.
Lack of structural support, infrastructure and equipment	Building common digital frameworks and guidelines that take into consideration aspects of well-being when investing in digital equipment and developing acceptable use policies, while creating personalised and age-tailored education programmes that foster healthy digital habits and digital well-being by providing learning tools to be used ethically and creatively.
Outdated nature of curriculum content	Innovating the curriculum content by co-creating education practices and measures with school pupils through mechanisms such as focus groups, school parliaments, and student-led initiatives, while also involving teachers, parents and guardians in the process for a whole-school approach to digital well-being.
Lack of consistent and up-to-date training for teachers	Providing structured, quality-oriented professional development and training opportunities aiming at identifying a series of possible strategies to face the lack of knowledge and understanding of digital well-being among teachers.
Lack of time and overwhelming schedules.	Integrating teachers' personal strategies to manage digital habits and well-being (i.e. turning off notifications, scheduling emails, creating tech-free zones, and removing work apps from personal devices, etc.) with structured professional development and mentoring programmes.

What do teachers and education professionals think about the mobile phone ban in schools?

Overall, it was clear from the focus group consultations that mobile phone bans are now being widely considered and implemented across the EU, with approaches ranging from high-level legislative mandates, to more practical school-level guidelines.

A majority of teachers and education professionals involved in the focus groups broadly supported policies which aim to restrict the use of mobile phone by pupils in schools. At the same time, many felt banning mobile phones was an insufficient measure on its own to address the issue of digital well-being, as it oversimplifies its broader educational and emotional dimensions.

Within this context, a number of education professionals indicated that restrictions can contribute positively to school pupils' well-being, especially in managing distraction and promoting healthier habits. However, in their respective country experiences, the result of mobile phone bans in schools has often resulted in teachers no longer perceiving digital well-being as their responsibility. This was seen as a barrier to promoting meaningful digital education.

Participants emphasised that **schools must remain central in developing digital resilience and literacy,** and that teachers need both tools and confidence to take on this role. The ban efficiency should also be put into context when considering the educational setting, such as schools with a higher percentage of school pupils in vulnerable conditions.

Rather than restricting access to technology, a more effective approach is to promote balanced, informed use. This includes supporting school pupils in developing critical thinking, emotional regulation, and healthy online habits – skills essential for navigating today's digital world.

Overall, the vision of educational professionals is of a **pro-active and hands-on approach to digital well-being**: one that combines guidance with **real-world relevance**, creates **opportunities for dialogue,** and offers engaging, collaborative, and **empowering activities both at school and beyond.**

4. Conclusions

4.1 Main takeaways

The consensus emerging both from the academic literature we have reviewed and the participants in our focus groups is clear: children and young people inevitably experience both opportunities and risks online, and may have a substantial impact on their physical and mental well-being in the offline world too. For school pupils, from an early age onwards, digital participation and engagement are a normal, valuable part of their everyday life. The primary question is not how to restrict access to the digital world, but how to make their use of digital technology – in and outside the school – part of a healthy lifestyle.

Within this context, **school pupils and education professionals broadly agreed on the importance of digital well-being**, which they understood as a mix of three interrelated components: safety, balance and responsibility. Both teachers and pupils, especially the older ones, demonstrated a growing awareness of online risks and challenges. This inter-generational alignment may help to underpin the development of effective policies and strategies within the school environment.

As such, children and young people can be considered an active and thoughtful stakeholder in shaping healthier digital cultures. They want to be directly involved in the **design of educational content and strategies**, providing their point of view on digital well-being, and how to promote it in a school environment, emphasising ingredients such as relevance, respect, and co-responsibility. This would grant teachers a more concrete understanding of the online experiences of their pupils, and the tools the school can offer to help pupils find a proper balance between the benefits and drawbacks that arise from digital engagement. In the meantime, teachers strive for more comprehensive, pedagogically oriented **professional development opportunities** as well. This need for training again relates to the importance of finding better ways to connect with each other's perspective, while creating more open communication channels – with a trusted person for every pupil to reach out to, if they are in need of support.

More broadly, a **whole-school approach** will help to start from a commonly shared vision on what it means **to use digital media in a balanced, reflective, and purposeful manner** in education. Our focus groups demonstrate how schools and teachers need guidance and support on how to develop high-quality and appropriate policy frameworks and procedures, and how to turn these into real and tangible actions. Child-centred frameworks and curricula – which prioritise digital skills and literacies,

socio-emotional learning and youth agency, and which can be tailored to the needs of vulnerable pupils in particular – are more promising than punitive or overly protective measures. This whole-school approach should be horizontal – rather than top-down or vertical – with school professionals, teachers and school pupils all sharing responsibility and duties, especially when it comes to training and mentoring, with many opportunities for mutual learning and co-creation. Within this context, there is a need not just to involve pupils, teachers and education professionals, but also the wider range of actors and stakeholder who play a role school pupils' offline and online lives. The family environment in particular is crucial when it comes to learning and well-being. Teachers and education professionals are therefore looking for **tailored programmes for parents and carers**, to provide them with tools and guidance to support their children finding a healthy lifestyle.

Last but not least, implementing a holistic approach in education that meaningfully engages school pupils, teachers, school leaders, and policymakers is a complex and often underestimated challenge. While the concept is widely embraced in theory, translating it into practice requires more than just good intentions. It demands **structured collaboration**, open dialogue, and a shared vision among all stakeholders. Each group brings unique perspectives and needs, and aligning these within a coherent strategy calls for time, trust, and sustained commitment.

Figure 6 - *Whole-school approach to digital well-being.*

4.2 The digi.well approach to digital well-being

A whole school approach to digital well-being

Exploring digital well-being in school environments has been essential for gaining a clear understanding of how school pupils, teachers, and other school professionals experience and perceive well-being in a digital context. Insights gathered through research and stakeholder consultations highlighted current strengths, gaps, and priorities, providing a solid foundation for the planning and implementation of the digi.well project.

The digi.well project, as introduced at the beginning of this report, aims to support schools in developing and fostering a whole-school approach to well-being in a digital world by addressing the needs of school pupils, teachers, and the broader school community.

To achieve this goal, the project translates research and insights into concrete actions. This includes the development of a Self-assessment tool that allows schools to evaluate their current digital well-being approach across specific areas: leadership, infrastructure, policies, and teaching practices. In addition, schools will receive guidance, training, and practical materials to help identify areas for improvement and design effective action plans.

The project also emphasises collaboration and wider stakeholder involvement. Parents/guardians, external organisations, and specialised services such as counselling and online safety helplines will be engaged to ensure a holistic approach. Complementing the core activities, capacity-building initiatives and outreach activities will be implemented to involve a broader range of stakeholders and enhance the overall impact of digital well-being across school communities (see figure 4).

Figure 7 - *digi.well project objectives.*

The digi.well Self-assessment tool and Action plan

Building on research insights and consultations with the school communities, the digi.well project recognises the need for practical tools that allow schools to assess and improve their digital well-being approach. To address this need, the project is developing a Self-assessment tool designed to move beyond stand-alone or single-component interventions, supporting a whole-school approach to digital well-being.

The Self-assessment tool will guide schools in identifying strengths and areas for improvement through a comprehensive framework structured around four complementary areas:

o **Leadership:** Assesses the adoption of a whole-school approach to digital well-being, incorporating the experiences and needs of school pupils and teachers, and mobilising the wider school community, including parents/guardians, professionals, and external stakeholders.

o **Infrastructure & Equipment:** Relates to the need to reflect on the role of digital technology within the school's infrastructure, ensuring that well-being considerations are integrated when investing in connectivity, digital equipment, access to online resources or platforms for online teaching and learning.

- o **Policy:** Refers to the kind of policies the school has in place in connection with various aspects of digital well-being and how these policies are being implemented and evaluated in practice.
- o **Practice:** Considers how teachers integrate well-being into their use of digital technology in the classroom, including reflection on pedagogical value and awareness-raising on online risks and benefits.

The Self-assessment tool will be complemented by an Action plan providing schools with guidance on steps to improve digital well-being across the entire school environment. Drawing on the experience of project partners, research, and European best practices, it supports schools in understanding the impact of the digital environment, developing effective policies and preventive programmes, promoting a healthy digital culture – including cooperation, safety, and a balanced attitude towards technology – and monitoring progress through evaluation tools linked to the self-assessment.

Developing a tool that is entirely consistent across national contexts can be challenging. In addition to language differences, there are structural, cultural, and educational specificities that require more than simple adjustments. Therefore, the Self-assessment tool and the Action plan will be designed with flexibility in mind, allowing for contextual adaptation while maintaining a shared European framework for digital well-being.

Accordingly, the tools will be available in different national versions. The English version will serve as a common reference, while the Portuguese, Serbian, and Slovenian versions will include tailored adaptations and examples that reflect national education systems, priorities, and needs.

The digi.well report provides a theoretical and empirical backbone for the digi.well Self-assessment tool and Action plan, which will be made available on www.digiwell.eun.org in Spring 2026.

Annexes

These annexes provide, first, an overview of the EU policy framework on digital well-being, which offers a shared foundation for promoting safe, inclusive, and supportive digital learning environments, and second, national examples from Portugal, Serbia, and Slovenia, illustrating how EU visions are adapted locally in diverse ways.

The European policy context for digital well-being in education

Schools play a central role in promoting mental health and digital well-being among children and young people, who spend most of their developmental years in educational settings. This aligns with the ambitions of the European Education Area (Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training)[25], which highlights well-being as central to high-quality, inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Across the European Union, digital well-being has become a key priority within education, children's rights, and digital citizenship. Although there is **no single EU-level definition**, it is generally understood as the ability to use technology **safely, meaningfully, and with balance,** in ways that support mental, emotional, social and cognitive health (DEAP, BIK+, DigComp, DigCompEdu).

Strategic EU frameworks supporting digital well-being

Digital Education Action Plan

As the main EU reference point for digital education, the **Digital Education Action Plan** underscores the importance of equipping learners with both digital skills and **emotional resilience**. It promotes **inclusive, safe, and empowering digital education,** addressing challenges like misinformation, cyberbullying, and online safety. Schools, therefore, are uniquely positioned to act as protective environments that promote critical thinking, empathy, and digital literacy, helping school pupils to thrive both offline and online[26].

The Council of the European Union Conclusions on supporting well-being in digital education

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[25] https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea/strategic-framework.
[26] https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan.

The Council of the European Union calls for a holistic approach to well-being in digital education, encouraging Member States to:

- o Strengthen school pupils' emotional resilience.
- o Empower teachers through professional development.
- o Promote whole-school approaches involving families and communities[27].

Competence frameworks underpinning digital school practices

Although not exclusively focused on well-being, EU competence frameworks increasingly integrate aspects of safe, ethical and balanced technology use:

- o **The DigComp -** digital competence framework for all citizens, including safety, well-being and responsible online engagement[28].
- o **DigCompEdu** – supports teachers in promoting ethical, safe and balanced digital practices in the classroom[29].
- o **SELFIE** – whole-school tools to reflect on digital maturity, including responsible use and well-being elements[30].

These frameworks guide schools in embedding safe, healthy and meaningful digital practices into everyday learning.

Child-centred and online safety-focused EU initiatives

Better Internet for Kids (BIK) places children's rights and well-being at the centre of the digital ecosystem. It promotes:

- o Safer and age-appropriate online environments.
- o High-quality digital experiences for learning, creativity and participation.
- o Strong support infrastructures (Safer Internet Centres, helplines, hotlines)[31].

BIK is supported by the **Digital Services Act**, which increases platform accountability and contributes to a safer digital experience for young users[32].

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[27] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/11/28/eu-highlights-the-importance-of-well-being-in-digital-education/.
[28] https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC144121.
[29] https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC107466.
[30] https://education.ec.europa.eu/selfie.
[31] https://better-internet-for-kids.europa.eu/en/about.
[32] https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package.

EU funding supporting digital well-being

European Union funding programmes such as **Erasmus+**[33] and **Horizon Europe**[34] continue to support projects addressing aspects of digital well-being, online safety and balanced technology use, with multiple **cross-country collaborations** exploring issues such as:

- o Safer digital school environments.
- o Mental and emotional resilience online.
- o Digital citizenship and media literacy.
- o Peer-to-pear approaches to digital well-being.

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[33] https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/grants/2021-2027/erasmus_en.
[34] https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en.

Portugal: Policy context for digital well-being in education

National context

The Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation (MECI) leads national efforts on **Digital Citizenship Education** and **digital well-being**. Work is done in collaboration with national and European partners (CIS.PT, BIK, Council of Europe). Through SeguraNet[35], MECI is part of the Portuguese Safer Internet Centre (CIS.PT), promoting safer and healthier digital environments. Digital well-being is seen as essential for creating **inclusive, safe and supportive digital school environments.**

Promoting digital well-being in schools

MECI developed the **Recommendations for the Promotion of Digital Well-Being in Schools**[36] together with health and academic experts. These guidelines help schools:

- o Define clear rules for device use.
- o Promote screen-free moments and face-to-face activities.
- o Support healthy sleep routines.
- o Strengthen social interaction.
- o Identify and monitor risks affecting pupils' well-being.

Emphasis on the key role of support services: law enforcement, helplines, Insafe, INHOPE[37].

Awareness and capacity-building initiatives

SeguraNet Awareness Centre: teacher training, school sessions, resource production, campaigns.

Major initiatives:
- o **Digital Leaders** – student participation in promoting digital safety.
- o **SeguraNet Challenges** for schools, parents/guardians, pupils.
- o **Safer Internet Day at Schools** and **Cybersecurity Month at Schools**.

Additional MECI programmes include:
- o **School Without Bullying | Violence-Free School** – prevention of (cyber)bullying.

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[35] https://seguranet.pt/.
[36] https://seguranet.pt/promover-o-bem-estar-digital-nas-escolas.
[37] https://www.inhope.org/EN.

- o **Digital Academy for Parents** – family digital literacy supported by youth volunteers.

National policies and measures

- o **National Digital Strategy**[38]**:** framework for digital transformation ensuring pupils gain essential digital skills, including safe and ethical use.
- o **Recommendations for Promoting Digital Well-Being in Schools (MECI/DGE)**[39]**:** core guidelines for balanced digital practices.
- o **Mobile phone use guidelines**[40]**:** evidence-based restrictions to reduce distraction and support learning and well-being.
- o **Digital citizenship in curriculum:**
  - ICT as a cross-curricular area in primary education.
  - Strong focus on safety, responsibility, and respectful behaviour in secondary ICT learning goals.
- o **National Strategy for Citizenship Education** includes media, human rights, and health, addressing digital citizenship and online well-being.
- o **Digital Development Action Plan for Schools** adds specific measures on Digital Citizenship and digital literacy.

Continuity of actions

Ongoing national commitment supported by:
- o **Digital Services Act.**
- o **European Action Plan to Combat Cyberbullying.**

Key support services:
- o **Safer Internet Line** (helpline + hotline) for support and rapid removal of harmful content.
- o **Cuida-te+ Programme** supporting emotional, medical, and social well-being of children and youth.

Future focus:
- o Strengthening collaboration with European partners.
- o Promoting responsible, informed, critical citizenship.
- o Building healthy, safe and inclusive digital communities.

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[38] https://digital.gov.pt/estrategias/estrategia-digital-nacional.
[39] https://seguranet.pt/promover-o-bem-estar-digital-nas-escolas.
[40] https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/95-2025-928937305.

Serbia: Policy context for digital well-being in education

National context

Serbia is actively engaging with digital transformation in education, focusing on pupils' health, safety, and digital literacy. **Digital well-being appears mainly within broader education and child protection frameworks**, rather than as a separate policy. There is an increasing awareness of the **impact of technology on pupils' well-being** and the need for safer, more supportive school environments.

To move toward a more comprehensive approach, **digital well-being is being gradually integrated into education and protection frameworks**. The focus is on teacher training, safe use policies, and awareness initiatives rather than a single national strategy. A potential next step would be the development of a central framework to connect all these efforts.

Definition of digital well-being

No official national definition yet. However, the concept of digital well-being is integrated across laws and frameworks addressing **education, child protection, and digital skills.** The focus is on protecting **children's development and online safety** through cross-sectoral policies.

Key trends

- EU Kids Online (2020)[41]: Serbian youth among the least active content creators (5%) and more exposed to negative online experiences.
- Only 3% turn to teachers when facing problems online which highlights need for stronger **school support systems**.
- Growing focus through national conferences (for example, AI and Pupil Well-being 2023) and research on **digital culture and health**[42].

Policies and initiatives

- **Law on the Education System Foundations (2023)**[43]: schools decide on digital device use; promotes device-free breaks.

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[41] https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/103294/.

[42] https://edtech.center/sr/izvestaj-sa-okruglog-stola-vestacka-inteligencija-i-dobrobit-ucenika-studenata-izazovi-i-prilike-za-donosioce-odluka/.

[43] https://www.paragraf.rs/.

- o **Digital Competence Framework (2023)**[44]: helps teachers support pupils' digital health and safety.
- o **Guidelines for Mobile Phone Use in Schools (2023)**[45]: manage screen time, promote meaningful tech use.
- o **Smart and Safe – National Contact Center (2017)**[46]: info and reporting hub for online risks.
- o **Children and the Internet – Smart from the Start**[47]: guide for parents/guardians/teachers of ages 4-8.
- o **Quality Screentime (New Literacy Programme)**[48]: practical materials on healthy digital habits.
- o **I Take Care of You Platform**[49]: prevention resources for digital and peer violence.

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[44] https://ceo.edu.rs/smernice-za-upotrebu-mobilnog-telefona/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
[45] https://ceo.edu.rs/okvir-digitalnih-kompetencija-2023/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
[46] https://pametnoibezbedno.gov.rs/.
[47] https://digitalni-vodic.ucpd.rs/.
[48] https://ceo.edu.rs/vreme-ispred-ekrana/.
[49] https://cuvamte.gov.rs/.

Slovenia: Policy context for digital well-being in education

National context

Slovenia **actively addresses digital transformation** in education through cross-sectoral policies and programmes. While there are **no policies on digital well-being**, there is strong focus on creating safe, inclusive, and supportive digital learning environments. Digital well-being is seen as a balance between technology's use and pupils' emotional, social, and cognitive growth.

Slovenia's approach views digital well-being as a shared responsibility of schools, teachers, and families. **The integration of well-being into mental health and digital citizenship policies is growing**, yet there remains an ongoing need for systematic inclusion in curricula and stronger support networks for teachers.

Definition of digital well-being

No formal national definition, but digital well-being is recognised as essential for holistic student development. Embedded across educational frameworks and programmes, it covers safety, ethics, responsibility, and balanced tech use. The concept is linked directly to mental health, social relationships, and academic motivation.

Key trends

- Safe.si (Slovenian Safer Internet Centre) Survey (2022)[50]: adolescent girls feel pressure from online beauty ideals; only 2% of parents/guardians are aware.
- Odklikni Project[51]: high levels of online harassment toward women and girls.
- Growing focus on **digital ethics, stress management, and respectful online communication.**
- Expanding role of NGOs (Safe.si (Slovenian Safer Internet Centre), Logout, Centre for Safer Internet) in awareness and counselling.

Policies and initiatives

- **Basic School Act (proposed amendment)**[52]: restricts device use in class unless pedagogically justified.

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[50] https://safe.si/raziskave-in-trendi/safesi-2022.
[51] https://odklikni.si/.
[52] https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news/slovenia-new-amendments-basic-school-act-modernise-school-system.

- o **National Programme for Education (2023–2033)**[53]: promotes safe and inclusive digital learning.
- o **Digital Education Action Plan (ANDI, 2021–2027)**[54]: supports digital pedagogy and secure learning environments.
- o **Teacher Training:** addresses cyberbullying, misinformation, screen time, and mental health.
- o **DIGI.DR Initiative**[55]: builds digital citizenship and ethical online behaviour.
- o **Safe.si** (Slovenian Safer Internet Centre) / **Logout programmes**[56]: offer workshops, webinars, and tools for pupils, teachers, and parents/guardians.

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[53] https://www.gov.si/en/news/2024-07-01-proposal-for-the-national-education-programme-for-the-period-20232033-submitted-to-the-minister/.
[54] https://www.gov.si/iskanje/?q=DIGITAL+EDUCATION+ACTION+PLAN+%28ANDI%29&submit=.
[55] https://www.digidr.si/.
[56] https://www.zadusevnozdravje.si/.

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